

Research and Critical Reading

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the importance of critical reading and how it connects to the research process. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Purpose of Critical Reading

Life presents us with a variety of reading situations that demand different reading strategies and techniques. Sometimes, it is important to be as efficient as possible and read purely for information or “the main point.” At other times, it is important to just “let go” and follow a good story.

At the heart of writing and research, however, lies the kind of reading known as **critical reading**. Critical examination of sources is what makes their use in research possible and what allows writers to create rhetorically effective and engaging texts.

Critical readers are able to interact with the texts they read through careful listening, writing, conversation, and questioning. They do not sit back and wait for the meaning of a text to come to them but work hard in order to create such meaning.

Becoming a critical reader will take a lot of practice and patience. Depending on your current reading philosophy and experiences with reading, becoming a critical reader may require a significant change in your whole understanding of the reading process. The trade-off is worth it, however. By becoming a more critical and active reader, you will also become a better researcher and writer.

Last but not least, you will enjoy reading and writing a whole lot more because you will become actively engaged in both.



TERM TO KNOW

Critical Reading

Reading that involves actively engaging with and creating meaning from a text through careful listening, writing, conversation, and questioning.

2. Key Features of Critical Reading

Critical reading is a two-way process. As a critical reader, you are not a consumer of words, waiting patiently

for ideas from the printed page or a website to fill your head and make you smarter.

Instead, as a critical reader, you need to interact with what you read, asking questions of the author, testing every assertion, fact, or idea, and extending the text by adding your own understanding of the subject and your own personal experiences to your reading.

The following are key features of the critical approach to reading.

1. No text, however well written and authoritative, contains its own pre-determined meaning.
2. Readers must work hard to create meaning from every text.
3. Critical readers interact with the texts they read by questioning them, responding to them, and expanding on them, usually in writing.
4. To create meaning, critical readers use a variety of approaches, strategies, and techniques, which include applying their personal experiences and existing knowledge to the reading process.
5. Critical readers actively seek out other texts related to the topic of their investigation.

3. Reacting vs. Responding

The goal of an active reader is to engage in a conversation with the text they are reading. In order to fulfill this goal, it is important to understand the difference between reacting to the text and responding to it.

Reacting to a text is often done on an emotional level rather than on an intellectual level. It is quick and shallow.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you encounter a text that advances arguments with which you strongly disagree, it is natural to dismiss those ideas out of hand as wrong and unworthy of your attention. Doing so would be reacting to the text based only on emotions and on your pre-set opinions about its arguments.

It is easy to see that reacting in this way does not take the reader any closer to understanding the text. A wall of disagreement that existed between the reader and the text before the reading continues to exist after the reading.

Responding to a text, on the other hand, requires a careful study of the ideas presented and arguments advanced in it. Critical readers who possess this skill are not willing to simply reject or accept the arguments presented in the text right away after the first reading.

Additionally, responsive readers learn to avoid simple “agree/disagree” responses to complex texts. Such a way of thinking and arguing is often called “binary” because it allows only two answers to every statement and question. A much more nuanced approach is needed when dealing with complex arguments.

Reacting to Texts	Responding to Texts
Works on an emotional level rather than an intellectual level	Works on an intellectual and emotional level by asking the readers to use all three rhetorical appeals in reading and writing about the text
Prevents readers from studying purposes, intended audiences, and contexts of texts they are working with	Allows for careful study of the text's rhetorical aspects

Fails to establish dialogue between the readers and the text by locking the readers in their pre-existing opinion about the argument	Establishes dialogue among the reader, text, and other readers by allowing all sides to reconsider existing positions and opinions
Binary Reading	Nuanced Reading
Provides only "agree or disagree" answers	Allows for a deep and detailed understanding of complex texts
Does not allow for an understanding of complex arguments	Takes into account "grey areas" of complex arguments
Prevents the readers from a true rhetorical engagement with the text	Establishes rhetorical engagement between the readers and the text

4. Critical Reading in Practice

To illustrate critical reading principles, consider the following two reading responses. Both texts respond to a very well-known piece: “A Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the letter, King responds to criticism from other clergymen who called his methods of civil rights advocacy “unwise and untimely.” Both student writers were given the same response prompt:

“After reading King’s piece several times and with a pen or pencil in hand, consider what shapes King’s letter. Specifically, what rhetorical strategies is he using to achieve a persuasive effect on his readers? In making your decisions, consider such factors as background information that he gives, ways in which he addresses his immediate audience, and others. Remember that your goal is to explore King’s text, thus enabling you to understand his rhetorical strategies better.”

Student A's Response

Martin Luther King Jr’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is a very powerful text. At the time, when minorities in America were silenced and persecuted, King had the courage to lead his people in the struggle for equality. After being jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, King wrote a letter to his “fellow clergymen” describing his struggle for civil rights. In the letter, King recounts a brief history of that struggle and rejects the accusation that it is “unwise and untimely.” Overall, I think that King’s letter is a very rhetorically effective text, one that greatly helped Americans to understand the civil rights movement.

Student B's Response

King begins his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by addressing it to his “fellow clergymen.” Thus, he immediately sets the tone of inclusion rather than exclusion. By using the word “fellow” in the address, I think he is trying to do two things. First of all, he presents himself as a colleague and a spiritual brother of his audience. That, in effect, says, “You can trust me because I am one of your kind.” Secondly, by addressing his readers in that way, King suggests that everyone, even those Americans who are not directly involved in the struggle for civil rights, should be concerned with it—

hence the word “fellow.” King’s opening almost invokes the phrase “My fellow Americans” or “My fellow citizens” used so often by American Presidents when they address the nation.

King then proceeds to give a brief background of his actions as a civil rights leader. As I read this part of the letter, I was wondering whether his readers would really have not known what he had accomplished as a civil rights leader. Then I realized that perhaps he gives all that background information as a rhetorical move. His immediate goal is to keep reminding his readers about his activities. His ultimate goal is to show his audience that his actions were non-violent. In reading this passage by King, I remembered once again that it is important not to assume that your audience knows anything about the subject of the writing. I will try to use this strategy more in my own papers.

In the middle of the letter, King states, “The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.” This sentence looks like a thesis statement and I wonder why he did not place it towards the beginning of the text, to get his point across right away. After thinking about this for a few minutes and rereading several pages from our class textbook, I think he leaves his “thesis” until later in his piece because he is facing a not-so-friendly (if not hostile) audience. Delaying the thesis and laying out some background information and evidence first helps a writer to prepare his or her audience for the coming argument. That is another strategy I should probably use more often in my own writing, depending on the audience I am facing.



THINK ABOUT IT

To be sure, much more can be said about King's letter than either of these writers have said. However, these two responses allow us to see two dramatically different approaches to reading. After studying both responses, consider the questions below.

1. Which response fulfills the goals set in the prompt better, and why?
2. Which response shows a deeper understanding of the texts by the reader, and why?
3. Which writer does a better job of avoiding binary thinking and creating a sophisticated reading of King's text, and why?
4. Which writer is more likely to use the results of the reading in their own writing in the future, and why?
5. Which writer leaves room for response to her text by others, and why?

As is probably clear from how much more in-depth the response is, Student B did a better job of addressing all of the questions posed in the prompt. Most notably, Student B did not address the text in binary terms; instead, she looked at the text from multiple perspectives and considered how this exercise could relate to her own writing.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the **purpose of critical reading** is to actively engage with a text and create meaning from it. The **key features of critical reading** include making meaning from texts through interaction, applying personal experience and previous knowledge to the reading process, and seeking out other texts related to the topic. You also learned about **the difference between reacting and responding** to a text while reading it. Finally, you looked at an example of **critical reading in practice** to get a better idea of what this exercise might entail.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Research and Critical Reading" tutorial.



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