

How to read critically?

Adapted from A. Williams (84-87)

It is helpful to begin reading with an open mind. Once you have a good understanding of the text on its own terms, you can then apply the same approach that you use to critically examine your own thinking. The first stage is to clarify the main components of the argument; the author's position, reasoning, evidence and assumptions.

Sometimes it is easy to identify the components of the author's argument. The author's position, for example, may be signposted with expressions such as: 'we conclude that...', 'it is our belief that...', 'in our view...'. The author's reasoning and evidence may also be signalled by words such as: 'because', 'since', 'as', and 'given that'. However, in many instances, you need to infer these elements.

Once you have identified the argument within the text, you can then apply the same questions that you ask yourself when critically challenging your own thinking.

1. Are the author's assumptions in fact true? How have they defined their key terms? What are their premises?
2. How solid is the evidence presented? Are examples given? If the evidence is statistical, how large and how representative is the sample? Have the authors used reliable methods to gather and analyse the data? Have the authors ignored evidence that would support other points of view? If so, how good is that other evidence?
3. How sound is the author's reasoning? Would it be possible to interpret their evidence in a different way and arrive at a different conclusion? Could there be any other reasons for what happened?
4. In what ways might the authors be biased? Do they have a vested interest in seeing the issue in a certain way?

Answering questions of this type can be difficult. You often need to use your knowledge of the research area and other studies to support the judgements that you make. It is therefore important to read widely and then think about how one study might relate to another/ Generally speaking, the more you have explored the issue, the easier it will be for you to think critically about what you read.

Remember

- Learn to distinguish between facts and opinions.
- Read textbooks to learn about the research territory around your essay question.
- Read books and articles that both support and challenge your position.
- Be prepared to change your mind.
- Learn to recognise the key features of arguments: position, reasons, evidence, premises.
- Question these features systematically.
- Read widely to ensure that your opinions of any given text are informed by your knowledge of other texts.

KEY CONCEPT

Premise is something you suppose is true and that you use as a basis for developing an idea.

EE HACK

Some students like to use different coloured highlighter pens to indicate when the author is communicating their position, reasoning, evidence, and assumptions.

STUDENT RESOURCE

Feel free to use the following boxes to help read your sources critically. You can adapt them to your needs and any recommendations your supervisor may make

Reading Critically: <insert source detail, eg name of author/book>	
Assumptions? Definitions? Premises?	Evidence? Reliability? Methodology? What's not being said?
Reasoning? Interpretation? Alternatives?	Possible bias?