Wolfson Academic Skills

Critical Reading

In academic terms, being critical is not about finding fault. Instead, it is the process of weighing up evidence and arguments to make a judgement. Taking a critical approach to your studies involves constantly asking questions and keeping an open mind.

Planning

Your reading should be just as structured as your essay. Before beginning, you need to plan. Create a list or mind map to analyse your question and help identify what you do and don’t know.

Ask yourself: Why am I reading this? What questions do I want it to answer?

Throughout the process do not accept what you read at face value, always question the information, ideas and arguments you come across. Use evidence to help you form your own opinions, arguments, theories and ideas.

Your strategic approach should ideally include the following steps:

- Survey
- Question
- Read
- Recall
- Review

Survey

You don’t have time to read everything, nor do you need to. Take a structured approach to target your reading:

Scan

- If it is a book, look at the contents page and index. If the information you are looking for isn’t mentioned here, you probably don’t need to read any further.
- If it is a chapter or journal article, use headings and subheadings to give you an idea about the content.
- Look at the list of references. Do you recognise anything? Is it linked to material you have been reading? If so, do they support or refute one another?
- Quickly look at the text to identify keywords or phrases.
- Figures, data and images are much easier to digest at speed than words.
- Evaluate the relevance and usefulness of the resource and decide if you need to read more. Then skim the text.

Skim

- Note key points made in the summary or abstract.
- Read the first and last paragraphs or sections to identify the main argument to help you decide if you need more specific information from the body of text.
- This is the case for paragraphs too; a good writer should introduce an argument in the first sentence and summarise it in the last.
- Look for repetition of arguments, phrases or words to give clues to the author’s intentions.
- What do they consider crucial? Does this match what you think is crucial?

Then, and only then, should you decide if you need to read further and take in-depth notes. If not, move on to the next text.

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Turn over for more tips
Question

Once you have established what an individual thinks, you’ll need to link it to the bigger picture. Develop a checklist to evaluate what you read:

Authority
- Can you tell who wrote it? If the author is not identified who is the sponsor, publisher, or organisation behind the information?
- Are the author’s credentials or organisational affiliations listed?
- Is the source reputable?

Purpose
- What is the purpose of the information? To inform, sell or entertain?
- Does the point of view appear objective or can you determine bias? Is this clearly stated or apparent through a close reading?
- Does the text/site provide information or is it an evaluation of other information?

Currency
- When was the information published/posted? Does this matter in your field?
- When was it last revised? Have there been new studies or developments in theory since then?
- If reviewing a web source, are the links current or broken?

Accuracy
- Where does the information presented come from? Are the sources listed?
- Can you verify the information in other sources or from your own knowledge?

Relevance
- What is the depth of coverage?
- Is the information central to your topic or does the source only touch on it?
- Is it unique? Is better quality information available from another source?
- Who is the intended audience?

Reading techniques

Finger-tracking: this is something we do when learning to read as a child but has huge value for advanced readers too. It is best employed when you don’t need to read every word. Run your finger across the text or, as you get more experienced, in a zigzag fashion down the centre of the page. You will still be able to take in the gist of argument despite not reading every word. It will help identify repeated keywords and arguments.

Reading aloud: again, speaking as we read is something associated with childhood. While reading silently can speed up the rate at which we digest text, it sometimes hinders clarity of thought. If passage is difficult or you are finding it hard to concentrate, reading aloud can focus your mind and improve comprehension.

See our guide on Sped Reading for more information.

Recall and Review

It is good practice to take a moment after reading to see if you can do the following by way of a summary:

- Restate: reiterate the same topics and facts. What is it about?
- Describe: discuss the topics and facts within the context of the author’s argument. What do they think?
- Interpret: apply meaning within the wider context of your prior knowledge and values. Is this what you think?

If you are struggling to do this you may need to re-read sections before moving on to another text.