



Critical reading

Critical reading is really critical thinking. It's about bringing a healthy skepticism to any reading which is open to interpretation and evaluation. This handout offers guidance on this process.

Many of your reading assignments are not open to debate (i.e. periodic table of elements). But other texts, frequently in the liberal and social sciences, will represent a particular author's point of view at a particular point in time. While respecting the author, you should push back on assumptions if you feel they are problematic or demand additional support if you are not convinced by their arguments. Some students feel they shouldn't challenge authorities in this way, but this kind of inquiry is not hostile; it is simply questioning. All authors welcome that kind of engagement with the reader. By reading critically, you are really saying that these ideas are worth thinking about.

Posing some of the following questions may help you unpack the assumptions, biases and context implicit in the authors you read.

Consider the source

What kind of publication is this? What is the author's background in the subject? To whom is the author writing? Why is s/he writing? (This kind of information is frequently available in the preface of the book or the introduction.)

Recognize assumptions & implications

What prior knowledge does the reader need? What assumptions does the author make? Are they justified? Is there adequate support for the author's arguments? Does the author pursue the logical implications of his argument?

Recognize intent, attitude, tone & bias

What attitude does the author adopt towards the material? Is the tone matter of fact, respectful, sarcastic, dismissive, etc.? How does the author use language? Objectively, or in an emotionally charged manner? Does the author appeal to the reader's emotions, prejudices or biases?

Analyze arguments

Which of the author's statements does he support? Which does he leave unsupported? What conclusions does the author reach? Of the author's conclusions, which are justified? Which ones are not justified?

This is how one reader might respond to an excerpt from a Ralph Waldo Emerson essay. It sounds a little as if the reader is "talking back" to the author.

Self-Reliance

Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within? my friend suggested,—“But these impulses may be from below, not from above.” I replied, “They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the devil's child, I will live then from the devil.” No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions. Every decent and well-spoken individual affects and sways me more than is right. I ought to go upright and vital and speak the rude truth in all ways.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson., from *Essays and English Traits*

