

Reading Critically

Critical reading—active engagement and interaction with texts—is essential to your academic success at Brandman and to your intellectual growth.

Research has shown that students who read deliberately retain more information and retain it longer.

Your college reading assignments will probably be more substantial and more sophisticated than those you are used to from high school (or work). Also, the amount of reading will almost certainly be greater. Plus, college students rarely have the luxury of re-reading of material, either, given the pace of life in and out of the classroom.

So I am here to teach how to read critically so that you can get the most out of your reading experience so that you don't have to re-read things over and over again.

1. Previewing

Look "around" the text before you start reading.

You've probably engaged in one version of previewing in the past, when you've tried to determine how long an assigned reading is (and how much time and energy, as a result, it will demand from you). But you can learn a great deal more about the organization and purpose of a text by taking note of features other than its length.

Previewing enables you to develop a set of expectations about the scope and aim of the text. These preliminary impressions offer you a way to focus your reading. For instance:

What does the presence of headnotes, an abstract or other beginning material tell you?

Is the author known to you already? If so, how does his (or her) reputation or credentials influence your perception of what you are about to read? If the author is unfamiliar or unknown, does an editor introduce him or her (by supplying brief biographical information, an assessment of the author's work, concerns, and importance)?

How does the layout of a text prepare you for reading? Is the material broken into parts— subtopics, sections, or the like? Are there long and unbroken blocks of text or smaller paragraphs or "chunks" and what does this suggest? How might the parts of a text guide you toward understanding the line of inquiry or the arc of the argument that's being made?

Does the text seem to be arranged according to certain conventions of discourse? Newspaper articles, for instance, have characteristics that you will recognize; textbooks and scholarly essays are organized quite differently. Texts demand different things of you as you read, so whenever you can, register the type of information you're presented with. What is it I am reading? Case study? Article? Essay? Report? A History?

2. Annotate (commenting w/notes)

Annotating puts you actively and immediately in a "dialogue" with an author and the issues and ideas you encounter in a written text. It's also a way to have an ongoing conversation with yourself as you move through the text and to record what that encounter was like for you. Make your reading thinking-intensive from start to finish!

Here's how:

Throw away your highlighter: Highlighting can seem like an active reading strategy, but it can actually distract from the business of learning and dilute your comprehension. Those bright yellow lines you put on a printed page one day can seem strangely cryptic the next, unless you have a method for remembering why they were important to you at another moment in time. Pen or pencil notation will help you read more actively, recall your first impressions, and respond better in class discussion (and on quizzes.)

Mark up the margins of your text with words and phrases: ideas that occur to you, notes about things that seem important to you, reminders of how issues in a text may connect with class discussion or course themes. This kind of interaction keeps you conscious of the reasons you are reading as well as the purposes your instructor has in mind. Later in the term, when you are reviewing for a text or project, your marginalia will be useful memory triggers.

Develop your own symbol system: asterisk (*) a key idea, for example, or use an exclamation point (!) for the surprising, absurd, or bizarre. Your personalized set of hieroglyphs allow you to capture the important—and often fleeting—insights that occur to you as you're reading. Like notes in your margins, they'll prove indispensable when you return to a text in search of that perfect passage to use in a paper, or are preparing for a big exam.

What I do:

- *Main idea*
- ? By confusing parts
- Circle words I don't know
- Underline supporting details
- I color coat similar ideas//repetitions

3. Outline, Summarize, and Analyze

Outline, summarize, analyze: take the information apart, look at its parts, and then try to put it back together again in language that is meaningful to you. The best way to determine that you've really gotten the point is to be able to state it in your own words.

Outlining the argument of a text is a version of annotating, and can be done quite informally in the margins of the text, unless you prefer the more formal Roman numeral model you may have learned in high school.

Outlining enables you to see the skeleton of an argument: the thesis, the first point and evidence (and so on), through the conclusion. With weighty or difficult readings, that skeleton may not be obvious until you go looking for it.

Summarizing accomplishes something similar, but in sentence and paragraph form, and with the connections between ideas made explicit.

Analyzing adds an evaluative component to the summarizing process—it requires you not just to restate main ideas, but also to test the logic, credibility, and emotional impact of an argument. In analyzing a text, you reflect upon and decide how effectively (or poorly) its argument has been made. Questions to ask:

- What is the writer asserting?
- What am I being asked to believe or accept? Facts? Opinions? Some mixture?
- What reasons or evidence does the author supply to convince me? Where is the strongest or most effective evidence the author offers— and why is it compelling?

- Is there anywhere that the reasoning breaks down? Are there things that do not make sense, conclusions that are drawn prematurely, moments where the writer undermines his purposes?

4. Look for Repetitions and Patterns

The way language is chosen, used, positioned in a text can be an important indication of what an author considers crucial and what he expects you to glean from his argument. It can also alert you to ideological positions, hidden agendas or biases.

Be watching for:

- Recurring images
- Repeated words, phrases, types of examples, or illustrations
- Consistent ways of characterizing people, events, or issues

5. Contextualize

Once you've finished reading actively and annotating, take stock for a moment and put it in perspective. When you contextualize, you essentially "re-view" a text you've encountered, framed by its historical, cultural, material, or intellectual circumstances.

- Do these factors change or otherwise influence how you view a piece?

6. Compare and Contrast

Set course readings against each other to determine their relationships (hidden or explicit).

- At what point in the term does this reading come? Why that point, do you imagine?
- How does it contribute to the main concepts and themes of the course?
- How does it compare (or contrast) to the ideas presented by texts that come before it? Does it continue a trend, shift direction, or expand the focus of previous readings?
- How has your thinking been altered by this reading, or how has it affected your response to the issues and themes of the course?

Finally

Question the Author

Who is the author? Can we trust them? What is the ethos (their expertise on this topic)? What has she or he written? What is his/her role (i.e., an academic, a journalist, an activist, a politician)? How does his/her role affect/ influence the way they communicate their opinions?

Question the Audience

What prompted the author to write this piece? For whom is this piece written? What examples in the language and tone tell me about that?

Question the Message

What are the main points of the piece? How does the author support his/her point of view? Are his/her examples scientific, derived from interviews, or part of his own experience? What are the possible

counterarguments? How does the author anticipate and refute them? Is the piece biased? If so, how do you know?

Question the Timing/Historical Context

When and where was the piece written? How does WHEN affect its meaning? What was the historical or significant meaning and effect if it was written in the South before the Civil War and if it was written now.

Question the Purpose

Question the purpose of the Argument

What is the text trying to do?

- Persuade
- Inform
- Entertain
- Mediate/Honor/Reflect

Question Yourself

How do I react to this piece? Does it support or go against my own experience and exposure to this topic? Did you like it? Do you agree with it? Can you relate to it?

If you have any questions, speak to an OWC tutor today! Thank you!

This material is based off of Harvard University's "Reading Critically – Interrogating Texts," which can be found here: <http://guides.hcl.harvard.edu/sixreadinghabits>

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