



Critical Reading Handout

As a student, you will engage with literature throughout your degree; being critical in your reading, however, is a skill that you will need to develop if you want to excel in your studies.

It is important to remember that critical reading is a skill: you will improve with practice but learning key techniques will help you master it.

Your goal as a reader is to evaluate the work, both in terms of the merits of the research, and the significance and relevance of the research to your question.

'The skill of critical reading lies in assessing the extent to which authors have provided adequate justification for the claims they make.' (Wallace & Wray, 2016: 7)

How can you be critical in your reading?

- By asking questions of the text
- By examining the evidence provided by the author and the conclusions that they make
- By drawing on your experience and knowledge to evaluate these claims, and by supporting your analysis with research

To make the most of your reading time, you need to have a clear idea of why you are reading. Your reading approach will be different depending on whether you are reading for context, to narrow your question, to identify alternative approaches, etc.

This handout presents different questions that you may want to ask when reading, but you will need to have a clear idea of why you are reading to choose the right questions for the task at hand.

Questions should guide your reading

You have to know what you want to get out of the text to select **relevant** questions

What is your **goal**?

What is your **purpose** in reading this text?

Becoming a critical reader

As a critical reader, your role extends beyond understanding the content: you must ask questions of the text and evaluate the validity and significance of the research.

Think about your goals when you are carrying out your research; understanding the role of a critical reader will help you fill the role of a writer when submitting your written work.

As an **author**, your goal is to convince your reader to agree with your claim.

As a **reader**, your goal is to determine whether the claim is convincing, and **why**.

Critical reading questions

When reading critically, you are often looking for the answers to these questions. They will guide you towards understanding the research and its relationship to your work.

- What is the author's **central argument** or main point?
- What kind of **approach/method** did the author use?
- What was the **outcome** of the research?
- What kind of **evidence** does the author provide?
- What was the **context** for this research/publication?
- What do you find **persuasive** about the text?
- What do you **disagree** with? Why?
- What did this research **contribute** to the field?

*If you aim to answer these questions when reading, you will find that you are engaging **actively** with the text, rather than **passively** taking in the information.*

Answering these questions is not always straightforward, and some are only relevant for particular reading goals. Having a clear idea of your goal is essential, but it can be helpful to divide these broader questions into more focused sub-questions. Here are some examples of sub-questions that can help you find the answer to each of the core critical reading questions.

What is the author's central argument or main point?

- What were the research aims and objectives? Are these clearly defined?
- What does the author want the reader to accept?
- Are the points made by the author supported by evidence?

You will normally find the research aims in the abstract or introduction of a paper, but you will need to scan through the text to determine if the author is supporting their arguments with evidence. Depending on your goal, it might be necessary to investigate this further (e.g. if you are using this paper to support your arguments).

What kind of approach/method did the author use?

- Is the methodology valid? (e.g. size of the sample, method of sampling used)
- Is the approach typical of your field?
- Are the results verifiable?
- What is the theoretical approach used by the author?
- Is there another theoretical or philosophical approach which might have been taken?

Remember, results are only valid if they are capable of supporting the claims being made. Look out for claims that are too broad or too narrow.

What was the outcome of the research?

- Was the author successful?
- Do they acknowledge limitations? Do they discuss any issues?
- Were they able to answer their research question?
- Do they explain the significance of their findings?

External factors can impact research at any level, but it is always necessary to acknowledge limitations.

Try to answer these questions by scanning through the paper in the first instance. You can then decide if it is relevant to your research and how it relates to your current research goal. At this point, you can think about more specific questions that will guide your engagement with the paper.

What kind of evidence does the author provide?

- Is it valid for supporting the conclusions?
- Have they explained the rationale for using this evidence?
- Is the evidence current?
- Do they acknowledge alternative interpretations of the evidence? How do they respond?

Think about how your answers to these questions impact the overall outcome of the paper.

These are particularly useful questions when you are looking for a methodological model.

What do you find persuasive about the text?

- What do you agree with? Why?
- Are the author's claims supported by literature?
- Is the evidence sufficient for supporting the claims they are making?
- Are they careful to acknowledge limitations?
- Do they respond to counterclaims fairly and effectively?

*Remember the **why** in your notes! If you find the paper persuasive, identifying the reasons can help you achieve the same quality in your own writing.*

These are particularly useful questions when carrying out the literature review.

What do you disagree with? Why?

- Does the writer present opinion as fact?
- Do they oversimplify complex ideas?
- Do they make unsupported generalisations or assumptions? (e.g. X is important, or Y is a negative thing.)
- Does their language, tone, or choice of examples reveal any biases?

*Again, the reason **why** you disagree is important here. If there are elements of the research that you find persuasive, you can still draw on those while acknowledging limitations elsewhere in the research.*

It is not enough to highlight quotations from the text to answer these questions; you will need to use your own judgement to answer these, and you will need evidence to support your answers (e.g. if you are arguing that the evidence is not valid, what are your reasons and evidence for this?).

What was the context for this research/publication?

- What kind of publication is this?
- What is the author's background in this subject?
- To whom is the author writing?
- When was research published?
- Does it present controversial ideas?

The type of publication can impact the language of the paper (e.g. less jargon in broader journals) or the credibility of the research (e.g. if the paper was not peer-reviewed).

Often, these questions can highlight potential biases in the research.

What did this research contribute to the field?

- Have the findings of this paper contributed to our understanding of the field?
- Was it significant?
- Was it controversial?
- Have there been subsequent publications that agree/disagree with this research?

If a paper presented an innovative approach but was published over a decade ago and had no impact on the field, you might want to identify the barriers that prevented the research from making a lasting contribution. Understanding how practice evolves in your research field will help you establish your credibility as a writer.

References and further reading

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