

#37) Annotation and Critical Reading

Sometimes a text can seem impenetrable. Your instructor gives you an assignment that hinges on your careful, critical reading of the material, but as you begin to read you feel lost. Following are some suggestions that might make the process of reading and analyzing written work easier.

Read More than Once

If at all possible, read the text several times. First, skim the material, gleaning the meanings of sections by reading the beginnings and endings of paragraphs and letting your eyes move more quickly over the middle sections. In this way, you can get a sense of what you're reading and can plan to spend significant amounts of time on the right sections during subsequent readings. Your second, close reading should involve annotation.

Ask Questions

On the other side of this handout is a list of questions you might find useful in understanding texts. Depending on your assignment, you may need to focus on one aspect of the text as you read comprehensively. However you approach it, continuously pose questions to yourself and to the writer regarding the material. Make notes in the text—a process called annotation—to track your ideas.

Annotate

"Read with a pencil," as the saying goes. When you have an article or book in front of you, mark the text with notes and comments. If you're going to reread the text, mark sparingly the first time, or you might crowd your text with unnecessary annotations. Annotating will make it much easier for you to find key information in class or while you're working on a paper. Also, the very act of making notes and highlighting important information can significantly improve your memory about the material you're reading. If you don't already annotate the texts you use, you might want to try a version of this method.

- Underline words, phrases, and sentences in the text.
- Make notes along the inner edges of the margins with key words to remind yourself of the primary content of the section. This way, you can find the material quickly when you need it.
- Make notes along the outer edges of the margins everywhere you have a question or comment about the text.
- Jot word definitions and other information in the margins, as well.
- If you're writing about the text, mark distinctively the portions crucial to your argument. These marginal notes can be an enormous help when it comes time to analyze your reading and to prepare for writing.

Draw Conclusions

Reading in a detail-focused way and asking questions as you go along will allow you to make sense of the text more easily. Don't be afraid to ask questions of the material you read, to come up with tentative ideas about the content of the text, and to bounce those observations off your instructor and classmates. All of these strategies can be useful parts of the process before you draw your own conclusions.

The University of British Columbia's (UBC's) website has a great list of critical reading questions for students working on a rhetorical analysis paper.

1. What is the general subject? Does the subject mean anything to you? Does it bring up any personal associations? Is the subject a controversial one?
2. What is the thesis (the main point)? How does the thesis comment on the subject?
3. What is the tone of the text? Do you react at an emotional level to the text? Does this reaction change at all throughout the text?
4. What is the writer's purpose? To explain? Inform? Persuade? Amuse? Motivate? Sadden? Ridicule? Anger? Is there more than one purpose? Does the purpose shift at all throughout the text?
5. How does the writer develop his/her ideas? Narration? Description? Definition? Comparison? Analogy? Cause and Effect? Example? Why does the writer use these methods of development?
6. How does the writer arrange his/her ideas? What are the patterns of arrangement? Particular to general? Broad to specific? Spatial? Chronological? Alternating? Block?
7. Is the text unified and coherent? Are transitions adequate? How do the transitions work?
8. What is the sentence structure like in the text? Declarative? Imperative? Interrogative? Exclamatory? Are the sentences simple? Compound? Complex? Short? Long? Does the writer use fragments or run-ons? Are there any patterns in the sentence structure? Can you make any connections between the patterns and the writer's purpose?
9. Does the writer use dialogue? Quotations? To what effect?
10. How does the writer use diction? Is it Formal? Informal? Technical? Jargon? Slang? Is the language connotative? Denotative? Is the language emotionally evocative? Does the language change throughout the piece? How does the language serve the writer's aim?
11. Is there anything unusual in the writer's use of punctuation? What punctuation or other techniques of emphasis (italics, capitals, underlining, ellipses, parentheses) does the writer use? Is punctuation over- or under-used? Which marks does the writer use when and for what effects? Dashes to create a hasty breathlessness? Semicolons for contrast?
12. Are important terms repeated throughout the text? Why?
13. Are there any particularly vivid images that stand out? What effect do these images have on the writer's purpose?
14. Are devices of comparison used to convey or enhance meaning? Which tropes--similes, metaphors, personification, hyperbole, et cetera, does the writer use? When does he/she use them? Why?
15. Does the writer use devices of humor? Puns? Irony? Sarcasm? Understatement? Parody? Is the effect comic relief? Pleasure? Hysteria? Ridicule?

More suggestions on critical reading and writing can be accessed through the UBC website at <http://www.writingcentre.ubc.ca/workshop/toolbox.htm>

Other useful links and resources

- http://www.critical-reading.com/critical_reading.htm, a take on how to read nonfiction.

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