

CRITICAL READING

GOAL: to go beyond passively accepting the author's viewpoint by questioning, reflecting, analyzing and evaluating the argument, support and evidence

BEFORE READING: Think about the course outline, the topic assigned, any questions asked in advance, what you already know and what you need to know about the topic.

Active reading:

1. **Title:** Does it give only the topic or both the topic and a hint of what the author's viewpoint might be?
2. **Scan** the article for headings, subheadings, illustrations, graphs, tables, bold or italicized words to get a general sense of the article. **Predict** what the article will be about based on this.
3. **Skim** the introductory and closing paragraphs to get a general sense of the article's structure, content and aim. Predict again.
4. Start reading the article. Locate the thesis statement or **main idea** which is usually in the first paragraph or section. (Note: In a textbook this might not be clear as the chapter is not necessarily an argument.)
5. After reading each paragraph stop and ask yourself what the main point was. Locate the **topic sentence**. Look for details and examples that support it. Note them down in point form.
6. Take note of **transition signals** used and relate them to the structure of the text. For example: First, ... Second, ... On the other hand, ... Turning to...
7. **Question!** Don't automatically accept the support or evidence given. Take a moment to think about it. Is it clearly relevant, is the author assuming more than s/he should about the significance of a certain fact? Does evidence given in one part of the essay contradict evidence in another part of the essay? What are you left wondering about? What would you need to feel convinced? Can you detect the author's unspoken assumptions and how they shape the argument?
8. **Question** again! Ask yourself what has been omitted and why? If you notice that a certain area is unaddressed, do you think it was a conscious choice on the part of the author, or do you think it was an oversight? Why? What else was said that helps you make this evaluation?
9. **Write** questions in the margins in pencil or in your **notes**.

AFTER READING:

- What is the author's main idea or point? Write it down succinctly. Can you say it out loud in your own words?
- How does each section relate to the main point of the article?
- How does each paragraph related to the main point of the article?
- Compare the author's viewpoint with your pre-existing knowledge of the topic or the viewpoints of other authors whose work you have read.
- What is your opinion of the article?
- How do the ideas in the article relate to (differ from, support) other ideas you have studied?

FOR DIFFICULT TEXTS:

If there is a glossary of key words, read or skim the definitions first.

UNKNOWN WORDS

- Don't rush to a dictionary.
- Try to guess at the meaning from the context of the sentence or paragraph.
- Break the word into parts and use your knowledge of some or all of the parts to guess the meaning of the word.
- If these steps fail, consult a dictionary.

COMPLEX SENTENCE STRUCTURE

If a sentence is long, break it down into sections. Momentarily disregard any extra details (adjectives, adverbs, phrases etc) and try to locate the main message.

10 POINTS TO PAY ATTENTION TO WHEN READING CRITICALLY

1. What is the person's *main purpose* in this piece of reasoning?
2. What is the key *question or problem* the person is addressing?
3. What is the *most important information* the person is using to reason through this issue? (what kind of data is used? needed?)
4. What are the person's major *conclusions*?
5. What are the *main concepts* the reasoning depends on? [I suggest circling them!]
6. What are the *main assumptions* the person is making in this piece of reasoning? (stated/unstated)
7. What are the main implications and consequences of the person's reasoning?
8. From what point of view is the person addressing this question?
9. What is the context of the issue the person is addressing? (disciplinary, circumstantial, etc)
10. What alternatives are there?

Adapted from Nosich, G. *Learning to Think Things Through*.