

Developing a critical approach to your reading



The word 'critical' has many different uses. For example, we may use this word to find fault in something (the food is too cold) or to convey the seriousness of a situation (my friend is in hospital and she is said to be in a critical condition). There is another use of the word 'critical', however which suggests that a topic or issue has been viewed from a range of perspectives (The film was very effective in terms of the way in which it critically considered the different perspectives of family life).

Traditionally, the phrase 'reading for a degree' was used which conveyed the importance of reading when studying at university. Whilst this phrase is not widely used today, there is still an expectation that students will read a variety of sources to help build a well-informed understanding of the subject area. Other expectations of higher education study include students being able to critically appraise literature. This means that we do not only state what has been read, but also provide discussion about how this information is connected to the subject area/assignment task as well as other literature and how this is moving on an understanding of the subject forward (or not), for instance.

Critical reading involves practising active reading skills through which a critical reader demonstrates an ability to read literally and critically. When you critically read a text, you are able to look beyond the surface of what is being said which is aided by asking questions as you read. Therefore, critical reading is essential to your academic development.

A critical approach to reading

- A critical reader engages with the reading material by questioning the information
- A critical reader looks at the strengths and limitations of the information presented
- A critical reader reads widely but strategically, drawing links between the different sources of literature

There are a range of strategies which might be helpful to developing a more critical approach to reading, some of which are suggested below:

To help avoid making an assertion, ensure you have an accurate in-text reference where you have drawn on information you have read from one of your sources.

As you are reading and making notes from a text, consider how the information you are reading is related to a current assignment and/or another text you have read. Also consider what this connection is, for instance is one piece of literature providing a similar point to another or a different perspective? Cornell notes can be a useful template to help you develop a critical approach to your reading.

Cornell notes: a template to help develop a critical approach to your reading

Reference

(Provide referencing information in this section so you can keep a track of what has been read and from where you have drawn particular information. It can be very frustrating to find an excellent piece of information and not be able to trace it back to its original source (which would mean that the information cannot be used in a written assignment, for instance)).

Use this column to make note of your thinking to some of the following indicative questions:

- Why have you made a note of this information? Why do you consider it to be important or relevant (and to what?)?
- Is this information connected to anything else you have heard (in lectures and seminars, for instance)? What are the connections/or similarities or differences between the information?
- Is this information connected to theoretical information and/or examples of relevant practice? What are the connections/or similarities or differences between the information?
- Do you have any observations or comments to make about the information? Think about the date of the source, who has written the document and their authority/position within the subject, the particular stance or perspective of the writing.

Use this column to make notes from the text you are reading.

- Think about condensing the information to key points only
- Maybe bullet-point the information rather than writing swathes of text



Use this section to review and summarise the article you have read overall.