

Critical Reading to Build an Argument

After analyzing an assignment prompt, you'll have a good idea of your professor's expectations. The texts on your syllabus are the best place to start building an argument. But keeping track of all your readings can be daunting, much less the outside research some papers require. If you start the semester by reading every assigned text from beginning to end, the way you might read for pleasure, you may find yourself overwhelmed. Set yourself up for success by using **critical reading strategies** that help you read more efficiently, retain new information, and even begin to organize your thoughts for writing.

What is critical reading?

Gilroy (2018) defines critical reading as "active engagement and interaction with texts." Critical reading involves attending not just to the written words but also to how the ideas are put together and conveyed (Kurland, 2000). You will want to consider the author's purpose, possible bias, the validity and reliability of their sources and arguments, how their argument stacks up against alternative views, and the broader context (Kirszner, 2011). That's a lot to think about!

Goals of critical reading (Kirszner, 2011):

- recognize author's purpose and bias
- evaluate sources and arguments
- consider opposing viewpoints
- understand context of study and/or paper

Reading critically to evaluate sources

Imagine you are doing research for a paper on teacher evaluation policies. You come across the news story below.

SPRINGFIELD, IL—In an effort to hold classroom instructors more accountable, the Illinois State Board of Education unveiled new statewide education standards Friday that require public school teachers to forever change the lives of at least 30 percent of their students. "Under our updated educator evaluation policy, teachers must make an unforgettable, lifelong impact on at least three of every 10 students and instill a love of learning in them that lasts the rest of their lives," said chairman James Meeks, adding that based on the annual assessments, if 30 percent of students don't recall a particular teacher's name when asked to identify the most influential and inspiring person in their lives, that instructor would be promptly dismissed.

Reading this excerpt passively would mean simply accepting the words on the page. But even without formal strategies, you were probably reading critically, asking questions as you read. You might wonder how states plan to measure "lifelong impact" or think that 30% seems like an unreasonable benchmark. Before reading the rest of the article, you should pause to consider Kirzner's critical reading goals, especially regarding the article's purpose, bias, source, and context.

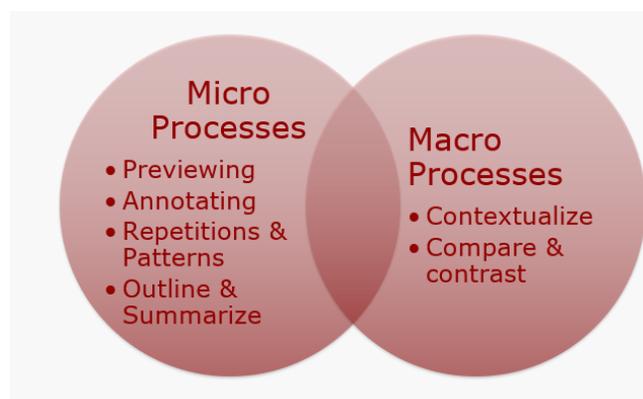


Turns out, the above excerpt comes from [The Onion](#), a satirical news site. Knowing the source, you are now better able to decide whether to use it. It isn't necessarily bad to reference *The Onion* in a paper, but you must be mindful of the context and present it appropriately (say, as an example of how teacher evaluation is depicted in popular culture). If you present evidence from *The Onion* as fact, your readers will take your writing less seriously.

Of course, this is an extreme example. However, especially with the abundance of internet sources, be vigilant when examining information. You might not confuse a satirical newspaper for real journalism, but there are many cases in which credibility is less obvious. The bottom line is to be clear about where your evidence comes from and why you are using it. For a deeper look at how to evaluate sources, please see our [Using Evidence in Academic Writing](#) tutorial.

Critical reading strategies

Gilroy (2018) lists six critical reading strategies, which we divide into two categories: **micro** and **macro processes**. Micro processes require you to think critically about features of the text in front of you, whereas macro processes help you connect it to other ideas.



We'll discuss each strategy separately, but you will likely switch between them or use more than one at a time. You will need to remind yourself to deliberately use the strategies, and it may initially take longer to read in this new way, but with practice, it will become more comfortable.

Micro processes

Previewing: Look “around” the text before you start reading.

When previewing, your goal is to understand the scope and purpose of the text. For example, you might ask:

- **Publishing details.** How might the author's reputation, credentials, field of study, funding, or other details affect their work? When was it published, and by whom?
- **Layout and organization.** As you know, headings, format, and style conventions can be clues to a text's content and goals. A policy memo offers something different than a scholarly article or a newspaper column.
- **Thesis/Argument.** To evaluate the argument without reading every word:
 - Review the abstract or executive summary.
 - Skim the introduction and conclusion for key takeaways.
 - Identify the thesis statement.
 - Skim the first and last sentence of each paragraph – in the U.S., these two sentences generally contain the author's most important claims.

Annotating: “Dialogue” with yourself, the author, and the issues and ideas at stake.

You probably are familiar with annotating, or adding your own notes and observations to a text, conversing with a text and its author, even speaking back and questioning ideas and evidence. Annotating helps you stay engaged and makes it easier for you to find ideas when writing a paper.

- *Write in the margins.* As you read, make notes in the margins of your text about questions or thoughts that arise, key concepts, or connections to other course material or personal experiences.
- *Develop a symbol system.* Color-coding or using symbols like an asterisk (*) for a key term, an exclamation point for a surprising connection, or a question mark to identify a possible research question, can help you reconstruct your thoughts.
- *Avoid passive annotation.* Highlighting and copy-pasting can be useful for brief quotes, but should not be your main strategy. It's easy to end up highlighting big chunks of text without really processing the information, which won't help you later.
- *Ask questions.* Practice self-questioning as you read. Here are some good ones:
 - Why did the professor assign this? What am I supposed to learn?
 - Can I restate the thesis/this point in my own words?
 - What does this mean?
 - Why and how does the author draw this conclusion?
 - What assumptions has the author made?

There is no "right way" to annotate, so try different strategies until you find a system that works for you.

Repetitions and Patterns

Patterns in a piece of writing can orient you to where you are in the paper. Often, writers restate their thesis multiple times to help it stick with the reader. If the author repeats something, she likely really wants you to remember it.

Patterns can help you organize your thinking and understanding of a text. For example, an author might give an idea, a concrete example, and a take-away for each of his arguments, a consistent structure that will help you follow the argument. Lastly, repetition sometimes signifies a hidden assumption or bias of the author. Gilroy (2018) suggests looking for:

- Recurring images
- Repeated words, phrases, or types of examples
- Consistent ways of characterizing people, events, or issues.

Outline, summarize, and analyze

Summarizing and analyzing the text as you go helps you monitor your own understanding.

- Create an outline of the thesis and key points as you go, which will help you to see what Gilroy (2018) calls "the skeleton of an argument," or how all the ideas connect.
- When you reach the end of a section or paragraph, pause to summarize the main ideas in your own words. If this is difficult, it's a sign that you may want to re-read, mark the section to return to, or jot down some questions for class discussion.
- After summarizing a main idea, reflect on how effectively the author makes the point. Consider:
 - What am I being asked to accept or believe?
 - Is this a fact, or an opinion?
 - Is it credible? What evidence is presented, and how persuasive is this evidence? Do I agree?
 - Is it logical? Does the reasoning make sense?
 - Is it valid? Does it accurately represent the real world? Does it explain its limitations, or the ways in which it is not valid?

Macro processes

The previous four strategies focused on the text itself: the words used, ideas expressed, and your reactions to them. Two **macro processes** will help you go beyond the piece you are reading and make connections to other ideas so that you can begin to assemble your argument.

Contextualize: Put the reading in perspective.

Think about the context of this text – the geographic, intellectual, cultural, historical, political, and social factors influencing the piece. A few examples:

- A piece uses racial terminology that would be unacceptable for a modern author, but was standard at the time of writing.
- An article about the role of standardized testing may rest on different assumptions depending on the author's home country.
- A specialized journal of economics likely selects and publishes articles with a different agenda than a journal of philosophy or psychology.

Also consider how your own experience shapes your understanding. We all have pre-existing perspectives, values, and assumptions that affect how we interpret texts.

Compare and contrast: Fit this text into an ongoing dialogue.

Every field has "hot topics" and central debates, and we advance scholarship by continually exploring these ideas in writing. For example, Western feminist scholarship is often divided into first wave, second wave, and third wave feminism, and these movements are associated with different principles. Knowing the main scholars, theories, and beliefs of each allows you to grasp the nuances within feminist thought. Every text you read contributes a new piece of information to the overall picture, building a sophisticated knowledge of the "intellectual landscape" on the topic. As you read, pay attention to:

- What is similar to other readings? Are these ideas widely held by multiple authors, or is this a minority view?
- How and why is it different from other readings? Does it:
 - Complicate a point raised by another piece?
 - Build on prior knowledge?
 - Use different methodological or theoretical assumptions?
 - Address a question not covered by another piece?
 - Actively dispute another line of thought?
- What does this piece tell you about the larger concepts and themes of the course?

References

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