

Critical Reading: A Guide for Graduate Students

There are different purposes for reading in graduate school, and each purpose requires a different *way* of reading. These purposes and ways of reading generally fall under what we call “Critical Reading.” By this, we mean reading *actively* with an eye towards *identifying, analyzing, comparing, evaluating, and responding*. Graduate-level critical reading often integrates these different reading purposes for one or more texts.

Reading to Identify

This tends to be the most basic way to read—and will usually happen during your *first reading* of a text. This type of reading will usually attempt to find out the following (but there could be more):

- Title, general topic of the text, specific focus of the text (argument or research question)
- Author and intended audience
- **Type** or **Genre** of writing (research paper, Op-Ed, response paper, literature review, etc.)
- Structure of the text (previewing)

Reading to Analyze

At this stage, not only are you recalling the elements you’ve just identified, but now you’re reading more deeply to **figure out how text works as a whole**. This type of reading will usually attempt to examine:

- Who is the intended audience? How does the author appeal to this audience?
- What is the author’s purpose? (to inform, to convince, to share new research, to entertain)
- What is the author’s *main argument*? What are the author’s *main evidence*? What *type of evidence* is used?
- How was the study conducted (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods)? (Or, how was the argument developed?)
- What is the author’s *tone*? How does the author’s language use and tone (specialized terminology, words with emotional connotation, etc.) support its intended/stated/implicit audience, purpose, and argument?

Reading to Compare

An important aspect of reading in graduate school is to place a text you are reading in the spectrum of readings you’ve done yourself inside and outside of class. Reading for comparison widens your understanding of a topic as you connect your text(s) to other texts about this topic. Reading comparatively often involves *synthesis*: the drawing together of sources that leads to novel or insightful conclusions based on the evidence from such sources. Ask yourself these questions as you read your sources, **noting for patterns or where they diverge**:

- Are the authors writing for a similar audience and purpose? If not, where do they differ?
- Are the authors advocating for a similar or opposing or different positions?
- How does the evidence in each article confirm/reinforce, contradict, or complicate the evidence in the other?
- How do the methods compare?
- How do the authors’ tone and language use compare in each text?
- How do the authors’ findings, implications, and/or conclusions compare to those of other scholars/authors in the field? (*compare the knowledge you’ve gained to previous knowledge)

Reading to Evaluate

Whereas reading to compare requires you to *notice* patterns that texts might fall into (or patterns they might deviate from), reading to evaluate requires you to **make a judgment** on the text’s strength and weaknesses. Remember that just because something is published, it does not mean that it is necessarily accurate, scholarly, or free of bias. Careful, critical readers evaluate texts to gauge its worthiness,

credibility, and correctness. Here, we return to previous questions we've asked in other types of reading, but now ask follow up questions to get to a point where we can evaluate the text(s):

- Author: Learn about the author's background a little bit; determine the author's credibility by looking at their previous work and, if available, who have cited them. What are potential *biases* (or conflict of interests) between the author and the subject?
- Publisher: Locate the publisher information of the text; is the journal or publication peer-reviewed? This matters for scholarly sources. Is the book from a university press or a trade publisher?
 - *When* was the work published? Fields change and develop over time, some more rapidly than others. Knowing the recency of the publication can help you evaluate if the source is current.
 - Does the author provide *a bibliography or references list*? This is an important aspect of scholarly writing. These should tell you whether the subject is well researched. Missing references list or bibliography can be a sign of a questionable material.
- Argument and Evidence:
 - Does the author *adequately* support their arguments? Does the evidence support the conclusions that the author draws? Has the author interpreted the evidence correctly?
 - Does the author present a counterargument?
 - Does the author have any bias or misuse/misappropriation of evidence?
- Methods:
 - Is the method sound? Credible? Reliable? Appropriate for the research question or purpose?
 - What the sample size sufficient? Generalizable?
 - What are the limitations of the study (stated or implied)?
 - Could the evidence be flawed based on how the study was conducted?
- *What is your overall evaluation of the text? What is the usefulness of the material?* Think of a response to "How was the article?" or "How was the book?" as a starting point for your evaluation.

Reading to Respond

In some ways, reading to respond is quite similar to reading to evaluate. Reading in order to respond to a text requires you to assess the effectiveness of the text (evaluation or critique) as well as (often) connect the reading to something you have learned and/or experienced or something you think might apply. This type of reading—and the writing that follows it—might involve *interpolation* and *extrapolation* of ideas. To *interpolate* means to bring external ideas to a text so that we learn something new about the text (the ideas could inform, enlarge, elucidate, or even refute the text). To *extrapolate* means to take what you've learned from the text and apply it to a different context. You might also draw *inferences*; that is, draw conclusions based upon the available information that you will then support with evidence (either from the text or elsewhere). Ask yourself **open-ended questions that begin with "how" or "why"** in addition to figuring out the parameters of the response assignment:

- What are the requirements of my response assignment? Am I reading to find out where I agree/disagree with the author? How the ideas in the text might apply to other contexts?
- Reflect on the ideas presented in the text. What does it mean for you, as a person, as a professional, as a student, etc.? What does this contribute to our knowledge of the topic?
- How does this information influence or affect me? Why does this topic matter?

Adapted from "Critical Reading." (n.d.) ASC Success Strategies. Walden University. <https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/ASCsuccess/ASCcriticalreading>; "Critical Reading." (n.d.) Writing@CSU The Writing Studio. Colorado State University. <https://writing.colostate.edu/guides/page.cfm?pageid=640&guideid=31>; "Interpolating and Extrapolating." (n.d.) Writing@CSU The Writing Studio. Colorado State University. <https://writing.colostate.edu/guides/page.cfm?pageid=695&guideid=34>