



The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Critical Reading & Critical Thinking

Despite the use of the term critical, critical thinking does not mean being critical in the sense that you tear down or attack thoughts or ideas. Rather, it involves evaluating or considering ideas from an unbiased perspective, being able to differentiate facts from opinions, determining validity, and understanding how the ideas or thoughts fit within a larger context.

This handout will provide you with questions and tips to aid in both thinking critically and engaging critically with texts. The thinking processes and questions listed below will assist writers with analyzing arguments, readings, or other sources from a critical standpoint. The questions will help writers to perform a critical or rhetorical analysis of the text. While it may be helpful to consider all questions and standpoints in the handout, not all questions will directly pertain to each text you read.

Elements of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking as conceptualized by Richard Paul, director of The Center for Critical Thinking, is comprised of eight basic elements, which are referenced via the questions below. Through engaging with these questions, you can analyze any idea or thought process, such as those presented in political speeches, scholarly articles, and the popular media. Ask these questions both during and after reading a text:

1. What is the purpose of this thinking?
2. What issue(s) are being addressed? What problem(s) need to be solved?
3. What is the author's point of view?
4. What evidence (e.g., facts, statistics, personal anecdotes, etc.) is being used?
5. What are the key concepts, and how are they defined?
6. What assumptions are being made?
7. What are the potential implications and consequences of this line of thinking?
8. How can this thinking be interpreted? What can be inferred?

Standards of Critical Thinking

After determining the overall facts guiding the thinking or ideas, it is important to analyze the information regarding the following standards. It is important to determine if the thinking is

- Clear
- Concise
- Consistent
- Broad
- Significant
- Relevant
- Precise
- Logical
- Complete
- Adequate
- Specific
- Plausible
- Deep
- Fair

Critically Engaging with Texts

Reading critically means reading for more than just facts and understanding; it means reading to understand the author's purpose, possible biases, and how the argument is constructed effectively (or not). In short, critical reading means reading to understand first and questioning the content second. The following are questions to consider:

- Who is the author and what is his/her background? Expertise?
- What audience is this directed at? Will they be accepting of the material or will they be unwilling to accept the information? How does this affect the way the material will be received?
- What assumptions does the author make in terms of commonly held values, beliefs, or knowledge?
- Does the author ever confuse facts with beliefs or opinions?
- What appeals does the author make? To reason (logos), for instance with statistics, the testimony of authorities, and personal experience? To the emotions (pathos), for instance, by an appeal to "our better nature," or to widely shared values? To our sense that the speaker is trustworthy (ethos)?
- How convincing is the evidence? Does it come from a reliable source?
- What is the author's tone? Is it appropriate?
- Are significant objections and counterevidence adequately discussed?
- To what extent has the author convinced me? Why?

These questions help the reader to understand not just what is being said, but how the information is being presented in a way to persuade the reader of a particular point of view or depiction of events. This allows the reader to move beyond simply understanding the document and move into a position to critically engage with the information. Use these questions as a jumping off point to start understanding texts from a critical point of view rather than from a content point of view.

For further information on related concepts, please see the following handouts:

- Engaging with Academic Texts