

# Basic Critical Reading Tips

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1. Read for Argument: What is the main argument? What are the main lines of argument the author deploys in support of the main thesis/claim? Hint: look at the topic sentences of paragraphs, and the paragraphs introducing sections and/or subsections of the paper for a sometimes quick way to grasp argument structure.
2. Read to discern the key vocabulary and/or terminology deployed to give shape to the account: authors rely on a critical vocabulary to help them make a case. What are the key terms? How are those terms organized in relation to one another? What do they mean?
3. How does the theory build on previous theories or concepts? For example, how does Charland's notion of Constitutive Rhetoric rely on Burke's notion of identification, on the power of narrative, or on interpellation as mode of address? If you have not read the literature on a particular area you can still explore how the current account seems to rely on other concepts or theories. Which seem more important?
4. Read for Critical Assumptions: Theories reflect points of view. It is an ordered attempt at sense-making from a particular standpoint. What are the principal assumptions that underlie the particular account? Are they assumptions about communication? About gender? About the social power of discourse? About technology? About social change?
5. What is missing or lacking that the author responds to? What does the author identify as the problem, issue, conundrum, intriguing question? What is their stated purpose? For example, in the first paragraph of his article "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis" (1989) Raymie McKerrow articulates a conundrum to which his article seeks to respond, and he follows with:

In response to this challenge, this essay articulates the concept of a *critical rhetoric*—a perspective on rhetoric that explores, in theoretical and practical terms, the implications of a theory that is divorced from the constraints of a Platonic conception. As theory, a critical rhetoric examines the dimensions of domination and
6. Read to Demystify and Simplify: As a first-read strategy seek to understand the broad strokes and afterwards examine the added layers of complexity.
7. What are the implicit (or explicit) understandings regarding society, culture, technology, media/mediation, and/or communication?
8. What kind of relationship exists between key conceptual elements? (causal, reciprocal, associative, etc.)
9. What are the main principles or propositions espoused or presented in the account? For example, McKerrow's "Critical Rhetoric" essay provides eight principles of Critical Rhetoric, Charland's "Constitutive Rhetoric" gives us three ideological principles for constitutive narratives, etc.
10. What, or where, are the fraying edges of the theory/account presented? Where are its limits? What does it not explain very well? In short, pay attention to a concept's focus and scope.

# Did You Read?

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As we discussed earlier in class, critical reading is of crucial importance. Masterful readers always:

1. Ask questions of the text (see below)
2. Assume a charitable attitude or disposition toward the author (imagine the author is somewhat knowledgeable, or at least making a good faith effort at developing a good argument)
3. Take notes as they read (for later review, to jot down main points, etc.)
4. Critically engage the argument(s) (see the previous handout on critical reading, and your notes on argument analysis)

Below are a few question prompts for when you prepare for class discussions:

- What is the main argument of the reading?
- What are the lines of argument (sub-arguments the author uses to develop their main argument)?
- What is the problem, dilemma, event, or circumstance that prompts the author to write?
- What do you find most compelling about the article?
- What ideas or concepts resonate the most, or stay the most with you?
- What did you not like about the article? What point did you find yourself challenging or refuting?
- What point or idea challenged your understanding the most? (what was most difficult to understand)
- What interesting connections to concepts you already know, or have encountered, were brought up during the reading?
- How does this particular article, concepts, or ideas connect to other readings you've done this semester?
- What clarifications do you need in order to understand this article's main argument?
- What key vocabulary needs definition and further elaboration?
- What assumptions are made by the author? (about people, about behavior, about attitude, about policies, about culture, about technology, etc.)
- What are the most important concepts in this article?
- How are particular ideas or concepts different than those in previous readings?
- How would you explain the article's ideas in your own words?
- What potential ramifications can you imagine from the argument?
- What examples might you come up with that help elucidate the main argument of the article?
- How would you draw or illustrate key concept(s), or the relationship between concepts presented in the article?
- How might concepts or ideas in the article connect to your classmate's projects?
- Which part of the text leads you to particular conclusions?

# How to Participate in Class

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Participation in class discussion is an integral component of learning. Your participation in this course is essential to the learning community we seek to establish in the classroom, and to your learning. As such, all members of this community are expected to complete all assignments and assigned readings on time, and to be prepared to share ideas, questions, models, illustrations, and examples. Think of the classroom as a collaborative learning space, one that is enriched by active participation by all of us. A substantial portion of learning takes place in the articulation of ideas, in trying out approaches, in comparing our thoughts to those of others. We convert information into knowledge when we perform those actions.

How can you participate effectively in class discussions? Here are a few prompts to help you get started (not an exhaustive list by any means):

1. Contribute new ideas for discussion (“What about...”)
2. Expand on the contributions of your classmates (e.g. “That reminds me of...”)
3. Ask questions for clarification (“How does...?”)
4. Provide relevant examples (“It is like...”)
5. Summarize the conversation so far (“So, what we’re saying is that...”)
6. Relate discussion or readings to other readings, texts, projects, or assignments (“Just like in last week’s reading...”)

There are many reasons why students might not participate in class discussion. A common concern for students is that they must know the right answer before participating (or that they must sound “smart”). That is not the case. Try these ways of initiating a contribution in class:

1. Let me try this out..
2. I’m not sure I have it all figured out, but what if we consider...
3. My initial reaction to that is...
4. If I understood the reading correctly...
5. Ok, so let me run this argument by you and see if it works out...
6. To pick up on what Jane said... maybe...
7. I’m not sure I have the right answer but...