Critical Reading

Critical reading is the process of reading that goes beyond just understanding a text. Critical reading involves:

- carefully considering and evaluating the reading
- identifying the reading's strengths and implications
- identifying the reading's weaknesses and flaws
- looking at the 'big picture' and deciding how the reading fits into the greater academic context (the understandings presented in other books and articles on this topic)

In brief, you are actively responding to the reading. Critical reading is useful at all stages of academic study, but is particularly important when writing an article critique or a literature review.

Critical reading often involves asking questions about the reading. In particular, you are examining the strengths and weaknesses of the reading's argument.

To do this, you need to consider

- the reading's background
- its purpose and overall conclusion (claim)
- the evidence used in the reading
- the logical connections between the claim and the evidence
- the reading's balance
- its limitations
- how it relates to other sources and research
- if the reading is based on research, how this research was conducted

Each of these affects how 'strong' the argument is, that is, how convincing it is.

Note: The questions here can also be used to improve your own writing, especially when you are required to construct an argument.

Background

Before you consider the argument of a reading, you should build up a background picture of the reading.

Who is the author?

While you cannot evaluate an argument based solely on the qualifications of the author, their background can give you an indication of credibility or potential bias.

- Are they a recognised academic expert or a new researcher?
- Do they work for a university, the government, an organisation, or a commercial interest?

What type of source is this?

As with the author, the type of reading can give you an idea of potential bias and the quality / applicability of the information. Is this an academic source? Is it trying to convince you of something or sell something?

- Periodical articles: Is this from a scholarly journal, a magazine, or a newspaper?
- Books: Is this from an academic publisher or a commercial publisher?
- Websites: Is the publishing organisation clearly identified?

Who is the audience?

The reading may be organised and written differently or have different goals depending on the intended audience.

Is it aimed at

- academics and researchers?
- people in the industry?
- the general public?

When was it written?

Up-to-date information is more useful. Something that was believed to be true in 1982 may have been disproved or improved since then.

Purpose

Getting the 'big picture' of the reading is essential so that you can see how all the pieces fit together.

What is the main claim of the reading?

The main claim (or argument) of the reading is the point that it is trying to prove. The claim of a reading is often a single statement: the thesis statement. This is often found in the abstract, the introduction, and/or the conclusion of the article.

- Is the main conclusion clear?
- Does the evidence lead to this conclusion?

What are the implications of the claim?

It is useful to think about the consequences and applications of the argument, as this may uncover particular strengths or further flaws.

- Are the applications practical or meaningful?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the applications?
- What are the costs and benefits of the applications?

How is the reading structured?

The structure of the reading will give you an idea of which points are most important, and which points support the conclusion. Look at

- Headings
- Subheadings
- Tables
- the introduction

It may be useful to draw a map or diagram of the reading's structure.

Evidence

It is essential to consider the quality of the evidence in the reading, as this directly relates to the usefulness of the reading.

Is the evidence fact, research, opinion, or personal experience?

- Objective facts are generally applicable.
- Information obtained through research is convincing, as long as the methodology is appropriate.
- Opinions can easily be contradicted by an alternative opinion. They are more likely to be biased.
- Personal experience may not apply to other cases and so is not easily generalised.

Is the evidence accurate?

- Does the evidence agree with other sources?
- Does the evidence agree with your own understanding of the topic?

Is the evidence relevant to the conclusion?

- Does the evidence connect to the reading's conclusion?
- Is it enough to support the argument?
- Is the evidence convincing?

Is the theory appropriate for this topic?

Many readings rely on particular theories or models to make their argument.

- Is the theory the best fit for this topic?
- Is the theory properly interpreted and explained in the reading?
- Does the theory explain the entire conclusion or only part of it?
- Are there parts of the conclusion not explained by the theory?

Methodology

If the reading is based on any kind of research (e.g. a survey, an experiment, a case study) it is important to consider **how** the research was conducted, as this can affect the validity of the findings reported.

Is the research qualitative or quantitative?

- Quantitative research involves measuring (quantifying) and analysing specific numerical or statistical data. It uses mathematical models to interpret data. Studies are designed so that mathematical models can be easily applied to research contexts using experiments and surveys.
- Qualitative research involves the examination, analysis, and interpretation of observations or accounts of events in order to, identify themes, underlying meanings, and patterns. This approach does not use mathematical models, but rather interviews, case studies and analysis of written documents.

Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages, but the type of research will always affect the findings.

What was the range / sample size of the research?

The wider the range or sample size of research, the more the findings can be generalised.

- If the research is a survey or questionnaire, how many participants were there?
- Did the participants come from different cultural / social backgrounds?
- Were the participants of different ages / occupations / genders / ethnic groups / nationalities?

Is the research falsifiable?

Could other research prove this research wrong? This is not asking whether the research is false, but whether it is possible to test its validity. If it is impossible to prove a claim wrong, it is also impossible to prove a claim right; the claim is instead a matter of faith.

Is the research repeatable?

If someone else conducted similar research using these methods, would they be likely to have a similar result? If it is impossible to repeat research, it is also impossible to test it.

Are there better methods?

Were there other methods that may be more effective, more scientific, more reliable, more culturally-sensitive, or more practical? Why weren't they used?

Logic

When reading critically it is important to examine the chain of reasoning used by the author, as any gaps or problems can undermine the validity of the conclusion.
Are key terms defined?

Definitions are an important part of academic study: terminology often varies between topics and between authors.

- Is each term that has been used properly defined?
- Are there any terms that could have several different interpretations?

Does the logic flow?

Does every point follow on from the last point? If there is a gap between two ideas, this could be a 'leap of faith' that undermines the overall conclusion.

Are there any flaws in the reasoning?

Is the reasoning logically sound? Some arguments are weak because they rely on faulty logic: these are often referred to as logical fallacies.

Balance

In order to read critically you have to consider whether the argument is appropriately balanced, looking at the issue or problem from relevant perspectives.

Do you have questions that are not answered in the reading?

- What details are missing?
- Are there any claims that seem unusual or extraordinary? You should pay attention to parts of the argument that seem controversial, as there are likely to be other explanations.

Is the reading biased?

It is impossible for a reading to be completely balanced, because a conclusion must ultimately be drawn, but some readings are more biased than others.

- Is the reading trying to convince you of something? Why?

- Did the reading push one point of view **to the exclusion of others**?

What other perspectives are there on this issue?

Readings are often written from one perspective; what other ways can you look at this topic?

Try, for example, a PESTLE analysis, which examines the **p**olitical, **e**conomic, **s**ociological, **t**echnological, **l**egal, and **e**nvironmental perspectives and implications.

Did the reading present a counter-argument?

A reading that offers several perspectives is more balanced, and a strong argument must consider and argue against counter-arguments.

- Are you aware of any counter-arguments that exist but were not discussed? This is a sign of a weaker argument.
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Limitations

What does the argument assume?

Some readings will identify their assumptions: this is so that if an assumption is later proven false, it is clear whether the argument is still correct or not.

- Does the reading make assumptions that it does not identify? Hidden assumptions may weaken the argument.

What are the limitations of the theory?

Some theories or principles only apply in certain situations. If a theory is applied outside of those situations, it may weaken the argument.

Other sources

No reading exists in isolation. You must consider how the reading fits into the 'bigger picture' of the larger academic context.

How does this reading relate to other readings?

If the reading disagrees with something from other readings, your textbook, or the lecturer, it may be incorrect. It may also be a controversial or debatable argument, or this reading may be discussing the argument from a different perspective.

Are there competing theories with better explanations for the evidence?

When there is more than one way to explain evidence, you must carefully evaluate the plausibility of each explanation.

Is there more up-to-date research that could disagree with the findings, or improve upon them?

Knowledge is developed in academia by improving on (or disproving) previous findings, so you should consider whether the reading has the most up-to-date understanding of the topic.

- What may have changed since the reading was written?
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References and further reading

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