



Critical Reading

Adapted from Critical Reading Improvement, Anita Harnadek (McGraw-Hill, 1978) and I Know What It Says . . . What does It Mean?, Daniel Kurland (Wadsworth, 1995)

Critical reading is really critical thinking. It's about bringing a healthy skepticism to any reading which is open to interpretation and evaluation.

Many things you are assigned to read will of course not be open to debate (the periodic table of elements, for example). 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. It's your job, while respecting the author, to also push back on his assumptions if you feel the need to take issue with them. Or demand additional support if you remain unconvinced by his arguments.

Some students may feel they don't have the credentials to challenge authorities in this way. But the kind of inquiry we are talking about here is not hostile; it is simply questioning. And 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 he writing? (This kind of information is frequently available in the preface of the book or the introduction.)

Recognize assumptions & implications

- What kind of prior knowledge does the reader need?
- What assumptions does the author make? Are those assumptions 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*

Assumptions about gender

Nothing?

What does this mean?

Even if I’m miserable and rejected by other people?

Dangerous premise? Assumes we have no responsibility to society.

Where’s the support for these ideas?
Overconfident tone

Does that mean all institutions are bad?

How realistic is this?

What else would you add?

- Consider the source
- Recognize assumptions & implications
- Recognize intent, attitude, tone & bias
- Analyze arguments