

# Critical Reading: Critical Analysis Guide\*

Critical reading goes a step beyond reading for information: it involves evaluating the information rather than simply absorbing it. When reading critically, it is more important to ask questions than to learn facts.

You can use this guide along with the Critical Analysis Sheet to help you organize your critical reading.

## Preliminary Information

Before you start reading, record the details of the text including the title, author's name and relevant reference information.

<b>Title:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The title may give you information about the content of the article: the geographical focus, period, subject, etc.</li><li>• Sometimes, the title will hint at the author's approach or interpretation (which may be indicated by a play on words or a question mark).</li><li>• What does the title lead you to expect from the article?</li></ul>
<b>Author(s):</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Note the author(s) of the text.</li><li>• What is the author's discipline?</li></ul>
<b>Source:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where was the work published? Note its original source.</li><li>• Is it an academic journal, a popular magazine, a textbook?</li><li>• If you are examining an article, the publication it appeared in can lend or deny the material credibility.</li></ul>

## Analysis Information

Examine the piece as a whole. Try to determine something about the purpose, audience, and content of the paper before you start reading. Look for clues in the title and/or subtitle, the acknowledgements (if any), the first foot/end note, and the author's biographical note (sometimes with the article, sometimes compiled separately).

<b>Purpose:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Why do you think the author wrote this paper?</li><li>• Does it seem to be refuting someone else's interpretation of some event or phenomenon? Is it offering new information?</li><li>• You'll usually find clues to the answer to these questions in the first few paragraphs.</li></ul>
<b>Subject:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What does the text seem to be about?</li><li>• Look at the first couple of paragraphs; they should give you some hints.</li><li>• Some disciplines include an abstract that precedes the text. This will give you an uncritical summary of the paper's subject/content.</li></ul>
<b>Sources:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where is the author getting her or his basic information?</li><li>• Is it mostly from other books or articles? Is it based on interview, archival or survey data?</li><li>• Knowing where the author got the information will tell you whether the author is looking at something old or looking at a new idea.</li></ul>

\* Slightly adapted with permission from Critical Analysis Guide developed by Amanda Graham, Yukon College

## Primary Details

Start reading. You should find the author's thesis statement in the introduction. You should also be able to tell what evidence the author is going to use to support the position he or she has taken. The author may also explain the limits on the text, the length of time, the geographic location, the extent of the information that is going to be used, etc. You should also be able to tell what the author's point of view is.

<b>Thesis:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Write out the thesis statement as you find it in the article. It is sometimes only one sentence, but it is sometimes two or three.</li><li>• An author might be obvious about it: "This paper will argue. . ." or subtle, giving only a statement of his/her interpretation followed by some indication of the evidence that will support that position.</li></ul>
<b>Evidence:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What evidence does the author claim will be used to support her/his argument?</li><li>• What evidence is actually used?</li></ul>
<b>Limits:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Does the text you are analyzing focus on a particular event, theory, person, phenomenon, or idea?</li><li>• The text may be further limited by a narrow geographic focus, a limited period, or restricted to a particular group of people.</li></ul>
<b>Point of View:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Similar to the thesis statement, the point of view may be obvious. In other cases, you will have to feel it out by looking at what things are described positively and what are described negatively.</li><li>• Note what you learn about the author's point of view.</li></ul>

## Presentation and Argumentation

Keep reading to gain an understanding of how the author presents the evidence and makes it fit into the argument. At this stage of the exercise, you should also take the time to look up any unfamiliar words or concepts. The last few paragraphs should summarize up the discussion, show how it all fits together neatly, explain where further research is needed, or reveal any implications/significance of the work.

<b>Concepts / Words:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Note the words or concepts you had to look up.</li><li>• Did the author coin his/her own terms, or use common terms in unusual ways?</li></ul>
<b>Use of Evidence:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How well did the author rely on his/her evidence?</li><li>• Was everything mentioned at the outset referred to in the text?</li><li>• Was quoted material used to illustrate or substantiate points?</li><li>• Are any of the materials listed in the bibliography not used in the paper?</li></ul>
<b>Conclusion:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Summarize where the author went with the paper.</li><li>• You may refer to the thesis statement to help you phrase your summary.</li></ul>
<b>Implications:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Note what the points the author has made might mean in a larger context.</li><li>• Who might find it useful? Would anyone change the way they work, or how they approach an issue if they read this article?</li><li>• What difference has it made for you?</li><li>• You may also consider why your instructor has asked you to read this article. Was the article assigned because it illustrated ideas or concepts covered in the course or did it present new course-related information?</li></ul>

## Evaluation

Once you have finished reading, consider your personal reaction to the work. Do not simply state whether or not you liked it. Even if you are unfamiliar with the topic of the article, you can make some judgments about the work and how well the author made his/her case. "Evaluating" means comparing one thing to some kind of standard (other work in the same discipline or journal as the one you've read). If you are not familiar with those other articles, it can be hard to evaluate well. However, you can do a fairly good job of it by considering the *conventions* of other, similar articles. Does this one fit the pattern? Does it have quality, that is, does it make up to the academic standards of writing, presentation, organization, source citation, and such? Alternatively, you can compare the article to what you have been taught in class. Does it support what you've learned, or does it contradict it? Does it do both?

<b>Personal Reaction:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What was your personal reaction to the paper?</li></ul>
<b>Strength of Case:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Did the author persuade you that the point/argument she/he was making was valid (or at least convincing)?</li><li>• Did you think, at any time, that the author was just hoping you would agree?</li></ul>
<b>Evaluation:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How good was this work compared to other work in the discipline/area or in the same journal?</li><li>• It is helpful to write page numbers of relevant passages in the article.</li></ul>
<b>Quality:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is your assessment of the quality of the paper?</li><li>• Were there any flawed arguments?</li><li>• Did the author support all his or her points, or were some of them missing evidence?</li><li>• Identify any technical problems, like spelling mistakes or formatting problems that you might note.</li></ul>
<b>Other:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Record anything else you may like to recall about the reading.</li><li>• Some students find it helpful to write a summary or review that they can use instead of reading the article again before tests or exams or when referring to it in a paper (although if you refer to the article in a paper, you should always check it again to make sure that you have the points correct, and you still need to cite the original source and page numbers).</li><li>• What is a question that this article makes you ask?</li><li>• Where have the authors made assumptions about their work?</li><li>• Is there another way that the authors could have explored/researched/answered this question?</li></ul>