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## **Writing@CSU Writing Guide**

# **Reading Critically and Actively**

Critical reading is a vital part of the writing process. In fact, reading and writing processes are alike. In both, you make meaning by actively engaging a text. As a reader, you are not a passive participant, but an active constructor of meaning. Exhibiting an inquisitive, "critical" attitude towards what you read will make anything you read richer and more useful to you in your classes and your life. This guide is designed to help you to understand and engage this active reading process more effectively so that you can become a better critical reader.

## **Reading a Text--Some Definitions**

You might think that reading a text means curling up with a good book, or forcing yourself to study a textbook. Actually, reading a text can mean much more. First of all, let's define the two terms of interest here--"reading" and "text."

### **What Counts as Reading?**

Reading is something we do with books and other print materials, certainly, but we also read things like the sky when we want to know what the weather is doing, someone's expression or body language when we want to know what someone is thinking or feeling, or an unpredictable situation so we'll know what the best course of action is. As well as reading to gather information, "reading" can mean such diverse things as interpreting, analyzing, or attempting to make predictions.

### **What Counts as a Text?**

When we think of a text, we may think of words in print, but a text can be anything from a road map to a movie. Some have expanded the meaning of "text" to include anything that can be read, interpreted or analyzed. So a painting can be a text to interpret for some meaning it holds, and a mall can be a text to be analyzed to find out how modern Americans behave in their free time.

## How Do Readers Read?

Those who study the way readers read have come up with some different theories about how readers make meaning from the texts they read.

Being aware of how readers read is important so that you can become a more critical reader. In fact, you may discover that you are already a critical reader.

## The Reading Equation

Prior Knowledge + Predictions = Comprehension

When we read, we don't decipher every word on the page for its individual meaning. We process text in chunks, and we also employ other "tricks" to help us make meaning out of so many individual words in a text we are reading. First, we bring prior knowledge to everything we read, whether we are aware of it or not. Titles of texts, authors' names, and the topic of the piece all trigger prior knowledge in us. The more prior knowledge we have, the better prepared we are to make meaning of the text. With prior knowledge we make predictions, or guesses about how what we are reading relates to our prior experience. We also make predictions about what meaning the text will convey.

### **Related Information: How can Reaching Comprehension Make Us Better Writers?**

When you have successfully comprehended the text you are reading, you should take this comprehension one step further and try to apply it to your writing process. Good writers know that readers have to work to make meaning of texts, so they will try to make the reader's journey through the text

as effortless as possible. As a writer you can help readers tap into prior knowledge by clearly outlining your intent in the introduction of your paper and making use of your own personal experience. You can help readers make accurate guesses by employing clear organization and using clear transitions in your paper.

## **Related Information: Making Predictions**

Whether you realize it or not, you are always making guesses about what you will encounter next in a text. Making predictions about where a text is headed is an important part of the comprehension equation. It's alright to make wrong guesses about what a text will do--wrong guesses are just as much a part of the meaning-making process of reading as right guesses are.

## **Related Information: Tapping into Prior Knowledge**

It's important to tap into your prior knowledge of subject before you read about it. Writing an entry in your writer's notebook may be a good way to access this prior knowledge. Discussing the subject with classmates before you read is also a good idea. Tapping into prior knowledge will allow you to approach a piece of writing with more ways to create comprehension than if you start reading "cold."

## **Cognitive Reading Theory**

When you read, you may think you are decoding a message that a writer has encoded into a text. Error in reading comprehension, in this model, would occur if you as a reader were not decoding the message correctly, or if the writer was not encoding the message accurately or clearly. The writer, however, would have the responsibility of getting the message into the text, and the reader would assume a passive role.

## **Related Information: Reading has a Model**

Let's look at a more recent and widely accepted model of reading that is based on cognitive psychology and schema theory. In this model, the reader is an active participant who has an important interpretive function in the reading process. In other words, in the cognitive model you as a reader are more than a passive participant who receives information while an active text makes itself and its meanings known to you. Actually, the act of reading is a push and pull between reader and text. As a reader, you actively make, or construct, meaning; what you bring to the text is at least as important as the text itself.

### **Related Information: Reading is an active, constructive, meaning-making process**

Readers construct a meaning they can create from a text, so that "what a text means" can differ from reader to reader. Readers construct meaning based not only on the visual cues in the text (the words and format of the page itself) but also based on non-visual information such as all the knowledge readers already have in their heads about the world, their experience with reading as an activity, and, especially, what they know about reading different kinds of writing. This kind of non-visual information that readers bring with them before they even encounter the text is far more potent than the actual words on the page.

### **Related Information: Reading is hypothesis based**

In yet another layer of complexity, readers also create for themselves an idea of what the text is about before they read it. In reading, prediction is much more important than decoding. In fact, if we had to read each letter and word, we couldn't possibly remember the letters and words long enough to put them all together to make sense of a sentence. And reading larger chunks than sentences would be absolutely impossible with our limited short-term memories.

So, instead of looking at each word and figuring out what it "means," readers rely on all their language and discourse knowledge to predict what a text is about. Then we sample the text to confirm, revise, or discard that hypothesis. More highly structured texts with topic sentences and lots of forecasting features are easier to hypothesize about; they're also easier to learn information from. Less structured texts that allow lots of room for predictions (and revised and discarded hypotheses) give more room for creative meanings constructed by readers. Thus we get office memos or textbooks or entertaining novels.

## **Related Information: Reading is multi-level**

When we read a text, we pick up visual cues based on font size and clarity, the presence or absence of "pictures," spelling, syntax, discourse cues, and topic. In other words, we integrate data from a text including its smallest and most discrete features as well as its largest, most abstract features. Usually, we don't even know we're integrating data from all these levels. In addition, data from the text is being integrated with what we already know from our experience in the world about all fonts, pictures, spelling, syntax, discourse, and the topic more generally. No wonder reading is so complex!

## **Related Information: Reading is Strategic**

We change our reading strategies (processes) depending on why we're reading. If we are reading an instruction manual, we usually read one step at a time and then try to do whatever the instructions tell us. If we are reading a novel, we don't tend to read for informative details. If we are reading a biology textbook, we read for understanding both of concepts and details (particularly if we expected to be tested over our comprehension of the material.)

Our goals for reading will affect the way we read a text. Not only do we read for the intended message, but we also construct a meaning that is valuable in terms of our purpose for reading the text.

Strategic reading also allows us to speed up or slow down, depending on our goals for reading (e.g. scanning newspaper headlines v. Carefully perusing a feature story).

## Strategies for Reading More Critically

Although you probably already read critically in some respects, here are some things you can do when you read a text to improve your critical reading skills.

Most successful critical readers do some combination of the following strategies:

- Previewing
- Annotating
- Summarizing
- Analyzing
- Re-reading
- Responding

### 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:

#### 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.

#### 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.

## Who is the Author?

If you have heard the author's name before, what comes to your mind in terms of their reputation and/or stance on the issue you are reading about? Has the author written other things of which you are aware? How does the piece in front of you fit into the author's body of work? What is the author's political position on the issue they are writing about? Are they liberal, conservative, or do you know anything about what prompted them to write in the first place?

## 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. Also, reading the opening sentences of paragraphs should give you a good idea of the main ideas contained in the piece.

## 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. You may want to make the following annotations as you read:

- Mark the Thesis and Main Points of the Piece
- 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 Reread
- 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 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**

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 will not only make your reading more active and memorable, but it may be material you can use in your own writing later on.

### **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 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?

### **Summarizing**

Summarizing the text you've read is an valuable way to check your understanding of the text. When you summarize, you should be able to find and write down the thesis and main points of the text.

## Annotating the thesis and main points

Mark the thesis and main points of the piece. The thesis is the main idea or claim of the text, and 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.

## 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
- 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 show itself to be irrelevant to the point the author is trying to make?

## Related Information: Source Evaluation

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 Sources

If an author uses outside sources to back up what s/he is saying, analyzing those sources is an important critical reading activity. Not all sources are created equal. There are at least three criteria to keep in mind when you are evaluating a source:

- Is the Source Relevant?
- Is the Source Credible?
- Is the Source Current?

## 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 position s/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.

## Re-reading

Re-reading is a crucial part of the critical reading process. Good readers will reread a piece several times, until they are satisfied they know it inside and out. It is recommended that you read a text three times to make as much meaning as you can.

## The First Reading

The first time you read a text, skim it quickly for its main ideas. Pay attention to the introduction, the opening sentences of paragraphs, and section headings, if there are any. Previewing the text in this way gets you off to a good start when you have to read critically.

## The Second Reading

The second reading should be a slow, meditative read, and you should have your pencil in your hand so you can annotate the text. Taking time to annotate your text during the second reading may be the most important strategy to master if you want to become a critical reader.

## The Third Reading

The third reading should take into account any questions you asked yourself by annotating the margins. You should use this reading to look up any unfamiliar words, and to make sure you have understood any confusing or complicated sections of the text.

## 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 to others. Here are several ways you can respond critically to a piece of writing:

- Writing a Response in Your Writer's Notebook
- Discussing the Text with Others

### Writing a response in your writer's notebook

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 in your writer's notebook. 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.

### Keeping a writer's notebook

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.

## Discussing 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.

## Critically Reading Assignment Sheets

It is important to have read your assignment sheet critically before you begin to write. Consider the following things:

- Analyze your Assignment Sheet Carefully
- Pay Attention to the Length of the Essay, and other Requirements
- Plan your Time Well

## Analyze your Assignment Sheet Carefully

You may want to annotate your assignment sheet like you would any other piece of writing. Look for key terms like *analyze*, *interpret*, *argue*, *summarize*, *compare*, *contrast*, *explain*, etc. These terms will tell you your purpose for writing. Be sure to know how your instructor is using key words on the assignment sheet. If you don't understand something about the assignment, be sure to ask your instructor. It's vital to understand the assignment completely before you begin writing.

## Pay Attention to the Length of the Essay, and other Requirements

Be sure to have a firm grasp on what you must do to meet the requirements of the assignment. Know how long the essay must be, because this will affect the thesis and focus of the paper. Short papers dictate a narrow focus, whereas longer paper allow for a larger focus.

Know also what formatting requirements are in place, such as font size, margins and other constraints.

## Plan your Time Well

Know when the assignment due date is and be sure to allow enough time for all thinking, reading, researching, drafting and revising. Be aware of your instructor's policy on due dates. Most instructors do not accept late papers.

## Reading for Meaning

After you've read an essay once, use the following set of questions to guide your re-readings of the text. The question on the left-hand side will help you describe and analyze the text; the question on the right hand side will help focus your response(s).

### DESCRIPTION

### RESPONSE

#### I. Purpose

Describe the author's overall *purpose* (to inquire, to convince, to persuade, to negotiate or other purpose)

Is the overall purpose clear or muddled?

How did the essay or text actually affect you: did the author's purpose succeed?

How does the author want to *affect* or *change* the reader?

Was the author's actual purpose different from the stated purpose?

#### II. Audience/Reader

Who is the *intended audience*?

Are you part of the intended audience?

What *assumptions* does the author make about the reader's knowledge or beliefs?

Does the author talk to or talk down to the reader?

From what *context* or *point of view* is the author writing?

### III. Thesis and Main Ideas

What *question* or *problem* does the author address?

Where is the thesis stated?

What is the author's *thesis*

Are the main ideas actually related to the thesis?

What *main ideas* are related to the thesis?

Do key passages convey a message different from the thesis?

What are the *key moments* or *key passages* in the text?

What assumptions (about the subject or about culture) does the author make?

Are there problems or contradictions in the essay?

What bothers or disturbs you about the essay?

Where do you agree or disagree?

### IV. Organization and Evidence

Where does the author *preview* the essay's organization?

Where did you clearly get the author's signals about the essay's organization?

How does the author *signal* new sections of the essay?

Where were you confused about the organization?

What *kinds of evidence* does the author use (personal experience, descriptions, statistics, other authorities, analytical reasoning, or other).

What evidence was most or least effective?

Where did the author rely on assertions rather than on evidence?

## V. Language and Style

What is the author's *tone* (casual, humorous, ironic, angry, preachy, distant, academic, or other)?

Did the tone support or distract from the author's purpose or meaning?

Are *sentences* and *vocabulary* easy, average or difficult?

Did the sentences and vocabulary support or distract from the purpose or meaning?

What *words, phrases, or images* recur throughout the text?

Did recurring works or images relate to or support the purpose or meaning?

Remember that not all these questions will be relevant to any given essay or text, but one or two of them may suggest a direction or give a focus to your overall response.

When one of these questions suggests a focus for your response to the essay, go back to the text to gather **evidence** to support your response.

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