Critical Reading Guide
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When you are asked to read something for a topic/class, the expectation is that you will “do a close reading” of the text or a “critical reading.” Both of these expressions mean that you will attend closely to the detail of the text, the argument, and evidence presented. By critical, we do not mean that you should look for mistakes. Critical in this context brings together several senses of the word. First it is to look for critical points in the text, whether these are assertions or arguments or evidence. It also means to bring a critic’s eye to the piece by paying attention to the detail. Also, as a reader you should assume a critical analytical position on the text.

Answering the following questions about any piece of assigned reading will provide you with a good set of notes. From these notes you should be able to produce a written or oral summary of the text you read and place it in context with other knowledge you have on the subject area.

You may not be able to answer all the questions with the information at hand or the time you are provided for a particular assignment, however, this is a guideline with which to work. Keeping a notebook of your reading summaries will help you when you sit down to write an essay or study for an exam/test.

1) Background information on the author – What is the author’s profession or discipline? Is the author engaged in a theoretical debate within his/her field? Is this work part of a body of writing on the subject by this author or a group of writers/theorists?

2) What is the main point of the article?

3) What is the author’s assertion, position, or thesis?

4) What are the author’s assumptions? (This may include the author’s theoretical affiliation or orientation – historical, political, psychoanalytic, etc.)

5) What type of argument is waged? (Historical, comparative, etc.)

6) What type of evidence does the author use to support the argument? (Historical, statistical, ethnographic, etc.) Is the evidence reliable? (For instance, if the author uses statistical evidence yet has a sample size inappropriate to the claims, you have grounds for a critique or counter argument.)

7) Does the evidence suit the argument? Is the type of evidence used appropriate to the type of argument waged?

8) What is your emotional response to the work? (Don’t disregard your feelings, they can inform your critical and intellectual work.) Identify any unusual or unfamiliar vocabulary and get definitions for these terms or phrases. If the writing style is very difficult or esoteric, you might think about possible explanations. Perhaps it is a translation from another language or maybe the author is “posing” in some way.

9) Are you convinced by the argument? Explain.

10) Any other responses that you may have should also be noted.

n.b. When reading about a media issue or subject, jot-down media examples (films etc.) that come to mind. This way you’ll have the example handy when you begin to write your essay.