Critical Reading

What is critical reading?

Critical reading involves developing a deep understanding of the content of a text as well as how the subject matter is developed. It involves analysing the text to identify the main ideas and perspectives, but it also interprets and evaluates the text.

You can read a text on at least four different levels:

Comprehension: Read to find out what the text says. Ask Yourself: What are the main ideas of the text?

Analysis: Read to see what the text does. Ask yourself how the information is used, how is it structured, how is it trying to persuade you?

Interpretation: Read to find out what the text means in a broader context. Ask yourself: what is the deeper meaning of the text? What are its implications?

Evaluation: Judge the text's strengths and weaknesses. Judge whether the text is important in terms of its contribution to the field.

Comprehension, analysis, interpretation and evaluation are illustrated below:

The discovery of antibiotics was contributed to by two scientists: Alexander Fleming and Howard Florey.

Prior to 1942 patients in hospitals were dying from sepsis after amputations or from other invasive procedures. Women died in large numbers from infections caused by childbirth, and there was no great effort being made to find some form of antibacterial agent.

In 1930, the microbiologist Fleming, who was studying micro-organisms and their growth patterns, wrote up his observations of the effect of bacteria on an organism for a small medical journal in London commenting that this might be worth further investigation; however, it was not followed up for 10 years.

During the Second World War, men injured in battle were dying from sepsis in wounds. An Australian, Florey, who was working at Oxford University, was given the job as part of a PhD to try and find some bacterial agent.

He came across the article written by Fleming and decided to follow it up. He managed to isolate enough penicillin from the penicillium fungus to treat one patient. America put money into this research and Florey and his assistant started to produce penicillin on a mass scale. There was enough produced in 1942 and 1943 to treat most of the allied soldiers, sailors and airmen that were being injured.

(This text was devised for teaching purposes only. The content is regarded as general knowledge.)

Critical analysis

1. Florey, building on the work of Fleming, managed to isolate penicillin during the Second World War. (**Comprehension**: This presents the same topic as the original. It restates the information.)
2. The passage compares the contributions made by two scientists to the development of a life-saving anti- bacterial agent. (**Analysis:** This discusses the way the material is presented and structured, showing deeper insight.)
3. The high numbers of soldiers dying of wound infection in the Second World War was the possible catalyst for the invention of penicillin. (**Interpretation:** This attempts to find a deeper meaning, interpreting the overall meaning of the passage.)
4. The article provides a good basic summary of the history of penicillin, but it ignores the vital work done by Moyer, which allowed large quantities of the drug to be produced.) (**Evaluation:** This judges the text in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

Critical reading process

In order to read critically, you must be an active reader.

Asking questions as you read forms the basis of critical reading skills. Questions like those listed below help you to maintain your focus while reading and to think about the deeper implications of the text.

Charles Sturt University

Argument

What is the writer's argument? What is the claim?

Support

What are the main points/ideas that support that argument? Does the writer attempt to address the stated point of view? Is it successful?

Evidence

What kind of evidence does the author present to support these points (quality and quantity)?

Consider: is the evidence provided relevant, reliable and current? Where does it come from?

Logic

Are the main points directly and logically linked to the argument? Look for examples of how they are linked.

Look for examples or information that is not relevant or explained well.

Assumptions

Are there assumptions/perspectives that underpin the evidence presented? What are they? Are these assumptions clearly stated?

Evaluation

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this text? Does is make an important contribution to the field?

Hints

- Have a pen or pencil with you as you read to note down strategies and processes that the writer uses as well as noting your own ideas and reactions to the reading.
- Add short observations or summaries along the margins of a text. "Post-it" notes and other coloured labels can assist in your note taking from a text.