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My Learning Essentials



Being critical: Thinking, reading
and writing critically

CHEAT SHEET

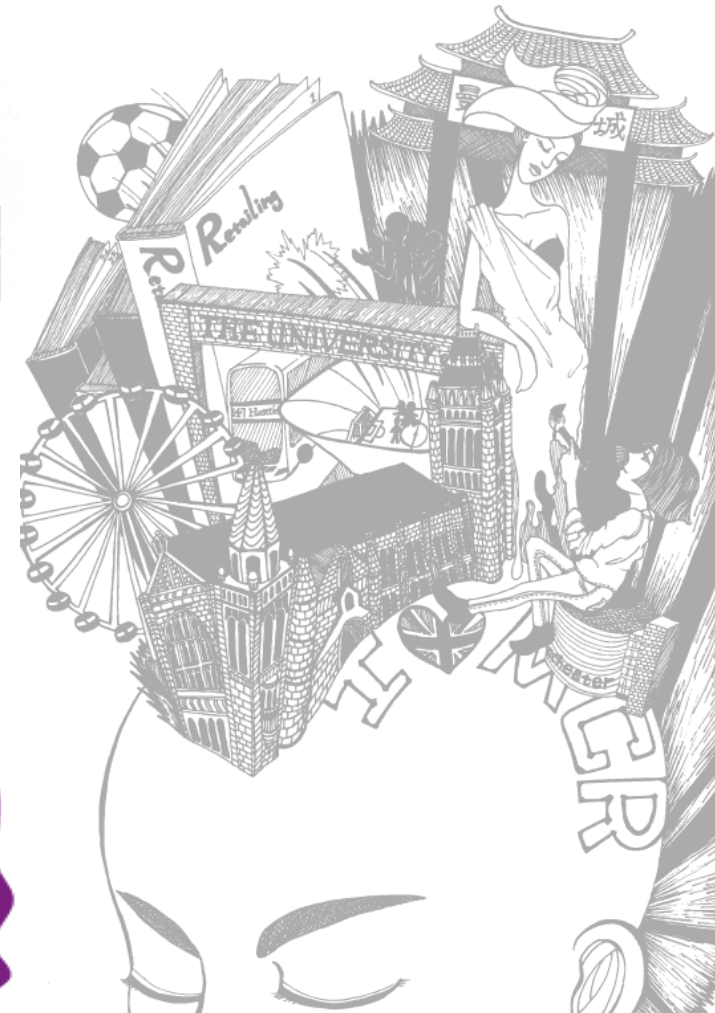


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Introduction

To be critical means to examine concepts, ideas and arguments from all possible angles, taking an analytical stance to evaluate and constantly question what is being presented to you.

It is a means of scratching below the surface to question assumptions and gaps within an argument or idea, while bearing in mind how it fits (or doesn't fit!) with other sources of evidence and your own existing knowledge.

The purpose of reading

We all do a lot of reading in our day-to-day lives, but we don't devote the same amount of time and attention to everything we read. The way you read a novel will be very different to the way you read a noticeboard; your approach varies according to your purpose.

The three main purposes of academic reading are for information, understanding and analysis.

Reading for information

Overview: looking for specific pieces of data

Examples: getting directions, finding opening hours, looking up an author's date of birth.

Technique: scanning a text to look for keywords or phrases that answer your question, then moving on.

The purpose of reading

Reading for understanding

Overview: gaining an overview of an area; gathering general information.

Examples: reading for pleasure, background reading into a topic.

Technique: reading a text once from start to finish, often passively.

Reading for analysis

Overview: engaging your prior knowledge and actively applying it to what you're reading.

Examples: reading for an essay, dissertation, literature review or thesis.

Technique: reading a text actively multiple times, asking questions of the text. This is critical reading; we will examine a strategy in more detail in this section.

You're the judge

When reading critically, you are trying to establish the validity and significance of a text.

Think of your reading as a trial; every text is a witness, and you are the judge. What questions do you need to ask to make a decision on the truth of the testimony?

- What is it claiming?
- What are the reasons for making that claim?
- Do any other witnesses support/corroborate the testimony?
- Does the testimony support the overall case?
- How does the testimony relate to the other witnesses?

By questioning every witness in this way, you can ensure you see all sides of the case. Using the evidence available and examining how they relate to each other, you can make a critical decision on the validity and relevance of the testimony.

Critical reading strategy: introduction

You can use this strategy as a tool to aid you to be critical in your reading. Following the steps in the process will ensure that you fully engage with the texts that you read.

- ① **PREDICT:** what are you expecting?
- ② **IDENTIFY:** what are the main ideas?
- ③ **QUESTION:** how do I know this?
- ④ **CLARIFY:** what is unclear?
- ⑤ **SUMMARISE:** what is it saying?

This strategy will help you to remain focused in your reading, taking note of both the small details and the wider context.

Critical reading strategy: the process

1. Predict

Prediction will assist you in guiding your reading in a purposeful way.

It helps you to create links between what you're reading and what you already know; by doing so you'll start to make connections between theories and concepts.

Predication also gives your brain something to focus on; it'll help you to avoid you getting to the end of a text and realising that you've not got what you needed out of it.

Before you start reading the text in full, ask yourself the following questions:

- What do you want to get out of reading it?
- What are your expectations?
- What is your goal?
- What are your limits?
- What do you think the main arguments of the text will be?

Write down your predictions; you'll refer back to them later in the process.

TIP: If you're reading a book or a book chapter, you can skim the introduction and conclusion to answer these questions. For articles you can usually answer these questions from reading the abstract, then the discussion and/or conclusion

Critical reading strategy: the process

2. Identify

At this stage you are focusing on understanding the text by identifying the main ideas. The main ideas are the arguments that the author has arrived at via analysis of the facts and data; **the facts and data themselves are not the main ideas.**

Read the text in full, asking yourself the following questions:

- What are the main ideas in the text?
- What are the key pieces of information?
- What links these together?
- How do these ideas link with others you've read?

You'll start to recognise patterns within the text, and how it links with other texts you've read. What themes are emerging from your reading?

Critical reading strategy: the process

3. Question

Having read and understood the text, this is where your analysis begins.

Look for weaknesses or limitations in the argument, discussion or experiment. Sometimes these will be explicitly stated; more often they'll be implicit and harder to identify.

Ask yourself:

- Is there any information missing?
- Are the arguments valid?
- Is the data reliable?
- What are the implications?
- What is the author's position? Is there a bias or distortion?
- Are the arguments applicable beyond the context of this particular text?
- How does it fit with other evidence, and what you already know about the topic?

Look for themes in the questions that you're asking of the text; these will help you to recognise your opinions of the patterns that are emerging, which can help to inform what you write.

Critical reading strategy: the process

4. Clarify

This stage further develops your understanding of the text. You need to ensure that you understand all of the relevant terminology, otherwise you may misinterpret the point.

Ask yourself:

- Are any words, phrases or sentences unclear?
- Do you understand all of the relevant terminology?
- Are there any other theories or authors referred to that are relevant to your reading?

The answers to these questions can inform what else you need to read.

Critical reading strategy: the process

5. Summarise

Summaries are vital to cementing your understanding, ensuring that you have grasped the important concepts and can reconstruct them in your own words.

Summarise the key arguments of the text in your own words in a couple of sentences.

Once you've done this, refer back to your prediction: do the two match up? Did you get what you needed from the text?

This should assist you in deciding what you do next. For example, if you were looking to find evidence to support one of your arguments and you don't find it in the text, you will need to look elsewhere to get what you need.

TIP: If you can't summarise the text you've just read, you haven't understood it! If you find yourself struggling to summarise a text in your own words, you may need to go back to the IDENTIFY stage to ensure that you've understood the main arguments and ideas.

Writing critically

The vast majority of your written assignments will require you to write critically. This is where the analysis you have done in your reading is evidenced in your writing.

Critical writing is your opportunity to:

- **introduce** your audience to your arguments and ideas
- **demonstrate** your thought process
- **guide** your reader through your analysis and evidence
- **contribute** new ideas to the conversation around your topic

Critical writing requires analysis and discussion, rather than merely description. This section will examine the differences between descriptive and analytical writing, and look at a strategy you can use to ensure your writing remains critical throughout your assignments.

Description vs analysis

It's important to recognise the difference between description and analysis. Descriptive writing is not critical; while you'll include some descriptive writing in your assignments, you will need to ensure that you include enough analysis in there too.

Being able to recognise the difference between the two will help you with this.

Descriptive writing

- Reports facts, events and/or data.
- Descriptive writing provides an account of a situation but does not draw conclusions, highlight implications or otherwise provide anything to aid the reader in understanding the significance of the information.
- Example: The school board met to discuss district policy, tenure and the start date for the new academic year.

Analytical writing

- Interprets facts, events and/or data.
- Analytical writing compares, contrasts and synthesises information, clarifies the importance of some data over others and provides arguments and ideas supported by the evidence drawn from the facts and data.
- Example: Following a summer of debate, the school board met to discuss the impact district policy and tenure will have on the start of the new school year; with tensions running high around the cost of the new initiatives, the meeting often divided along party lines.

Critical writing strategy: It says/I say/and so

This strategy will help ensure you are writing critically by breaking your writing down into three areas.

It says

- These are the facts: the data and examples you will use to support your opinions.

I say

- This is your analysis of the data, showing your understanding of the topic and allowing your reader to understand the process you followed to form your opinions.

And so

- This is the implications of your analysis, and how it connects with the rest of your writing. This is key as it ensures that you are presenting a cohesive and thoughtful piece of writing.

Bear this in mind when you're reviewing your work; check that you've got enough "I say" and "And so" within your assignment to make sure you avoid purely descriptive writing.

Summary

Being critical is a vital component of the academic process and when employed it will result in you gaining a thorough and deeper understanding of your discipline.

We've looked at a number of strategies to help with being critical in your academic reading and writing. Do you have any others you want to share? Find us on Twitter and join the conversation.



