

Applying Critical Thinking to Source Analysis

Critical thinking skills and techniques serve an essential purpose not only in school and academic work, but also in professional careers and other fields of endeavor. Critical thinking essentially means to justifiably evaluate the quality of and reasoning behind information.

Skills used in critical thinking refer to one's abilities to use discerning, effective, and honest analytical thinking in decision-making and problem-solving. Critical thinking techniques are the methods used to accomplish critical thinking. Critical thinking skills and techniques are diverse and can be learned, refined, and applied to information gathering, comprehension, and source analysis. The process begins with sourcing scholarly material that is relevant, credible, unbiased, and recent or seminal.

Three-Step Procedure for Reading/Understanding Written Texts

Step One: Read the Material/Make 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 comfortably sized portions for the reader. If permissible, the reader should make written notes in the margins or elsewhere on the page of the text. This is easily done on a printout 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, various note-taking programs and apps allow color highlighting or comment insertion to make notes directly on the electronic text or in the margins of pages.

Types of reader notes, whether in pencil or electronic format, include the following: personal written comments or assessments; critical questions; underlining of words; circling of words; parentheses around words; brackets around words; drawing of lines to show relationships; numbering, lettering, and other diagnostic punctuation marks (e.g., question mark or exclamation mark). The notes are for the sake of the reader alone; therefore, the reader should create an understandable notation system. The reader should feel comfortable in writing as many helpful marks, comments, or questions on the text as desired.

As the reader makes notes, the 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
- 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 Two: 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, device, 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 detailed observations. Making the original notes on the text allows the reader to implement analysis. The summary then gives the reader opportunity to implement synthesis of the text.

Step Three: 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 the first two steps, the reader should have a thorough comprehension of the function of the entire text portion to then 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 unfair to the author and his intent for the material. The true worth of the text portion depends upon the following:

- ✓ what it accurately means
- ✓ how it is most useful and specifically by whom
- ✓ how it is weak or strong for its intended purpose

Reference

Hacker, D. (2006). *The Bedford handbook* (7th ed.). Bedford/St. Martins.