Being critical when reading

What is being critical?

Critical thinking is a central part of university life in the UK. You’ll hear people talking about it in lectures and discussions. The term “critical” or “critically” often appears in assignment and exam questions, and in marking criteria and feedback. Criticality (being critical) is essential to your success as a student. One lecturer said that the ability to take a critical approach was the quality, more than anything else, that “separated out the really successful students” (Moore, 2011, p. 265). In other words, if you want to do well in your studies, you need to learn how to be critical.

When academics talk about “being critical” or “critical thinking”, they are talking about an approach you take to everything you do. It is associated with mainly with questioning things and using these questions to develop your own argument.

Almost all the reading you do at university requires you to ask questions about what you read. The process of reading and questioning enables you to develop your own point of view about the topic and then to express this through a strong written argument. This handout gives you tips on being critical when you are reading.

Being critical when reading

Being critical is not about criticising an author and concluding that he/she was wrong. Most of the material you’ll be reading for your degree will be written by experts in the field, so they do usually know what they are talking about. However, this does not mean that their work cannot be critiqued by someone like you. Most articles and books include some facts and a lot of interpretation of those facts. The interpretation is usually the most interesting aspect of the work and where the controversy lies, since two people will seldom interpret something in exactly the same way. Being critical, therefore, is about analysing and discussing the way an author has interpreted an issue. Here are some tips for being critical in your reading:
• Think about your purpose – why are you reading this text? What do you hope to find in it?

• Read actively. Keep a pen in your hand and write down your reactions to the text while you read. It is important to record not just what the author said, but also what you think about what the author said.

• It is vital that you evaluate what you read – in other words, you should make judgements about it, not just accept everything as if it were absolute truth. Your judgements should include whether the claims are reasonable, whether the evidence is strong, whether the conclusions are sound, whether the ideas can be applied in the real-world, and so on.

• As you read, ask yourself questions about the text, such as Does this seem right? Would this apply in my own context? What evidence is there? Is this similar to what Scholar X said? Write questions and comments in the margin as you read.

• Look for limitations or drawbacks of the ideas/theories/models mentioned – they are unlikely to be perfect in every way. It may be, for example, that a theory or model describes how individuals are motivated, but it doesn’t mention anything about how groups are motivated. Similarly, a theory or model may suggest that a process is linear and straightforward, but in reality, it is often more complex, perhaps cyclical, with some stages being repeated.

• What issues have been ignored? What is not mentioned can be as important as what is said.

• Avoid thinking in terms of right/wrong, for/against, yes/no. All ideas have some strengths and some weaknesses, and it is important to acknowledge this complexity.

• Pay attention to who is cited within the text. If you see the same names coming up again and again, these may be key people whose work you should read.

• Try not to get too caught up in the details – remember to see the bigger picture. What is the overall message of the text? What claims is the author making?

• Remember to compare and contrast different sources of information as you accumulate more and more reading. Try to see patterns. What do studies X, Y and Z have in common, for example?
Learning Development

- Ask yourself how the text fits with other material you’ve read. For example, does the author seem to be taking a similar perspective to Scholar X? Do two or more authors hold similar beliefs? Do they emphasize similar things?

- When you have finished reading, do a mental recap – Ask yourself: What was the text about? In what way was it similar or different to other things you’ve read on that topic? What are the main controversies around this topic?

- Consider grouping your notes on different texts thematically, so that texts that tackle a subject from a similar perspective / use a similar methodology / focus on similar aspects of the topic, are grouped together. This way you can begin to build up a sense of who is writing about what and who agrees with whom in the discipline.

- Finally, consider making summary notes that include the following information:
  o This text focuses on ....
  o The main problem / issue / controversy according to this author is ...
  o The author’s key claims are ...
  o The ideas in this text are similar to ...
  o This author supports/agrees with the work of Scholar X
  o This author probably does not agree with the work of Scholar Y
  o This theory / these ideas would apply well in X context because ...
  o I don’t think this theory / these ideas would apply well in Y context because ...
  o The author does not say much / anything about ...

It is also important that you SHOW this critical reading in your writing, so have a look at the handout called Being critical in writing.