Critical Reading

Academic Success Center
Iowa State University

Definition
Critical reading is reading to evaluate the information being presented.

General Considerations
♦ Critical reading is probably the most advanced type of reading because it requires the greatest interaction of the reader with the writer.
♦ It is applicable to any material which presents arguments or draws conclusions.
♦ Critical reading is not necessarily slow or plodding reading. It is skillful, efficient reading.
♦ Many people have difficulty with critical reading. They either allow the preconceptions to prevent their understanding of the author's points or they blindly accept whatever points are being made.
♦ Critical reading is extremely important to every individual. It influences what he buys, what he believes, and how he behaves.

Techniques of Critical Reading
Critical reading can be divided into three steps: understanding, identification, and evaluation.

Understanding
♦ It is essential to understand what the author is writing before identifying the writer's techniques and evaluating his point of view.
♦ This is identical to the understanding obtained from any kind of reading – that is, getting the information from the material.
♦ Details are organized and generalizations are drawn from them. For critical reading it is important that the details be organized into groups of facts which the author offers to support his views.
♦ It is helpful to stop reading at the end of sections or chapters and recall what points have been made.
♦ While speed is not the most important factor in critical reading, the student should not make the mistake of always resorting to word-by-word reading, since this may lower his comprehension… a line by line rate that is comfortable for the material should be used. When ideas become complex, the reader will need to read slower.

Identification
♦ This second step may be accomplished during surveying, skimming, line-by-line reading, recalling, or during re-reading.
♦ The material is examined for omission of facts that should logically be presented.
♦ The material is examined for inaccurate statements.
♦ Distortions in the material are identified. Implications may be made that do not fit the facts. Frequently a straw man is set up; that is, a number of objections to the idea which the author wants to promote are stated, but he is careful to state only those which he can refute. Also, he implies that these are the only objections to his idea. The author proceeds to destroy the straw

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man and thereby convince the reader that his idea is sound and that all objections to it have been taken care of.

♦ Places where the author is appealing to bias or prejudice are identified.
♦ Propaganda techniques the author uses are identified.

Evaluation

♦ This step is based upon the understanding of the information in the article and the identification of omissions, inaccuracies distortions, and propaganda appeals made by the author. Evaluation should never occur without being precede by the first two steps of understanding and identification.
♦ The author's position, ideas, and points are then evaluated and either accepted or rejected, or judgment is suspended on them.
♦ This last course of action is important, for it the reader is not relatively certain of his evaluation, he should suspend judgment until he obtains more information.
♦ Flaws in arguments or appeals to emotions weaken the author's point of view but do not invalidate it when there are other valid arguments.
♦ The author's frame of reference is relation to his conclusions, the adequacy of his supporting evidence, and the implications of his beliefs are then evaluated.

All three steps should be constantly utilized during critical reading. Particularly for long selections, each point that is encountered should be understood and related to its supporting details, the techniques used in making the point should be identified, and an evaluation should be made of the validity of the author's contention.