

# HOW TO READ CRITICALLY

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The key to success in college, in all courses, in all disciplines, is critical reading. Critical reading is concentrated, active, engaged reading. At its core, critical reading involves *annotating* a text: underlining and writing key words in the margins. Many students do not know how to read critically because they have never been allowed to write in their books. In college, you own the books, so you can finally begin to learn this vital skill. You might worry that you are ruining the book, especially for sale back to the bookstore. However, marking in the book does not decrease its value, and the bookstore doesn't really give you much money for a used book anyway. Think economically: you are paying a lot to get an education. A real education involves critical reading. If you are not reading critically, annotating all your texts, you are not getting a real education. Would you rather get a few dollars back at the end of the semester, or know that you got the full value of your dollar from your reading? Critical reading is difficult but rewarding. Here are a few steps to help you:

**1. FIND A QUIET PLACE TO READ:** You *must* be able to concentrate to read critically. Turn off the TV, throw your roommate out, hide your iPod, turn off your cell phone. Better yet, find a quiet place like the library. You can't use all your mental capacity if you can't concentrate.

**2. PRE-READ THE ASSIGNMENT:** Skim over the whole assignment very quickly. Get a good idea of how much you must read and what it will entail. Pay special attention to chapter titles, headings, highlighted sections, and illustrations. You will be a better reader if you know what you are about to tackle.

**3. ANNOTATE BY READING WITH A PEN IN HAND:** Annotation is the heart of critical reading. You aren't reading critically if you aren't annotating. The two most basic moves of annotation are *underlining* and *writing in the margins*. Underline key points, especially topic sentences. Highlight key words and terms by drawing a box around them. Although many students like to use highlighters, I have found that merely highlighting a text is not sufficient; if you do use a highlighter, you should also use a pen to write in the margins.

**4. WRITE KEY IDEAS/MAIN POINTS IN THE MARGINS:** As you underline key ideas and main points, write them beside the text in the margins. *This step is the most important step in critical reading.* If you come to class with an article or textbook chapter or short story or novel or non-fiction text that has the main points summarized, paragraph by paragraph, you will be prepared to answer questions and engage in class discussion. When you go back to the text to write a paper or study for a test, you can quickly skim the text for main ideas without re-reading the whole text. Annotating—underlining and writing in the margins—takes more time than quick, passive reading, but it actually saves time in the long run. You will understand the reading better from the start and retain more of it later. An interesting note: studies have shown that, even if you never look at the text again, if you have annotated it well, you will retain more than if you had merely read the text without marking it.

**5. READ WITH A DICTIONARY IN HAND:** And use it! Look up unfamiliar words and

*write the definitions in the margins.* Since a text is made of words, if you don't know what the words mean, you don't really understand the text. Pay special attention to defining key concepts.

**6. ASK QUESTIONS AS YOU READ:** Stop often and ask questions. What does the title mean? Why does the writer begin the text this way? What is the writer's main point? Why did the writer make that argument or use that example? Engage in a dialogue with the writer as you read. The writer is talking to you; talk back with questions. And write key questions in the margins. A questioning reader is well on the way to becoming a critical thinker.

**7. ASK "HOW?," "WHY?," AND "SO WHAT" QUESTIONS:** Don't just read to understand what the writer is saying (although that's important); read to figure out how, why, and so what. These are the deeper analytic questions.

**8. LOOK FOR THE ELEMENTS OF REASONING:** As you read and after you have read, try to find and think about the elements of reasoning: purpose, question at issue, point of view, information, concepts, implications, assumptions, conclusions, context, and alternatives. If you apply the elements of reasoning to your reading, you are critically reading and critically thinking.

**9. THINK ABOUT THE STANDARDS OF CRITICAL THINKING:** After you have finished reading, apply the standards of critical thinking to the text: clearness; accuracy; importance and relevance; sufficiency; breadth and depth; precision. If you can do a standards check of a text before class, you will be way ahead in the game.

**10. LOOK FOR CONNECTIONS:** Have you read anything else by this writer? Is this text like something else you have read? Does this text relate to something you are learning in another course, or something from your own experience? Make emotional or personal connections, and write them down in the margins.

Why read critically if it is so hard? First, if you read critically, you will make better grades in this course and in all your courses. More importantly, you will learn more and more deeply, which is your higher goal in college. Most important of all, critical reading is the first step toward becoming a critical thinker. You will not only be a better student, but you will be a more informed citizen and a fuller human being. Critical reading, then, is not only the key to success in college, but a key to success in life. Critical reading will probably seem hard at first, especially if you have never done it, but it will become easier with practice. Isn't that true of any hard skill you have tried to master: kicking a soccer ball, playing a musical instrument, swimming the breaststroke? As hard as it seems when you begin, critical reading will pay you intellectual rewards far beyond what you can imagine.

I have found that many students are very resistant to critical reading. Some good readers think it will ruin the experience of reading. In my experience, analytical, critical reading actually makes reading more pleasurable. When I look back at a text I have annotated well, I get a sense of intellectual pride. Some students give critical reading a half-hearted try, then abandon it as the semester gets underway. The students who do the best in my courses are the ones who grow and develop as critical readers. Always annotate everything you read for a college class!