CRITICAL THINKING TECHNIQUES 1:

Reading and Understanding Written Texts[1]

Introduction

Critical thinking skills and techniques are very important, not only for use in school and academic work, but in all fields of endeavor. "Critical thinking" essentially means to justifiably evaluate the quality of and reasoning behind information; hence, "critical thinking skills" refers to one's abilities to use discerning, effective, and honest critical thinking. "Critical thinking techniques" refers to methods used to do critical thinking. Critical thinking skills and techniques are diverse and can be learned. The purpose of this presentation series is to survey critical thinking techniques that can be beneficial and useful to Liberty University students. The purpose of this presentation is to describe a critical thinking technique for reading and fully understanding written texts (e.g., book chapter, article, essay, paper, etc.).

Three Step Procedure[2]

STEP 1: Read and Write Discerning Notes

The first step is to read and make discretionary notes on the material to be understood. Lengthy material should be broken up into sized portions the reader is comfortable with. The reader should make written notes[3] in the margins or elsewhere on the page of the text as possible. This is easily done on a printout or book version of the material. The reader's notes are best made in pencil, *not* with a colored highlighter. Notes in pencil are very flexible, personal, and often erasable. Colored highlighting is not erasable, and in future reading tends to cause the reader to see only what has been highlighted, which can render an inaccurate understanding of the text. If the text is in electronic format a copy of the material may be permissible on one's computer; then computer program color highlighting or editorial comment insertion may flexibly be used to make notes on the text.

Kinds of reader notes in pencil or electronic format include: personal written comments or assessments; critical questions; underlining of words; circling of words; parentheses around

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[1] Information for this presentation is based on: Diane Hacker (2006). *The Bedford handbook* (7th ed.). Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martins, pp. 468-480. Hacker includes a sample paper illustration.

[2] The reader may feel that the three step process presented herein is too involved and time consuming to be useful. All three steps are necessary to complete the intended explanation. How thoroughly the three step process is implemented by the reader is at his/her discretion.

[3] This presentation assumes that students write in their university textbooks.

words; brackets around words; drawing of lines to show relationships; numbering; lettering; other diagnostic punctuation marks (e.g., question mark, exclamation mark).

The notes are for the sake of the reader alone; therefore the reader should create a notation system that is easily understandable. The reader should feel comfortable to write as many helpful marks, comments, or questions on the text as desired.

As the reader makes notes, his/her goal is to understand the point, logical flow, full expression and worth of the written portion. To accomplish this goal the reader should discern the text's key features, such as:

➢ thesis/purpose statement

➢ main points, arguments or questions discussed

➢ where points, arguments or questions change if not clearly visible in the text

➢ apparent most significant point, argument or question the text provides

➢ questions left unanswered or poorly answered

➢ arguments that are weak or illogical

➢ apparent worth or expertise of cited sources

➢ clarity, coherency, and relevancy of sentences or paragraphs as related to the thesis/ purpose of the text

STEP 2: Summarize the Text Portion

The second step of the reading and comprehension process is to take all notes that have been made and summarize the key points and overall message of the text. This summary can be made on computer or handwritten on paper or note cards.

The reader may not fully understand the message of certain parts or features of the text (e.g., due to unfamiliar vocabulary or technical explanations). The reader should research such difficulties to clarify and understand them sufficiently enough that a reasonable summary covering that text portion can be written.

Following the resolution of special difficulties, the reader composes the summary of the text portion. The summary ideally gives careful attention to the following elements:

✓ an accurate identification or quotation of the thesis/purpose statement

✓ the thrust of each main point, argument or question that forms the outline of the text

✓ what the conclusion segment of the text emphasizes most

- ✓ content strengths of the text

- ✓ content weaknesses of the text

- ✓ what logical role or position the text portion plays (if it is one part of a larger whole)

In the written summary precise details are acceptable, but not required, since the original notes on the text recorded various detailed observations. Making the original notes on the text allows the reader to implement analysis. Making the summary gives the reader opportunity to implement synthesis of the text.

STEP 3: Conclusive Assessment of the Text Portion

The third step of reading and comprehending a text portion is making a decision regarding the strength and value of that portion. By completing Steps 1 and 2 the reader should have a thorough comprehension of the function of the entire text portion. It is now time to ask the following questions:

- Is the thesis/purpose statement successfully accomplished? Why or why not?

- Does the most significant point or argument appear strong or weak? Why or how?

- What specific reading audience is interested in this text?

- Is the intended reading audience student, professional, technical, or general public?

- Considering the intended reading audience, how could the text portion be improved?

With proper use of critical thinking skills and techniques upon a written text, the decision on the value of the text portion is *not* whether it is "good" or "bad"; such vague and quick opinions are mindless and unfair to the author and his/her intent for the material. The true worth of the text portion depends upon:

- ❖ what it accurately means

- ❖ how it is most useful and specifically by whom

- ❖ how it is weak or strong for its intended purpose

end