First Year Academic Literacy & Standards Week

CRITICAL THINKING,
CRITICAL READING

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Week 3: Academic Standards and Literacy

Objective:
to improve students’ understanding of academic literacy and expected standards (includes presentation and professional communication, academic writing, conditions of originality, and the subject of this lecture, critical thinking and critical reading).
AIMS

1. To demonstrate the importance of critical thinking and critical reading, and to encourage you to take responsibility for the sharpening of your ‘critical toolbox’.

2. To introduce key terms and modes of practice for approaching reading actively/critically.

3. To introduce you to some techniques and strategies for approaching academic literature.
Some questions to consider

1. What is critical thinking? (And why does it matter?)

2. What is the relationship between critical thinking and academic reading?

3. What does it mean to read critically (actively)?

4. How can I develop my critical reading skills?
questions to consider cont’

6. How should I approach reading materials at University? Both the set readings and the ones I seek out for assignments?

7. How am I supposed to get through all of my readings every week?
WHAT IS THEORY?

- Theory is a way of thinking that is more structured, systematic and sophisticated than everyday thinking.
OBESITY AS AN ISSUE

- In terms of everyday thinking, you might say to yourself, why is obesity becoming such a problem in Australia?

- The theorist/university student in you might ask, How does the rising obesity rate in Australia reflect our social and cultural values? Is it truly as significant a problem as we’re hearing? If so, what might be the consequences of these rates in five years time? What alternative ways can we think of to combat resulting health issues?
- Good theory is like a good defence in court.
- In terms of using theory to argue, the key lies in presenting practical evidence to support the theories you are using.
- Evidence provides the bridge between theory and practice.
1. What is critical thinking? (And why does it matter?)
“When you are thinking critically, you are not just thinking passively and accepting everything you see and hear. You are thinking actively. You are asking questions about what you see and hear, evaluating, categorising, and finding relationships.”

(University of Canberra, Academic Skills Centre)
Some of the activities involved in critical thinking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Skill</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting according to a framework</td>
<td>Predicting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating theory to practice</td>
<td>Describing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making a claim and supporting it</td>
<td>Analysing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using appropriate evidence</td>
<td>Synthesising</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making links between ideas</td>
<td>Categorising</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>Establishing cause and effect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>Identifying problems and solutions</td>
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(University of Canberra, Academic Skills Centre)
2. What is the relationship between critical thinking and academic reading?
Reading critically means drawing on your critical faculties in order to weigh things up and think about the implications and conclusions of what is being said. It means forming an opinion of your own about the subject after analysing and assessing the evidence base within the material.
To be a critical thinker you need to:

- Ask questions
- Be persistent (you may not find the answer quickly!)
- Be committed to accuracy and clarity.
- Think: relevance, depth, consistency, be open-minded, be curious, be willing to doubt...
What does it mean to read critically?

And why do we do it?
Critical reading is ACTIVE reading.

Reading critically is closely connected to an ability to analyse and evaluate the material you read.
To non-critical readers, texts provide facts. Readers will gain knowledge by just memorising the statements provided.

Critical readers will recognise that any single text offers only one portrayal of the facts. It is one or maybe a few people’s interpretation of an issue.

Critical readers seek to understand the perspective or point of view being offered. This means focusing not just on the ‘what’ of a text, but the how of it.
Goals of critical reading

- To identify the argument, the ‘what’s at stake?’
- To recognise an author’s purpose and intent
- To understand the author’s tone and persuasive and rhetorical elements
- To identify bias
- To develop an informed response to the reading based on your assessment of the author’s argument, evidence, analysis of key issues, methods and conclusion
BUT this won’t happen just by reading the words on the page.

To meet these goals you need to decode the material:
Learn how academic texts are structured

Recognise that academic writing is typically founded on a set of genre conventions

Recognise that academic writing is a genre

Develop a ‘tool box’ for decoding the literature/readings

Research critical reading and thinking

Practise! Apply your skills. And then reflect
Academic discourse is usually quite formal in structure and style. These styles and forms differ according to disciplines. A lot of academic writing, however, includes the following structural conventions:

- An abstract / overview/ dust jacket blurb
- An introduction
- A methods section
- A results section
- A discussion section
- A conclusion
5. How should I approach reading materials at University? Both the set readings and the ones I seek out for assignments?
When you approach a text for the first time don’t treat it like a novel. Instead approach it as a case of forensics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predict content</td>
<td>From title, illustration, layout, graphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scan</td>
<td>To locate specific information from chapter headings and subheadings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skim</td>
<td>To find main ideas – from first and last paragraphs, from topic sentences</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Power’ read</td>
<td>To get an overall, general understanding. Try to read through the article once without stopping. Highlight unknown words</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read intensely</td>
<td>For details, for a close understanding. Use the context as much as possible to work out the meanings of unknown words</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make notes</td>
<td>At this intensive reading stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Your understandings and the authors views and attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>What you can recall as you read through your notes</td>
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(Australian Catholic University: Reading at University)
Some questions for framing your reading

- What is the issue/main argument?

- Where has this text come from (what is the source – is it a journal article, a scientific work, a newspaper clipping, an extract from a blog?)

- Is it an authoritative source? (Do I trust it? Why?)

- What is the author’s main point, argument or thesis? (What’s at stake?)
Some questions for framing your reading (cont)

- What evidence is used to support this?

- How valid is that evidence? What is it based on – statistics, research data, the views of other scholars, personal opinion? Do I trust it? Why, why not?

- Why is the writer presenting this point of view?

- How is the argument presented?

- Is the writer using emotional or persuasive language?
Some questions for framing your reading (cont)

- Do other writers agree with these ideas?
- Do I agree with these ideas? (Why or why not?)

(Adapted from the ACU Academic Skills Uni Resources)
CREDIBLE SOURCES

1. Does the author have some authority in the field about which she or he is providing information?

2. Does the author have articles published in peer reviewed (scholarly and professional) publications?

3. Are there clues that the author/s are biased? For example, is he/she selling or promoting a product? Bias is not necessarily "bad," but the connections should be clear.

4. Is the information current? Old information may be useful for background material but in, for example, science and technology changes are rapid and information rapidly becomes out of date.
5. Does the information have a complete list of works cited, which reference credible, authoritative sources?

6. In what kind of publication site does the information appear? (The journal, publisher, etc., can give you clues about the credibility of the source.)
CREDIBLE SOURCES - ONLINE

- Developing a keen sense of the credibility of sources, based on such clues as connection of author to the subject, audience, source of publication, and documentation of supporting evidence, can also help you evaluate print and other types of sources.

1. Is there any evidence that the author of the Web information has some authority in the field about which she or he is providing information?

2. With what organisation or institution is the author associated?
3. Does the author have publications in peer reviewed (scholarly and professional) publications, on the Web or in hard copy?
4. Are there clues that the author/s are biased?
5. Is the Web information current? If there are a number of out-of-date links that do not work or old news, what does this say about the credibility of the information?
6. Does the information have a complete list of works cited, which reference credible, authoritative sources?
7. Can the subject you are researching be fully covered with WWW sources or should print sources provide balance? Much scholarly research is still only available in traditional print form. It is safe to assume that if you have limited background in a topic and have a limited amount of time to do your research, you may not be able to get the most representative material on the subject
8. On what kind of site does the information appear? The site can give you clues about the credibility of the source.

(From http://mason.gmu.edu/~montecin/web-eval-sites.htm)
Take advice from this University of Canberra academic skills site which says:

Academic material is not meant to be read. It is meant to be ransacked and pillaged for essential content.

• Be selective.
• Set a realistic time frame for any reading task.
• Never read without specific questions you want the text to answer.
• Never start reading at page 1 of the text, but look for the summary, conclusion, subheadings, etc.
Always keep in mind what you need, what is relevant to the question you are asking the text.

In sum:
What do critical readers do?

- They approach a text with curiosity – they ask questions as they read.
- They do not accept at face value the idea under discussion – either its accuracy or that it’s the only way to think about the topic.
- They identify the positive (useful) components of an argument & the negative (weak, flawed) sections.
- They analyse & identify the evidence base provided for an argument in order to understand the author’s rationale & position.
What do critical readers do? (cont)

- They identify component parts of an argument – content (basic facts), themes (overall ideas or claims), ‘evidence’ (supporting material) and they use this to raise issues about a text’s application, potential, usability.

- They think about the relationship between the text and other texts and authors. They see the text as part of a conversation.

- They form opinions about what they read – and they back it up through a compilation of the above.

Adapted from: http://www.uq.edu.au/student-services/Reading+critically
Preparation for in-class task

- *Bring copies of assigned readings to class* (you will need to be familiar with the readings for your in-class task)

- Read the material included in the Week 3 folder on vUWS (via this subject’s own vUWS homepage)

- Do your own research on critical reading and thinking
Speed reading quiz

http://skills.library.leeds.ac.uk/reading/articulate/speed_reading/quiz.html
Further research

- Investigate what the terms ontology, epistemology and methodology mean (they are crucial to higher level research and critical thinking—both the making and the reading)

- Start to develop your own understanding of what you think constitutes ‘knowledge’

- Do some preliminary research on the terms discipline and discourse (both play a part in the kinds of research you’ll be reading over the next 3+ years)
Further Reading

The Notebook as a Tool for Thinking

UWS Online Study Resources
http://www.uws.edu.au/currentstudents/current_students/getting_help/online_study_resources2
Further Reading

Unilearning

The Critical Reading Checklist

How to Study
http://www.cse.buffalo.edu/~rapaport/howtostudy.html
Further Reading

UWS Student Learning Unit Workshop Schedule

http://www.uws.edu.au/currentstudents/current_students/getting_help/study_and_life_skills_workshops/academic_skills_workshops_schedule#4

UWS Online Study Resources

http://www.uws.edu.au/currentstudents/current_students/getting_help/online_study_resources2
References

Image # 1:  

Australian Catholic University  