Critical Reading for Research

McNair/ROP Seminar Presentation

Introduction: Thinking-Intensive Reading

Critical reading—active engagement and interaction with texts—is essential in grounding your research in a theoretical base, and to your intellectual growth. Research has shown that students who read deliberately retain more information and retain it longer.

While the strategies described below are (for the sake of clarity) listed sequentially, you typically do most of them simultaneously. They may feel awkward at first, and you may have to deploy them very consciously the first few times, especially if you are not used to doing anything more than moving your eyes across the page. But they will quickly become habits, and you will notice the difference—in what you “see” in a reading, and in the confidence with which you approach your texts.

1. Preview

Look "around" the text before you start reading.

You’ve probably engaged in one version of previewing in the past, when you’ve tried to determine how long an assigned reading is (and how much time and energy, as a result, it will demand from you). But you can learn a great deal more about the organization and purpose of a text by taking note of features other than its length.

- Previewing enables you to develop a set of expectations about the scope and aim of the text. These very preliminary impressions offer you a way to focus your reading. For instance:

- Look at the sub-headings. Most books or chapters will progress in some manner, whether they show a progression of time or an evolution of ideas. Look over the topics and try to find the pattern.
- What does the presence of headnotes, an abstract, or other prefatory material tell you?

- Is the author known to you already? If so, how does his (or her) reputation or credentials influence your perception of what you are about to read? If the author is unfamiliar or unknown, does an editor introduce him or she (by supplying brief biographical information, an assessment of the author's work, concerns, and importance)?

- How does the disposition or layout of a text prepare you for reading? Is the material broken into parts—subtopics, sections, or the like? Are there long and unbroken blocks of text or smaller paragraphs or "chunks" and what does this suggest? How might the parts of a text guide you toward understanding the line of inquiry or the arc of the argument that's being made?

- Does the text seem to be arranged according to certain conventions of discourse? Newspaper articles, for instance, have characteristics that you will recognize; textbooks and scholarly essays are organized quite differently. Texts demand different things of you as you read, so whenever you can, register the type of information you're presented with.

- **Read the introduction and reflect.** Any nonfiction article or book will have an introductory section that gives an overview of the main points. Read this first, then stop, think, and soak it in.

- **Read the summary and reflect.** The summary at the end of a chapter or book should re-state the points that were mentioned in the introduction. (If they don't, then this really is a difficult book to understand!) This reiteration of the main points may offer the material in more depth or from a different viewpoint. Read this section, then stop and soak it in.

**At this point stop, decide whether this text will apply to your research question.** Parts of it may apply, but not the entire book or article. In this case you may want to scan the text and take the highlight the parts that are pertinent to your research. Or, the book or article may be very important and will serve as theoretical basis of your research. In this case the entire text needs to be read carefully. Read carefully and ascertain how much time you want to devote to each reading. If you are not sure, make an "undecided" pile and return to it later.
When you have decided to keep the article continue on to the following tips.

2. Annotate

Annotating puts you actively and immediately in a "dialogue" with an author and the issues and ideas you encounter in a written text. It’s also a way to have an ongoing conversation with yourself as you move through the text and to record what that encounter was like for you.

Make your reading thinking-intensive from start to finish! Here's how:

**Throw away your highlighter:** Highlighting can seem like an active reading strategy, but it can actually distract from the business of learning and dilute your comprehension. Those bright yellow lines you put on a printed page one day can seem strangely cryptic the next, unless you have a method for remembering why they were important to you at another moment in time. Pen or pencil will allow you do to more to a text you have to wrestle with.

**Mark up the margins of your text with words and phrases:** ideas that occur to you, notes about things that seem important to you, reminders of how issues in a text may connect with class discussion or course themes. This kind of interaction keeps you conscious of the reasons you are reading as well as the purposes your instructor has in mind. Later in the term, when you are reviewing for a test or project, your marginalia will be useful memory triggers.

**Develop your own symbol system:** asterisk (*) a key idea, for example, or use an exclamation point (!) for the surprising, absurd, bizarre. Your personalized set of hieroglyphs allow you to capture the important -- and often fleeting -- insights that occur to you as you're reading. Like notes in your margins, they'll prove indispensable when you return to a text in search of that perfect passage to use in a paper, or are preparing for a big exam.

**Get in the habit of hearing yourself ask questions:** “What does this mean?” “Why is the writer drawing that conclusion?” “Why am I being asked to read this text?” etc. Write the questions down in your margins, at the beginning or end of the reading, in a notebook, or elsewhere. They are reminders of the unfinished business you still have with a text: something to ask your research mentor, or to come to terms with on your own, once you’ve had a chance to digest the material further or have done other readings.

**Watch for lists.** Always look for code words that tell you a list is coming. If you see a passage that says “There were three major effects of this event, and they all impacted the political climate,” or something similar, you can be sure there is a list following. The effects will be listed, but they may be separated by many paragraphs, pages, or chapters. Always find them and make note of them.
Look up words you don’t understand. Don’t be lazy! One word can indicate the entire tone or view of the piece. Don’t try to guess the meaning. That can be dangerous!

3. Outline, Summarize, and Analyze

Outline, summarize, analyze: take the information apart, look at its parts, and then try to put it back together again in language that is meaningful to you.

The best way to determine that you’ve really gotten the point is to be able to state it in your own words.

Outlining the argument of a text is a version of annotating, and can be done quite informally in the margins of the text, unless you prefer the more formal Roman numeral model you may have learned in high school. Outlining enables you to see the skeleton of an argument: the thesis, the first point and evidence (and so on), through the conclusion. With weighty or difficult readings, that skeleton may not be obvious until you go looking for it.

Summarizing accomplishes something similar, but in sentence and paragraph form, and with the connections between ideas made explicit.

Analyzing adds an evaluative component to the summarizing process—it requires you not just to restate main ideas, but also to test the logic, credibility, and emotional impact of an argument. In analyzing a text, you reflect upon and decide how effectively (or poorly) its argument has been made. Questions to ask:

What is the writer asserting?

What am I being asked to believe or accept? Facts? Opinions? Some mixture?

What reasons or evidence does the author supply to convince me? Where is the strongest or most effective evidence the author offers -- and why is it compelling?

Is there anywhere that the reasoning breaks down? Are there things that do not make sense. conclusions that are drawn prematurely, moments where the writer undermines his purposes?

4. Look for repetitions and patterns

The way language is chosen, used, positioned in a text can be important indication of what an author considers crucial and what he expects you to glean from his
argument. It can also alert you to ideological positions, hidden agendas or biases. Be watching for:

Recurring images

Repeated words, phrases, types of examples, or illustrations

Consistent ways of characterizing people, events, or issues

5. Contextualize

Once you’ve finished reading actively and annotating, take stock for a moment and put it in perspective. When you contextualize, you essentially "re-view" a text you’ve encountered, framed by its historical, cultural, material, or intellectual circumstances.

Do these factors change or otherwise influence how you view a piece?

Also view the reading through the lens of your own experience. Your understanding of the words on the page and their significance is always shaped by what you have come to know and value from living in a particular time and place.

6. Compare and Contrast

Compare reading to those you read previously to determine their relationships.

At what point does this reading come?

How does it contribute to the main concepts and themes of your research?

How does it compare (or contrast) to the ideas presented by texts that come before it? Does it continue a trend, shift direction, or expand the focus of previous readings?

How has your thinking been altered by this reading, or how has it affected your response to the issues and themes of your research?

7. References, Footnotes and Endnotes
References, footnotes and endnotes hold important information that you can use.

Who does the author cite? Can you use those cited authors’ writings towards your own research? This alone can reduce the amount of time you spend searching for articles by hours. This is how you “build” off others’ work and connect your own research to the larger academe.

Footnotes and endnotes are part of the text. Often an author uses them to add extra information to make their point. Take some time and scan the notes, especially for those articles and books you are using as your main sources.