

CRITICAL READING AND CRITICAL THINKING

What Is Critical Reading?

Note: These remarks are primarily directed at non-fictional texts.

Facts v. Interpretation

To **non**-critical readers, texts provide facts. Readers gain knowledge by memorizing the statements within a text.

To the **critical** reader, any single text provides but one portrayal of the facts, one individual's "take" on the subject matter. Critical readers thus recognize not only *what* a text says, but also *how* that text portrays the subject matter. They recognize the various ways in which each and every text is the unique creation of a unique author. A non-critical reader might read a history book to learn the facts of the situation or to discover an accepted interpretation of those events. A critical reader might read the same work to appreciate how a particular perspective on the events and a particular selection of facts can lead to particular understanding.

What a Text Says, Does, and Means: Reaching for an Interpretation

Non-critical reading is satisfied with recognizing what a text *says* and restating the key remarks.

Critical reading goes two steps further. Having recognized what a text *says*, it reflects on what the text *does* by making such remarks. Is it offering examples? Arguing? Appealing for sympathy? Making a contrast to clarify a point? Finally, critical readers then infer what the text, as a whole, *means*, based on the earlier analysis.

These three steps or modes of analysis are reflected in three types of reading and discussion:

- What a text **says** – **restatement**
- What a text **does** – **description**
- What a text **means** – **interpretation**

You can distinguish each mode of analysis by the subject matter of the discussion:

- What a text says – restatement – talks about the same topic as the original text
- What a text does – description – discusses aspects of the discussion itself
- What a text means – interpretation — analyzes the text and asserts a meaning for the text as a whole

Goals of Critical Reading

Textbooks on critical reading commonly ask students to accomplish certain goals:

- to recognize an author's purpose
- to understand tone and persuasive elements
- to recognize bias

Notice that none of these goals actually refers to something on the page. Each requires inferences from evidence within the text:

- recognizing purpose involves inferring a basis for choices of content and language
- recognizing tone and persuasive elements involves classifying the nature of language choices
- recognizing bias involves classifying the nature of patterns of choice of content and language

Critical reading is not simply close and careful reading. To read critically, one must actively recognize and analyze evidence upon the page.

Analysis and Inference: The Tools of Critical Reading

These web pages are designed to take the mystery out of critical reading. They are designed to show you **what to look for (analysis)** and **how to think about what you find (inference)**.

The first part —what to look for— involves recognizing those aspects of a discussion that control the meaning.

The second part —how to think about what you find— involves the processes of inference, the interpretation of data from within the text.

Recall that critical reading assumes that each author offers a portrayal of the topic. Critical reading thus relies on an examination of those choices that any and all authors must make when framing a presentation: choices of content, language, and structure. Readers examine each of the three areas of choice, and consider their effect on the meaning.

What is Critical Thinking?

No one always acts purely objectively and rationally. We connive for selfish interests. We gossip, boast, exaggerate, and equivocate. It is "only human" to wish to validate our prior knowledge, to vindicate our prior decisions, or to sustain our earlier beliefs. In the process of satisfying our ego, however, we can often deny ourselves intellectual growth and opportunity. We may not always want to apply critical thinking skills, but we should have those skills available to be employed when needed.

Critical thinking includes a complex combination of skills. Among the main characteristics are the following:

Rationality

We are thinking critically when we

- rely on reason rather than emotion,
- require evidence, ignore no known evidence, and follow evidence where it leads, and
- are concerned more with finding the best explanation than being right, analyzing apparent confusion and asking questions.

Self-awareness

We are thinking critically when we

- weigh the influences of motives and bias and
- recognize our own assumptions, prejudices, biases, or point of view.

Honesty

We are thinking critically when we recognize emotional impulses, selfish motives, nefarious purposes, or other modes of self-deception.

Open-mindedness

We are thinking critically when we

- evaluate all reasonable inferences,
- consider a variety of possible viewpoints or perspectives,
- remain open to alternative interpretations,
- accept a new explanation, model, or paradigm because it explains the evidence better, is simpler, or has fewer inconsistencies or covers more data,
- accept new priorities in response to a reevaluation of the evidence or reassessment of our real interests, and
- do not reject unpopular views out of hand.

Discipline

We are thinking critically when we

- are precise, meticulous, comprehensive, and exhaustive,
- resist manipulation and irrational appeals, and
- avoid snap judgments.

Judgment

We are thinking critically when we

- recognize the relevance and/or merit of alternative assumptions and perspectives and
- recognize the extent and weight of evidence.

In sum,

- Critical thinkers are by nature **skeptical**. They approach texts with the same skepticism and suspicion as they approach spoken remarks.
- Critical thinkers are **active**, not passive. They ask questions and analyze. They consciously apply tactics and strategies to uncover meaning or assure their understanding.
- Critical thinkers do not take an egotistical view of the world. They are **open** to new ideas and perspectives. They are willing to challenge their beliefs and investigate competing evidence.

Critical thinking enables us to recognize a wide range of subjective analyses of otherwise objective data and to evaluate how well each analysis might meet our needs. Facts may be facts, but how we interpret them may vary. By contrast, passive, non-critical thinkers take a simplistic view of the world.

- They see things in black and white, as either-or, rather than recognizing a variety of possible understanding.
- They see questions as yes or no with no subtleties.
- They fail to see linkages and complexities.
- They fail to recognize related elements.

Non-critical thinkers take an egotistical view of the world

- They take *their* facts as the only relevant ones.
- They take *their own* perspective as the only sensible one.
- They take *their goal* as the only valid one.

Critical Reading v. Critical Thinking

We can distinguish between critical reading and critical thinking in the following way:

- Critical *reading* is a technique for **discovering** information and ideas within a text.
- Critical *thinking* is a technique for **evaluating** information and ideas, for deciding what to accept and believe.

Critical reading refers to a careful, active, reflective, analytic reading. Critical thinking involves reflecting on the validity of what you have read in light of our prior knowledge and understanding of the world.

For example, consider the following (somewhat humorous) sentence from a student essay:
Parents are buying expensive cars for their kids to destroy them.

As the terms are used here, **critical reading** is concerned with figuring out whether, within the context of the text as a whole, "*them*" refers to the parents, the kids, or the cars, and whether the text supports that practice. **Critical thinking** would come into play when deciding whether the chosen meaning was indeed true, and whether or not you, as the reader, should support that practice.

By these definitions, critical reading would appear to come before critical thinking: Only once we have fully understood a text (critical reading) can we truly evaluate its assertions (critical thinking).

The Two Together in Harmony

In actual practice, critical reading and critical thinking work together.

Critical thinking allows us to monitor our understanding as we read. If we sense that assertions are ridiculous or irresponsible (critical thinking), we examine the text more closely to test our understanding (critical reading).

Conversely, critical thinking depends on critical reading. You can think critically about a text (critical thinking), after all, only if you have understood it (critical reading). We may choose to accept or reject a presentation, but we must know why. We have a responsibility to ourselves, as well as to others, to isolate the real issues of agreement or disagreement. Only then can we understand and respect other people's views. To recognize and understand those views, we must read critically.

The Usefulness of the Distinction

If critical thinking and critical reading are so closely linked, why is this still a useful distinction?

The usefulness of the distinction lies in its reminder that we must read each text on its own merits, not imposing our prior knowledge or views on it. While we must evaluate ideas as we read, we must not distort the meaning within a text. We must not allow ourselves to force a text to say what we would otherwise like it to say—or we will never learn anything new!

Reading Critically: How Well Does the Text Do What It Does

We can think of a writer as having taken on a job. No matter what the topic, certain tasks must be done:

- a specific topic must be addressed
- terms must be clearly defined
- evidence must be presented
- common knowledge must be accounted for
- exceptions must be explained
- causes must be shown to precede effects and to be capable of the effect
- conclusions must be shown to follow logically from earlier arguments and evidence

As critical readers and writers, we want to assure ourselves that these tasks have been completed in a complete, comprehensive, and consistent manner. Only once we have determined that a text is consistent and coherent can we then begin to evaluate whether or not to accept the assertions and conclusions.

Thinking Critically: Evaluating the Evidence

Reading to see what a text says may suffice when the goal is to learn specific information or to understand someone else's ideas. But we usually read with other purposes. We need to solve problems, build roads, write legislation, or design an advertising campaign. We must evaluate what we have read and integrate that understanding with our prior understanding of the world. We must decide what to accept as true and useful.

As readers, we want to accept as fact only that which is actually true. To evaluate a conclusion, we must evaluate the evidence upon which that conclusion is based. We do not want just any information; we want reliable information. To assess the validity of remarks within a text, we must go outside a text and bring to bear outside knowledge and standards.