

BASICS OF CRITICAL READING IN AN ARGUMENT

To do a *critical reading* (also called *active reading* or *close reading*), you analyze a piece of writing in fine detail, as if with a magnifying glass. You then comment on your reactions as a reader, and analyze the author's argumentative strategy and style. Critical reading is important because it is the building block for larger analysis. The more critically you can read the argument, understanding not just what the author concludes in his argument, but *how* he reaches that conclusion, the more original and exact your response will be. The following step-by-step set of questions can be used after reviewing the webpage on Critical Reading in the class website. Taking the following steps will help you write appropriate reading responses. The ones with asterisks are most vital.

Pre-Reading:

1. Notice the title. What rhetorical expectations does it create? What expectations in terms of the essay's content?
2. Look and see if the book contains information about the author. What expertise does he or she have? What sort of perspective might the writer have on the issue at hand?
- 3.* Skim through the reading quickly. Note any sub-divisions in each chapter or essay. What does the general subject matter appear to be? What is the author's point?
4. Examine the introduction and conclusion. Why did the author decide to begin and end the writing that way? What is the effect of that choice?

Interpretive Reading:

- 5.* Read the essay again, this time slowly and carefully. Look up any unfamiliar words. For a pre-21st century text, look in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for possible outdated meanings.
- 6.* Summarize and paraphrase what you read, especially confusing passages.
- 7.* Does the author directly state what his argument is, or does an implied argument remain unstated that the reader must deduce? Write down the argument in thesis format, as best you can.
8. Who speaks in the essay? To whom does he or she speak? Does the narrator speak in the first person ("I") or third person? What is the *persona* of the author? Is that author writing as a professional / expert? A parent? An authority figure? A concerned citizen? The common person?

Critical Reading:

9. After you determine what the author concludes, analyze how he arrived at that conclusion. What examples does he give? What does he consider evidence? What is the chain of logic?
- 10.* Make notes in the margins—underline or mark important passages, such as the author's argument, or where the author states a position in the argument. You might also make a two or three word summary at the top of every couple of pages, then a longer two or three sentence summary at the end of the reading. Try "talking back" to the author, asking questions about the essay's statements.
- 11.* Does the author make her appeal to you through logic, through emotion, or through her own character/authority? In which sections do you see those appeals?
12. Why do you think the author takes the position he or she does? Is there a personal investment in the matter? What larger social, economic, political, or other circumstances may have influenced the creation of this piece of writing? Do such conditions render the argument invalid in other circumstances, or does it hold just as true in any situation?

Synoptic Reading:

13. Does the argument remind you of another essay in the book? On what points would the two authors of these essays disagree or agree? Why?

Post-Reading:

14. If you strongly agree or disagree with what the author said, what about your experience and background led you to have that strong reaction?
- 15.* What broader implications are there if the reader accepts the argument? What ought the reader do? How should the reader's actions or thinking change as a result?
- 16.* What is left out or kept silent? What did the author not discuss about this issue that you or someone else might include? What questions are still unanswered as far as you are concerned?
- 17.* Why does the author think the point of the essay is important? Why should you?

You might be able to use one of these questions as the basis of your response to a reading if you ask you to write in reaction to it.