

Critical Reading

A good way to describe critical reading is to describe its opposite—passive reading. Passive reading is what you do when you are reading for pleasure or when you don't have a high level of accountability to the content of a reading. On the other hand, reading critically (or engaged reading) includes analyzing not only what a text says but how it says it and how it relates to other texts—what it says, does, and means. Critical reading can be broken into three stages: preparing to read, reading actively, and using reading. Below are short descriptions of preparing and reading actively. Using reading will be covered in other lessons.

Pre-reading activities:

1. Clarify (for yourself) your purpose of reading. This will help you focus your attention on the important components of what you are reading.
2. Recall what you know about the subject. Putting your reading in context will help you remember the content.
3. Analyze the visual elements (i.e. Are there subheadings, graphs, or pictures? Why does the author use them? How do they help you read the text?).

Read Actively (Annotating and Note Taking):

Annotating a text involves several strategies: underlining the most crucial pieces of information, writing notes to yourself in the margins, and identifying important sections, words, and/or criteria. Annotating enables you to go back and quickly review what you have read. Remember, when annotating a text:

1. Be as economical (selective) as you can. If you underline too much, it will be difficult to go back and determine what was really important. I don't suggest using a highlighter. Instead, use a pencil and underline.
2. Identify major/key points in the text. Note major claims or theses. Identify and analyze the evidence, etc. You can bracket off whole sections to identify them rather than underline.
3. Note the overall progression of a text. What strategies are used by the author in building their argument? How does the author try to convince you of their point of view?

In your classes at college, you will be introduced to several reading assignments that will help you increasingly engage in reading academic texts. Annotating a text (a verb meaning reading actively) will help you write an annotation—a response or summary of a reading (a noun).

Note taking involves several activities including journal writing (taking notes on a text, double-sided journals, Cornell notes, etc.), writing descriptive outlines, mapping the text, and many others. Since note taking is active writing, it takes you one step closer to writing your own essays. For example, in addition to annotating a text, academic readers will often write down things like their initial impressions of a text, key definitions, and important points. Putting these things in your own words helps you both understand what you are reading and also remember important details. Once you have annotated and taken notes, you should be able to more easily write a summary or annotation. These can then be used when you begin to write your own research-based essays.