

Critical Reading

Critical reading is not simply skimming a text for context

Critical reading requires the active engagement of the reader in asking questions of the text.

I.e. *How* is it argued?

It is not searching primarily for information.

It is not compiling lists of facts, quotations or examples.

It is looking for ways of thinking.

Begin by reading the text once to get a grasp of the context. Then reread critically.

Steps to reading critically

1. What is the basic argument of the text.
2. Who is the audience. Who does the text speak to?
3. What is the historical context?
4. What kind of reasoning or theories are being employed? What type of thinking is being appealed to?
5. What evidence is used and how? What kind of authorities are being referred to? Is the source primary or secondary?
6. Some assignments will require an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the argument. What could have been presented differently and how?

You may also consider:

What is achieved by describing things in a certain way?

What is assumed by choosing a certain type of evidence?

Also take note of the nature of language being used and any rhetorical techniques.

The following questions pertain to the abridged version of Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1963). They are meant to demonstrate the sort of examination of a text that is required for critical reading.

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-from-birmingham-city-jail/>

1. Who is he addressing primarily? Why?
2. Who is the secondary audience? Keep in mind, this was widely published.
3. How does he respond to "the outsider coming in"? This leads up to the next question.
4. What is the basic premise of this argument?
5. What is his basic defense of his call for justice?
6. How does he defend "direct action"?
7. How does he differentiate between "just" and "unjust" laws?
8. What authorities does he evoke?
9. What is the basic assumption underlying his argument?
10. Why is he disappointed with "white moderates"?
11. What rhetorical device does he use in this section?
12. What is the effect?
13. What is his conclusion regarding the action in Birmingham?
14. How does this tie into the first four paragraphs?

Material adapted from:
University of Toronto: Writing Advice
<https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/researching/critical-reading/>

