

## CRITICAL READING STRATEGIES

### 1. **Preview:** *Learn about a text before really reading it.*

Previewing enables readers to get a sense of what the text is about and how it is organized before reading it closely. This simple strategy includes seeing what you can learn from the headnotes or other introductory material, skimming to get an overview of the content and organization, and identifying the rhetorical situation (Who is the author? What is the author's purpose? Who is the audience?)

### 2. **Contextualize:** *Place a text in its historical, biographical, and cultural contexts.*

When you read a text, you read it from your own point of view. Your understanding of the words on the page is influenced by what you have experienced, living in a particular time and place, and what you value. But the texts you read were all written by someone else, sometimes by someone in a different time and place. To read critically, you need to acknowledge the context, to recognize the differences between your point of view and the point of view represented in the text.

### 3. **Formulate questions to understand and remember:** *Ask questions about the content.*

As students, you are used to teachers asking you questions about your reading. These questions are designed to help you understand a reading and respond to it more fully, and often this technique works. When you need to understand and use new information, you can formulate your own questions as you read the text for the first time. When you are assigned difficult readings, you will understand the material better and remember it longer if you write a question for every paragraph or brief section. Each question should focus on a main idea, not on illustrations or details, and each should be expressed in your own words, not just copied from parts of the paragraph.

### 4. **Reflect on challenges to your beliefs and values:** *Examine your personal responses.*

Some of the reading assigned in college might challenge your attitudes, your beliefs, or your opinions on current issues. As you read a text for the first time, mark an X in the margin at each point where you recognize a personal challenge to your attitudes, beliefs, or opinions. Make a brief note in the margin about what you feel or about what in the text created the challenge. Now look again at the places you marked in the text where you felt personally challenged. What patterns do you see?

### 5. **Outline and summarize:** *Identifying the main ideas and restating them in your own words.*

Outlining and summarizing are especially helpful strategies for understanding the content and structure of a reading selection. Outlining reveals the basic structure of the text, and summarizing captures a selection's main content in brief. Outlining may be part of the annotating process, or it may be done separately. The key to both outlining and summarizing is being able to tell the difference between the main ideas and the supporting ideas and examples. The main ideas form the backbone, the strand that holds

the various parts and pieces of the text together. Outlining the main ideas helps you to discover this structure. When you make an outline, don't use the text's exact words.

Summarizing begins with outlining, but instead of merely listing the main ideas, a summary recomposes them to form a new text. Putting ideas together again -- in your own words and in a condensed form -- shows how reading critically can lead to deeper understanding of any text.

**6. Evaluating an argument:** *Testing the logic of a text as well as its credibility and emotional impact.*

All writers make claims that they want you to accept as true. As a critical reader, you should not accept everything you read, nor should you reject everything you read. Every claim must be evaluated. An argument has two essential parts: a claim and support. The claim asserts an idea that the writer wants you to accept. The support includes reasons (shared beliefs, assumptions, and values) and evidence (facts, examples, statistics, and authorities) that give readers a reason to accept the claim. When you evaluate an argument, you are concerned with the logic of the author's reasoning as well as its truthfulness (these are not the same thing). At the most basic level, in order for an argument to be acceptable, the support must be appropriate to the claim and the statements must be consistent with one another.

Be careful not to accept an argument simply because it supports your own point of view. Likewise, don't reject an argument simply because it challenges your point of view. What matters is the strength of the argument. Is it logical? Is it truthful?

**7. Compare and contrast related readings:** *Exploring likenesses and differences between texts to understand them better.*

Many of the authors we read are concerned with the same issues or questions, but approach how to discuss them in different ways. Fitting a text into an ongoing conversation or debate helps increase our understanding of why an author approached a particular issue or question in the way he or she did.