



A Preliminary Guide to Critical Reading

I. Initial Reading

- a) When beginning to read a text (particularly an article) it is useful to get an overall sense of its parameters first. Flick through it, read the abstract if there is one, and have a brief look at the introduction and the conclusion. This should give at least a general sense of what kinds of issues the text is dealing with. Bear this information in mind -as you are reading the article in full.
- b) Some people find it helpful to skim read an article before reading it thoroughly. You might like to try this as it develops speed-reading skills more generally. Let your eye travel down over the text and try and pick out the key points as they 'jump out' at you. Often this is a sentence at the beginning or end of a paragraph, anything that is emphasised (bold, capitals etc), or sentences that begin 'in short...', clearly..., in conclusion. ..' Often you can tell from the beginning of a paragraph whether this signals new point or an elaboration of a previous point.
- c) Read through the article at a brisk pace. Don't stop to re-read paragraphs, unless your mind has wandered and you can't remember reading it! Make a note of things you find difficult, words you don't understand, bits you want to come back to because you think they are significant -but only very briefly: don't write out the difficulties in full, or stop to grapple with them. **READ THE TEXT ALL THE WAY THROUGH FIRST.** By the end of the first reading you should ideally have a general sense of the argument of the text and a text with lots of squiggles all over it.

2. Second reading

- a) Now that you've read the whole text you can begin to work on it. This is true whether you feel you have understood absolutely nothing, or absolutely everything. Even if you think you haven't understood anything, you have. Begin reading the whole text again. This time, when you come to a point that you don't understand (word, sentence, paragraph, or section) stop and re-read it to try and gain more of a sense of its meaning. (You may have already begun to resolve some of the earlier problems you noted, because of reading the whole text through). Look up words, re-read sentences and paragraphs. If you still don't understand it, underline it (or make a more detailed note) and come back to it later.
- b) When you have finished the second reading, if you have more of a sense of what the text is about, write down what you believe to be the key points of the argument (in brief).
- c) Then go back to any of the points you have underlined, and try and make sense of them through that. If it is still difficult, try and write down what it is that you don't understand. Language? How this relates to the argument as a whole? Sometimes you may have understood the meaning, but not how it relates to the context. Or you may disagree with the author, or think their point is too simplistic. Remember that you are a critical reader, and problems of understanding are not always to do with you.
- d) If you cannot get to the stage of summarising the main points, try and pick one paragraph (that has the least underlinings and problems) and focus on that. Read it carefully, making detailed notes of what the argument is, and which points you are unclear about. Do this with several paragraphs, and then try again with step two.

3. Reading for precise clarity

- a) This process is one of fleshing out the summary and basic understanding of a text, and beginning to trace your own individual way of reading it.
- b) With your summary of main points, follow the text through and detail the subsidiary arguments and expositions of the main argument. Ideally, this should be a case of finding the point I in your summary, and following through the argument until point II, etc. But of course theoretical writers are rarely that co-operative. A writer may go from point I, to point II, and then to point III, and then circle back to elaborate on each point. What can be quite helpful if you are having difficulties following the argument is to highlight each main point in a different colour from your summary, and then highlight each thing you read in terms of its relationship to those points. It may be that some arguments are related to more than one point, and so they would have more than one colour code.
- c) Now go back again to any points or arguments you are having difficulty with. It may be now that you still don't understand it, but that you can link it to a particular point in the argument-summary or elaboration. Are there any words you still don't understand? Is the author being obtuse?
- d) It can be helpful to imagine retelling the argument of the text to someone who hasn't read it, or to imagine answering a questionnaire on the text. Try answering these questions:
 - i. What is the basic point of the whole text? How does the author make their case? Do they make their case effectively?
 - ii. By this point, you would ideally be able to answer in depth (though not necessarily complex) questions on the nature of the text.

4. Critical Engagement

- a) Write down, without being too cautious, all your responses to the text- do you agree with it?
- b) Do you like it? Do you hate it? Does it advance your understanding of the area/issues in any way? Does it relate to anything else you have read?
- c) Now take each point and elaborate on it. What do you like or hate? In what ways does it advance your understanding of the area/issues (this could be about the construction of the text itself, or about the concepts expressed)? How does it compare to other texts in the area? This is the point at which you could approach additional secondary reading, going through the same process with the secondary reading, though not in as much depth. From this you should have a basis for a critical reading of the text(s).
- d) Pinpoint the sentence(s) or paragraph(s) where you strongly agree or disagree with the author. Examine this in detail. How is the argument constructed? Is this why you like/dislike the argument? How could this argument be extended or applied do you think? I.e., could it work as a way of reading other texts or situations, or could it be applied practically in any way? (I'm sure you can think of other questions to ask)
- e) If you are applying one particular text to another i.e., reading through a particular author, you should follow this process: 1. Summarise the author's argument and why you have chosen it; 2. Describe the other text; use the first argument as the basis for understanding or elucidating the second -what interpretations of the text does such a reading offer; 3. Does the latter text

expose any gaps in the 'reading text'? Does it highlight how useful an argument it is? Does the latter text extend the 'original' argument in any way? If so, how? And do you like that?

- f) If you are reading two texts together, you should 1. Summarise both arguments and why you have chosen them; 2. Compare and contrast the textual formation and language, arguments that are both similar and different; 3. Show how each text allows the other to be read in a particular way; 4. If you think one text or argument is much stronger you should say so.
- g) Getting to the point of being able to express a critical reading or opinion is time-consuming and meticulous. There really aren't any shortcuts. But the good news is that it is not a mystical process, but one that is a little like working out a puzzle.

5. A Few Hints

- a) Use highlighter pens (if it is your own text) as described above.
Focus on key words and phrases if you are having problems accessing meaning. e.g., in short, to conclude, Firstly, secondly, thirdly, etc.
- b) Read the first few lines of each section or part, or even paragraph.
- c) Leave some time between readings if you are having difficulties. Sometimes your mind will do the work 'on its own'.
- d) Discuss texts with other people (after the first reading); use each other to make the process easier .
- e) Difficult texts always take a long time to get to grips with. This is true for everyone. It is an essential process of reading to read and re-read, not a sign of lack of understanding.