

What is critical reading?

Critical reading is an important precursor to critical writing. This Study Guide explains why critical reading is important, and gives some ideas about how you might become a more critical reader. Other Study Guides you may find useful are *What is critical writing? Using paragraphs* and *The art of editing*.

What is critical reading?

The most characteristic features of critical reading are that you will:

- examine the evidence or arguments presented;
- check out any influences on the evidence or arguments;
- check out the limitations of study design or focus;
- examine the interpretations made; and
- decide to what extent you are prepared to accept the authors' arguments, opinions, or conclusions.

Why do we need to take a critical approach to reading?

Regardless of how objective, technical, or scientific the subject matter, the author(s) will have made many decisions during the research and writing process, and each of these decisions is a potential topic for examination and debate, rather than for blind acceptance.

You need to be prepared to step into the academic debate and to make your own evaluation of how much you are willing to accept what you read.

A practical starting point therefore, is to consider anything you read not as fact, but as the argument of the writer. Taking this starting point you will be ready to engage in critical reading.

Critical reading does not have to be all negative

The aim of critical reading is not to find fault, but to assess the strength of the evidence and the argument. It is just as useful to conclude that a study, or an article, presents very strong evidence and a well-reasoned argument, as it is to identify the studies or articles that are weak.

Evidence

Depending on the kind of writing it is, and the discipline in which it sits, different kinds of evidence will be presented for you to examine.

At the technical and scientific end of the spectrum, relevant evidence may include information on: measurements, timing, equipment, control of extraneous factors, and careful following of standard procedures. Specific guidance will be available within specialties on what to look for.

At the other end of the spectrum is writing where there is clearer scope for personal interpretation, for example:

- analysis of individuals' experiences of healthcare;
- the translation of a text from a foreign language; or
- the identification and analysis of a range of themes in a novel.

In these cases the evidence may include items such as quotes from interviews, extracts of text, and diagrams showing how themes might connect.

The nature of the evidence presented at these two extremes is different, but in both cases you need to look for the rationale for the selection and interpretation of the evidence presented, and the rationale for the construction of the argument.

Broadening the definition of evidence

This Study Guide takes a broad view of evidence: it maintains that all that you read can be considered as evidence, not purely the actual data collected/presented. This encompasses:

- the report of the context within which the data were collected or created;
- the choice of the method for data collection or selection;
- the audit trail for the analysis of the data i.e.: the decisions made and the steps in the analysis process;
- the rationale for the interpretations made and the conclusions drawn;
- the relevance of, and the use made of the theoretical perspective, ideology, or philosophy that is underpinning the argument.

Linking evidence to argument

On its own, evidence cannot contribute to academic debate. The *interpretation* and presentation of that evidence within an argument allows the evidence to make a contribution.

The term 'argument' in this context means the carefully constructed rationale for the enquiry, and for the place of its results within the academic arena. It will explain for example:

- why the authors considered that what they did was worth doing;
- why it was worth doing in that particular way;
- why the data collected, or the material selected, were the most appropriate;
- how the conclusions drawn link to the wider context of their enquiry.

Even in the most technical and scientific disciplines, the presentation of argument will always involve elements that can be examined and questioned. For example, you could ask:

- Why did the writer select that particular topic of enquiry in the first place?
- Why did the writer decide to use that particular methodology, choose that specific method, and conduct the work in that way?
- Why did the writer select that particular process of analysis?

Note taking

As you read, it can be helpful to use a table to record the information that you know you will need later. In addition to the usual bibliographical details, you can devise your own list of extra information you want to collect at the initial reading stage. Some suggestions are given below.

Two important points about using such tables are:

- it is essential that you devise *your own* list of information to collect from each source, based on what you know you will need to comment upon; and
- realistically, it is probably best not to try to collect this information from every single source you use, only from those you decide to refer to in your report or assignment. Otherwise it could really slow down your background reading, and result in the collection of a mass of material that you never use.

Descriptive details you may want to record about sources

Setting	Type of data
Sample size	Use of theory
Sample profile	Equipment
Follow up	Style of writing
Statistics used	Measurements
Methods	Sources of bias
Questions raised	Limitations
Main arguments	Intended audience

Some interpretative questions you may need to ask about sources

These are questions that need more input from you as the critical reader. You will need to make judgements about your answers, and will need to record the reasons for your answers. This list is a mix of arts and science-based questions, as there are several areas of common interest.

- Q How well-developed are the themes or arguments?
- Q Did the theoretical perspective used introduce any potential bias?
- Q Are you convinced by the interpretations presented?
- Q Are the conclusions supported firmly by the preceding argument?
- Q How appropriate are the comparisons that are used?
- Q Did the response options, or measurement categories or techniques used affect the data that were collected?
- Q Have any ethical considerations been adequately addressed?

If you take a critical approach right from the start of your reading and note taking, it can save a lot of time later on. When you come to write your assignment or thesis, you will need to comment on the validity of the writing that you refer to. So, if you

have kept a systematic record of the results of your critical reading, you will be able to refer to it easily. If you have not, you will find yourself wasting a lot of time re-reading material, and re-reviewing the evidence presented.

Helpful guidance from other sources

There are many sources of guidance on how to engage in critical reading: some are in books on general study skills; others are on the internet. Chapter 10 of the 'Study Skills Handbook' by Stella Cottrell (2003) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, is particularly recommended. The following questions are based on material from that chapter:

- Does the writing assume a causal connection when there may not be one?
- Are general conclusions drawn based on only a few examples?
- Are inappropriate comparisons being made?
- Might there be other explanations apart from the one proposed?
- Are there any hidden assumptions that need to be questioned?
- Is enough evidence presented to allow readers to draw their own conclusions?
- Does the line of reasoning make sense?

Guidance available via the internet can be found on the following websites

Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP)

<http://www.casp-uk.net/>

This site is designed for use within healthcare, but many of the ideas are transferable more widely in both quantitative and qualitative research.

University of Toronto: Advice on critical reading for academic writing

<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/reading-and-researching>

This site has many useful sections on styles of academic writing.

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute: Center for Communication Practices

<http://www.ccp.rpi.edu/resources/critiques/>

This site has a useful e-handout on writing critiques.

This study guide is one of a series produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills.

studyhelp@le.ac.uk | www.le.ac.uk/succeedinyourstudies