

# Critical reading

## What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking is the central intellectual skill that a tertiary education seeks to develop in students. It involves taking an attitude of **reflective skepticism** towards what we read and what people tell us.

“**Reflective**” means thinking seriously about what we have read or heard; “**skepticism**” means not taking it for granted that what we have read or heard is true or correct. Instead, we seek to **evaluate** or **assess** the **validity** of the information and opinions we encounter.

**NOTE:** “critical” in this context does *not* just mean looking for mistakes and weaknesses. It means judging what is good and what is not in the reading, and why.

Critical evaluation is a higher order intellectual skill, and can therefore be a demanding intellectual task. One of the purposes of a university education is to develop your capacity to do this, and it does take time.

## What is critical reading?

Sometimes we read just for pleasure or entertainment; sometimes we read just to obtain information, taking it for granted that the information is reliable. Critical reading means analysing and evaluating what we read – to repeat, working out what is good and what is not, and why.

Understanding the argument in a text is essential to critical evaluation – we cannot evaluate something we do not understand. We then seek to identify the strengths and weaknesses or limitations in the author’s argument and evidence, and to challenge any assumptions that the author might have made.

We need to keep in mind that we are evaluating an author’s ideas in the context of a specific discipline. There are variations among disciplines as to what constitutes evidence and how it might be used to support an argument. For example, approaches and assumptions used in medical research might not be appropriate in a history or sociology paper, and vice-versa.

The following pages suggest a number of questions that may help you to develop a critical evaluation of what you read.



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## 1. Putting the text into context

Find out anything you can about the **author** – who she/he is, what else she/he has published, what work she/he does. The **gender** and **cultural background** of the author may have a bearing on the author's perspective. Some of this information can be gained from the foreword, introduction or the back of a book, or at the bottom corner of the first page of an article. (Journals and edited books often include a list of contributors, with brief notes about their work.) You can also look them up in Google, or the new "Scholar Google" (<http://scholar.google.com/>) - most academics these days have their own webpage, describing their work and listing their publications.

This information may give you some indication of the author's **purpose**, the **audience(s)** she/he typically writes for, who she/he typically **collaborates** with in research, her/his **ideological orientation** or **conceptual framework**.

It is important to note the **date of publication** of a text. The historical context in which a text is written can influence the author's thinking and preoccupations, and the date can tell you how up-to-date the material in the text is.

The **context** in which an article has been published is relevant to your evaluation as well. In a book that is a collection of articles on a particular topic, the **editors' introduction** usually provides a very useful summary of each article and the overall theoretical and research context of the volume. You will learn that in each discipline some **journals** are considered particularly important, and particular journals are often associated with particular theoretical approaches.

## 2. Reading the text

You should begin to critically evaluate as you preview material, and as you read, but it is also useful to critically review the text as a whole after you have finished reading it. The following questions will help you undertake your critical evaluation of a text.

As you read a section of a book or article, look for information to help you answer the following questions (Marshall and Rowland 1998:139):

### The author's purpose

- Why has the author written the material? Are these purposes explicitly stated? Are there other implicit purposes?
- For whom is the material intended?

### The author's approach

- What theoretical perspective has the author taken? How does this perspective relate to other material in the field?
- What are the author's underlying assumptions? Are these explicitly stated?
- Is there any evidence of covert or overt bias in the interpretation of material or in the choice of sources and information? (Emotional language can be a clue to this.)

### Content

- Is the writer simply presenting information, or is she/he presenting an argument?

- If an argument, what is the writer's **thesis** – i.e., the statement or proposition that she/he is arguing to support?
- How does the author develop the thesis from one point to another?
- What evidence, examples or explanations are used to support the thesis?
- Are the supporting evidence, examples and explanations well researched and accurate?
- Which aspects of the topic has the author chosen to concentrate on? Which aspects has the author not included or discussed?
- Is the material comprehensive and accurate, or is the subject treated superficially?
- Are there alternative explanations for the material or data presented? Has the author addressed these alternative explanations?
- Does any graphic or quantitative material illustrate or restate the written content?
- If there are any visual images, how are they linked with the written text?
- How do the contents relate to what you know about the topic?
- Which of your own questions about the subject does the author answer? Which are not answered?
- Do any items puzzle or intrigue you?

### **Structure**

- Is a clear, logical framework used to organise the material?
- How does the author introduce the argument?
- Are the main points organised, linked and balanced?
- How is the supporting material organised and developed within the framework?
- Does the author recapitulate what has been said at appropriate points?

### **Style and format**

- In what style has the material been written? For example, is it formal or informal, simple or complex, descriptive or critical, didactic or persuasive, narrative or analytical?
- How does the style and format influence your own reaction to the material?

These questions will help you critique or evaluate a text at quite a detailed level of analysis. Not all of them will be relevant to **all** your reading; you need to keep your purpose in mind. Nevertheless, reading for lectures, tutorials and essays always requires **some** level of critical analysis. Answering the questions on the author's approach and the questions dealing with content should provide a good understanding of what the text contributes to the topic.

### **Research articles**

Research articles are typically structured in a particular way (Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion). In addition to the questions on the author's approach, you will need to ask the following questions when evaluating them:

- What were the authors trying to discover?
- Why is the research important?

- What information is given about the sample (the people or materials selected for study)?
- Were appropriate methods used for data collection and analysis?
- What was measured?
- What were the results?
- What do the authors conclude?
- Can you accept the findings as true?
- Can you apply the findings to your own work?
- What if different studies have contradictory results?

### 3. Developing your own view

Your own life experiences can help you think about the validity of an argument or point of view. Does it make sense in terms of your own experience? Does it, perhaps, make you question your own assumptions and prejudices?

In developing your own thinking in relation to a text, you will draw upon ideas presented in lectures and from other texts that you have read. These offer points of view that you can use to help you evaluate the text.

Comparing authors with different points of view on the same topic can also help you to identify their ideological framework and their inherent assumptions. Can the assumptions each author makes be challenged? Why and how are these writers interpreting the same events, data or evidence differently?

If you are having difficulty identifying the argument and/or finding things to say about the text, try discussing the text with friends, with fellow students in tutorials and with anyone else who might be interested. Discussion can generate ideas and help you clarify your thinking. Finally, if you enjoy a good argument, you should explore the wealth of material in the resources listed below.

#### References:

Marshall, L., & Rowland, F. (1998). *A guide to learning independently* (3rd ed.), Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman.

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