

quicktips

CRITICAL READING STRATEGIES

Reading effectively requires approaching texts with a *critical* eye: evaluating what you read for not just *what* it says, but *how* and *why* it says it. Effective reading is central to both effective *research* (when you evaluate sources) and effective *writing* (when you understand how what you read is written, you can work to incorporate those techniques into your own writing). Being an effective reader also means being able to evaluate your own practices, working to develop your critical reading skills.

IDENTIFY WHAT YOU'RE READING FOR.

- Knowing *why* you're reading a given text can help you organize both your reading and how you can use what you read.
- Before you read a text, ask and answer the following kinds of questions: Are you reading only for general content? For data? For specific information or for general thematic concerns? For arguments that support or contest your thesis in a writing assignment? For information that you know you'll need for an assignment, or for information to get you thinking *about* what you'll need?

ALLOW ENOUGH TIME TO READ, AND TAKE YOUR TIME.

- Reading critically is not a fast process. Many students do not set aside enough study time for reading (and rereading), and read everything either too quickly or at the same speed. If you know what you're reading for, you can better distinguish information that can be skimmed from that which should be more closely examined, and make better use of your reading time.
- Preview or survey the text before detailed reading begins, looking for clues related to its purpose, its relevance, its difficulty, and how it connects with ideas or information you already know.
- Be willing to struggle with the text in order to understand it – but don't get hung up on single, tough details in first readings. Rather, hold confusing passages in mental suspension, and continue to read with the idea that what seems difficult to understand now may be cleared up as you go along.

REMEMBER THAT RE-READING IS A PART OF EFFECTIVE, CRITICAL READING.

- Just as having more than one conversation with another person leads to closer understanding, conducting a number of readings leads to a richer and more meaningful relationship with, and understanding of, a text.
- If your first reading is for basic information and evaluation, subsequent readings can take on different levels of focus (on style and tone, on details, on examples, on intellectual or ideological tradition, etc.).
- In re-reading, work to separate parts of arguments (e.g., thesis idea, evidence, preview, counterarguments) and to understand how these parts work to support the author's thesis.

ENGAGE WITH THE TEXT TO GET THE MOST OUT OF IT.

- Read with a pen or pencil, highlighting key statements, parts, or points – even those you find confusing. Also, make note of words or terms you don't understand so you can look them up later.
- Note where and how the text relates to lectures or discussions, as well as general or specific questions you might wish to ask your instructor in class or office hours.
- Record your own questions, points of agreement or disagreement, references to related ideas, and points at which ideas match up with each other. In other words, work to enter into a *dialogue* with the text, mark it up, and make it your own.

ASK YOURSELF IF YOU CAN EXPLAIN BOTH “WHAT THE TEXT SAYS” AND “WHAT IT DOES.”

- In other words, can you both provide a *summary* of key claims and theses and understand its *purpose*, what this text seeks to do (to report or state facts, to contest a certain idea, to persuade, to open new inquiries, etc.)?
- Keep in mind that all texts filter reality – distort, persuade, and arrive at different conclusions – and that all texts are trying to change your view in some way.

ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND HOW EACH WRITER’S BACKGROUND AND PURPOSES INFLUENCE WHAT THEY WRITE.

- Reading a text critically requires that you ask questions about the writer’s authority and agenda. You may need to put yourself in the author’s shoes and recognize that those shoes fit a certain way of thinking.
- Work to determine and understand an author’s context, purpose, and intended audience.

WORK TO UNDERSTAND YOUR OWN STRATEGIES AND TO IMPROVE THEM.

- Ask yourself questions about how you read: Do you read too quickly or slowly? Do you tend to lose your focus? Can you scan for key information or ideas?
- Consider the characteristics of effective reading above, in relation to those practices and strategies you already employ, to get a sense of your current reading strategies and how they might be improved.

Adapted from the University of Minnesota’s *Student Writing Guide*, 2004. 9–11.

The *Student Writing Guide* is also accessible as a pdf at <http://writing.umn.edu/sws/assets/pdf/2010SWG.pdf>