

Guide to Critical Reading

Critical reading involves active and creative participation with the material you read. You may follow many of these techniques already or you may just be developing this skill. Critical reading, listening and thinking are skills that develop over a lifetime. I think this approach makes intellectual work more exciting and relevant to our lives and our work.

General Suggestions

1. Read the table of contents, the preface and the conclusion of a book. Think about the apparent structure of the book. In the case of an article, read the first and last sections and all the section headings. The idea is to form a mental map of where the author will lead you.
2. As you read a book or article keep up your side of the conversation by underlining, making notes in the margin, asking questions, being aware of your emotional responses.
3. Think about what you have read and what you have written. If possible, talk about the article with someone else who has also read it.

Specific Questions to Guide Critical Reading and Thinking

1. Summarize the author's main points or argument in a few sentences.
2. What is the context (e.g. race relations, gender relations, the nature of society, etc.) that frames these main points/ideas/arguments?
3. What is the question that is asked or the problem that is being addressed?
4. What evidence does the author offer about the question or problems? Where does the evidence come from?
5. What are the implications of this position? If this perspective were correct, what would it mean for the question or problem posed and the people who experience the problem? What does it mean for the rest of society? What solution does this perspective advocate?
6. What do you think about the argument based on your experience? You might ask: Can I see what the author is talking about in the real world? If not, is it because of the limits of my own experiences or because of the apparent limits of the author's own experience and/or assumptions?
7. What alternative explanations can you offer for the argument? What is your evidence? What are the implications of your position?

This is a composite of similar guidelines developed by faculty at University of Michigan and University of North Carolina.