



Critical Readings

Overview

Being a good writer means also being a good reader and a good thinker. The three activities are best thought of as part of a single process. Now, by “reader” we don’t mean just being able to scan and understand the meaning of words on a page. That is just plain reading. What we mean is critical-reading – some prefer the term close-reading or deep-reading. Whatever term we use, what we mean is reading as a set of strategies to engage, interpret, analyze and evaluate a text. It is a much more active process than simply reading words on a page. Reading in an academic setting is not simply a matter of passively consuming what is written in front of us but actively interpreting and making our own meaning of what we read. It’s like a conversation. Our part of that conversation involves thinking about what we read and writing about it ourselves – then reading some more, thinking some more, writing some more. And so on. Reading, thinking, writing are three interacting gears in the process of learning and exploring ideas.

Drawing from the excellent book, *Writing Analytically* by David Rossenwasser et al, let’s highlight some elements of this critical reading process:

Remember that your goal in reading is twofold: first you need to acquire a meaningful understanding of what you read and secondly, you need to be able to **do something** with the reading towards some purpose.

Acquiring a meaningful understanding of what you read goes well beyond simply being able to repeat what the authors say. You need be able to talk meaningfully about what you read. This requires thinking deeply about the reading and somehow interpreting it using your own words. It’s a conversation. And the best way to facilitate this is to write about what you read. Responding in writing, even just a little, about what you are reading allows you to begin generating your own ideas about what you read. When you read for an academic assignment, have a pen in your hand – make notes in the margins of the text, ask questions, underline key phrases and ideas. Next, try paraphrasing certain passages of the text, using your own words to develop your own interpretations and understanding. Next, try summarizing what you read, put the whole reading in perspective and demonstrate to yourself your own understanding of the material. Finally, try doing some free-writing about what you’ve read. Let your thoughts flow out, write continuously for a defined period of time without any concern for editing. This is a way to begin making interpretive leaps and come to your own ideas about the subject. So, in summary, you will begin by annotating in the

margins of the text to be more active in the process of reading, then paraphrasing key passages to find your own words on the matter, then summarizing to demonstrate your full understanding of the entire reading and then free- writing to begin generating your own ideas on the subject.

Now that you've engaged in the active process of reading, what's next? How will you translate that into something meaningful in your own writing assignment? Here are a few preliminary ideas:

- Compare to other readings – for most university essays, you will have to read widely on the subject to get a full picture. As you do, see if the ideas in the reading are new ideas or if they have appeared before, what has influenced these ideas, how do they compare to opposing ideas?
- Explore the context of each reading – ask questions about the author bias, credibility, historical situation.

After reading other articles, see if your thinking has evolved? Refer to your original notes and see where your thinking has changed. What is the relevance to your essay?

How We Can Help

Developing a sophisticated approach to reading is an integral part of the research and writing process and is a fundamental part of becoming a fully participating post-secondary student. It is arguably the most fundamental of all university skills. It is not, therefore, something that is easily developed by students working in isolation using handouts alone. It is best developed through a sustained effort of practice, and regular guidance and feedback. Writing Support is uniquely able to provide this kind of help. By giving you thoughtful response to your writing as it progresses, we can give you precisely the kind of guidance you need to improve your academic reading and writing. We will ask you the kinds of questions that will promote deeper thinking on your subject, we will encourage you to more effectively articulate your ideas, we will tell you the kinds of strategies and approaches to reading that we ourselves use in our own work, and we will help you to gauge your own progress.

Resources

Watch this useful [video on critical reading strategies](http://youtu.be/lqoJ5KCyA3A) from the Dublin Institute of technology (<http://youtu.be/lqoJ5KCyA3A>).

Rossenwasser, D., Stephen, J., Babbington, D. (2006). Writing Analytically First Canadian Edition. Toronto, ON: Nelson.