



*When I was a university writing instructor, I was often asked:
How do I 'do' critical analysis???*

If you have ever asked this question, the following discussion is specifically for YOU!

In most courses, students are expected to prepare for class by critically reading and thinking about all assigned materials. It is important to take notes, as writing often helps to solidify thinking and cement what you have learned. It also prepares you to begin higher-level thinking about the issues and debates presented in the readings that you will build on during class activities, discussions and debates. Further, you will need to hone your critical reading skills in preparation for class, and also for success in completing course assignments.

As students, you are expected to not only produce written work (essays, proposals, reports, etc), but also to critically analyze the work of others. Being able to critically analyze academic research is an essential skill to learn in order to successfully complete assignments and become critical thinkers. However, for many students, getting an assignment that asks you to 'critically analyze' a text (could be an article or a book) can be hard to decipher. Understandably, some students think that they should criticize the article. Others believe that they are being asked for their opinion. Still others end up simply summarizing what the article says, and only fulfil a minor part of the assignment. None of these tendencies encompass critical analysis. As a result, students often receive comments like "the paper is too descriptive" or "you need to provide more critical analysis of the issue".

So what is the difference between description and analysis? Good question! To flesh out the differences, let's use a common text that we are all familiar with. Think of a menu in a restaurant. A menu *describes* what the restaurant has to offer. It contains categories and lists and is organized into a familiar order, but it doesn't provide any analysis (or judgement) of the dishes. The assumption is – if they are serving it, they believe that it tastes good and is of good quality; business depends on it. Now let's compare the menu to a critic's review of the restaurant. Here, the critic tells us about what they liked and what could be improved, in addition to ranking the restaurant on a scale. Those of you familiar with restaurant reviews know that the critic doesn't only criticize the restaurant (if they did, readers would probably see the review as unbalanced); the critic doesn't simply state their opinion (unsubstantiated opinion is never convincing if we are thinking critically); and they definitely don't summarize the menu (summary simply *describes* what is on the menu). What the critic does is analyze (judge) the quality of the food, service and atmosphere – all things that add up to an enjoyable meal out. In other words, the menu describes, the review analyzes.

Now what do you need to do to become a critical thinker? First, you must ask critical questions about what you read (and hear) in order to judge whether or not an argument is convincing, and why. The 'and why' part means that you need to go beyond your gut reaction/opinion – 'this article was impossible to understand' – and look at *why* it was impossible to understand (remember the restaurant critic).

It is extremely important - especially in this era of 'fake news' – to be able to sort through information and make judgements about how sound its findings are. In other words, being able to 'do' critical analysis is not simply an academic skill – it is something you can and should be doing as you are confronted by all ideas, information or arguments in your courses and beyond.

Simply put, the first principle of critical analysis is: don't believe everything you read! The second principle is: read/listen for arguments and evidence rather than recording information (this is what you should be focusing on when



Critical Analysis 101

Krista Hunt

you take notes too). The third principle is: ask lots of questions, especially the ones no one else seems to be asking or wants to answer.

The following questions can be used as a basis for 'doing' critical analysis. Individually or as a group, you may choose to expand this list by adding discipline-specific questions.

- What sort of evidence is used to support their thesis/argument?
- How could this argument be strengthened?
- What perspective is the author coming from?
- Who is the audience (who is the author speaking to)?
- What assumptions does the author make?
- What has this author left out? What hasn't been said?
- Who is speaking/being spoken for?
- Did this article make you see things in a different way?
- How do the arguments relate to your own experiences?
- How would a person from an opposing perspective respond to the argument?
- How does this argument stand up when applied to historical or current events?
- How does this text challenge or support other texts in this course?
- What do these readings tell us about how political change happens?
- Are there relevant course concepts that you could use to help analyze this text or to draw connections to other works in the course?
- How/does this text challenge and/or reinforce inequalities/power imbalances?
- What is the significance of this text - politically, socially, and historically?
- What is taken for granted/assumed to be natural?
- If a particular argument or idea were made universal, who would benefit and who would be injured?
- How do specific public policies (or proposed reforms) affect the most disadvantaged and marginalized members of our communities?
- How is the message constructed?
- What techniques are used to attract my attention?
- How might different people understand this message differently from me?
- What identities, values and points of view are represented or omitted?
- Why was this message sent?
- Who profits if the message is accepted and who may be disadvantaged?

....and there are an infinite number of other questions that you, as a critical thinker, can continue asking yourself and others.