

Critical Reading in the Social Sciences – Appendix: Detailed Description of the Four-Step Approach

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Part I: The First Reading – Previewing

Previewing a text means gathering as much information about the text as you can before you actually read it. You can ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) What is my purpose for reading? If you are being asked to summarize a particular piece of writing, you will want to look for the thesis and main points. Are you being asked to respond to a piece? If so, you may want to be conscious of what you already know about the topic and how you arrived at that opinion.
- 2) What can the title tell me about the text? Before you read, look at the title of the text. What clues does it give you about the piece of writing? It may reveal the author's stance, or make a claim the piece will try to support. Good writers usually try to make their titles do work to help readers make meaning of the text from the reader's first glance at it.
- 3) How is the text structured? Sometimes the structure of a piece can give you important clues to its meaning. Be sure to read all section headings carefully.
- 4) What information can you glean from the introductory and concluding paragraphs? Usually, authors will foreshadow the main points of their text in the introductory paragraphs. As well, in the concluding paragraphs they will usually review the ground they've covered as well as re-state their argument.
- 5) What is conveyed by the opening sentences? Quickly skimming over the opening sentences of paragraphs should give you a good idea of the main ideas contained in the piece.
- 6) What are the author's main points? The main points are the major subtopics, or sub-ideas the author wants to explore. Main points make up the body of the text and are often signaled by major divisions in the structure of the text.
- 7) What is the author's thesis? After previewing the article / chapter you should be able to identify the author's thesis.

Part II: The Second Reading – Annotating

Annotating is an important skill to employ if you want to read critically. Successful critical readers read with a pencil in their hand, making notes in the text as they read. Instead of reading passively, they create an active relationship with what they are reading by "talking back" to the text in its margins. As well, writing while reading aids your memory in many ways, especially by making a link that is unclear in the text concrete in your writing. You may want to make the following annotations as you read:

- Mark the thesis and main points of the piece
- Write signposts that will help organize the text for you
- Note for yourself the main evidence used to support the argument
- Mark key terms and unfamiliar words
- Underline important ideas and memorable images
- Write your questions and / or comments in the margins of the piece
- Write any personal experience related to the piece
- Mark confusing parts of the piece, or sections that warrant a re-read
- Underline the sources, if any, the author has used

Mark the thesis and main points of the piece

Mark the thesis and main points of the piece. The thesis is the main idea or claim of the text, and it relates to the author's purpose for writing. Sometimes the thesis is not explicitly stated, but is implied in the text, but you should still be able to paraphrase an overall idea the author is interested in exploring in the text. The thesis can be thought of as a promise the writer makes to the reader that the rest of the essay attempts to fulfill. The main points are the major subtopics, or sub-ideas the author wants to explore. Main points make up the body of the text, and are often signaled by major divisions in the structure of the text. Marking the thesis and main points will help you understand the overall idea of the text and the way the author has chosen to develop her or his thesis through the main points s / he has chosen.

Mark key terms and unfamiliar words

While you are annotating the text you are reading, be sure to circle unfamiliar words and take the time to look them up in the dictionary. Making meaning of some discussions in texts depends on your understanding of pivotal words. You should also annotate key terms that keep popping up in your reading. The fact that the author uses key terms to signal important and / or recurring ideas means that you should have a firm grasp of what they mean.

Underline important ideas and memorable images

Mark passages that strike you for whatever reason so that you can easily return to them. You will want to underline important ideas and memorable images so that you can go back to the piece and find them easily. Marking these things will also help you relate to the author's position in the piece more readily. Writers may try to signal important ideas with the use of descriptive language or images, and where you find these stylistic devices there may be a key concept the writer is trying to convey.

Write your questions and / or comments in the margins of the piece

Writing your own questions and responses to the text in its margins may be the most important aspect of annotating. "Talking back" to the text is an important meaning-making activity for critical readers. Think about what thoughts and feelings the text arouses in you. Do you agree or disagree with what the author is saying? Are you confused by a certain section of the text? Write your reactions to the reading in the margins of the text

itself so you can refer to it again easily. This not only will make your reading more active and memorable, but it may indicate material you can use in your own writing later on (properly cited, of course).

Write any personal experience related to the piece

One way to make a meaningful connection to a text is to connect the ideas in the text to your own personal experience. Where can you identify with what the author is saying? Where do you differ in terms of personal experience? Identifying personally with the piece will enable you to get more out of your reading because it will become more relevant to your life, and you will be able to remember what you read more easily.

Mark confusing parts of the piece, or sections that warrant a reread

Be sure to mark confusing parts of the piece you are reading or sections that warrant a reread. It is tempting to glide over confusing parts of a text, probably because they cause frustration in us as readers. But it is important to go back to confusing sections to try to understand as much as you can about them. Annotating these sections may also remind you to bring up the confusing section in class or to your instructor.

Underline the sources, if any, the author has used

Good critical readers are always aware of the sources an author uses in her or his text. You should mark sources in the text and ask yourself whether the source is relevant, credible, and current.

Part III: The Second Reading – Analyzing

Analyzing a text means breaking it down into its parts to find out how these parts relate to one another. Being aware of the functions of various parts of a piece of writing and their relationship to one another and the overall piece can help you better understand a text's meaning. To analyze a text, you can look at the following things:

- Evidence
- Evaluation
- Assumptions
- Sources
- Author bias

Analyzing evidence

Consider the evidence the author presents. Is there enough evidence to support the point the author is trying to make? Does the evidence relate to the main point in a logical way? In other words, does the evidence work to prove the point, or does it contradict the point, or does it show itself to be irrelevant to the point the author is trying to make?

Evaluating sources

Good critical readers are always aware of the sources an author uses in her or his text. You should mark sources in the text and ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the source relevant? In other words, does the source work to support what the author is trying to say?
- Is the source credible? What is his or her reputation? Is the source authoritative? What is the source's bias on the issue? What is the source's political and / or personal stance on the issue?
- Is the source current? Is there new information that refutes what the source is asserting? Is the writer of the text using source material that is outdated?

Analyzing assumptions

Consider any assumptions the author is making. Assumptions may be unstated in the piece of writing you are assessing, but the writer may be basing her or his thesis on them. What does the author have to believe is true before the rest of her or his essay makes sense?

Example: "[I]f a college recruiter argues that the school is superior to most others because its ratio of students to teachers is low, the unstated assumptions are (1) that students there will get more attention, and (2) that more attention results in a better education" (Crusius and Channell, *The Aims of Argument*, Mayfield Publishing Co., 1995).

Analyzing author bias

Taking a close look at the author's bias can tell you a lot about a text. Ask yourself what experiences in the author's background may have led him or her to hold the positions / he does. What does s / he hope to gain from taking this position? How does the author's position stand up in comparison to other positions on the issue? Knowing where the author is "coming from" can help you to more easily make meaning from a text.

Part IV: Responding

Responding to what you read is an important step in understanding what you read. You can respond in writing or by talking about what you've read with others.

Write a response to the article

One way to make sure you have understood a piece of writing is to write a response to it. It may be beneficial to first write a summary of the text, covering the thesis and main points in an unbiased way. Pretend you are reporting on the “facts” of the piece to a friend who has not read it, the point being to keep your own opinion out of the summary. Once you have summarized the author's ideas objectively, you can respond to them. You can agree or disagree with the text, interpret it, or analyze it. Working with your reading of the text by responding in writing is a good way to read critically. Moreover, by developing a habit of reading and writing in conjunction, both skills will improve.

Keep a writer's notebook

It is often helpful to regularly record your responses and thoughts in a more permanent place that is yours to consult. A writer's notebook, or journal, is a place in which you can respond to your reading. You should feel free to say what you really think about the piece you are reading, to ask questions, and to express frustration or confusion about the piece. The writer's notebook is a place you can come back to when it is time to write an assignment, to look for your initial reactions to your readings or to pull support for an essay from personal experience you may have recorded. Writing about what you are reading is a way to become actively engaged in the critical reading process.

Discuss the text with others

Cooperative activities are important to critical reading just as they are to the writing process. Sharing your knowledge of a text with others reading the same text is a good way to check your understanding and open up new avenues of comprehension. You can annotate a text on your own first, and then confer with a group of classmates about how they annotated their texts. Or, you can be sure to participate in class discussion of a shared text—verbalizing your ideas about a text will reinforce your reading process.