

Critical Reading Strategies

I. *Reading with a Purpose*

Before you actively engage with a text, you must be aware of your **purpose** in reading an assigned selection. It is not enough merely to say, “My professor wants us to read this chapter by Thursday.” If you read with such a passive approach, you will find yourself flipping the pages of your textbooks without assimilating and retaining information and without determining why such information is crucial for your course and your education.

Reading experts suggest that there are six fundamental purposes for reading:

1. to grasp a certain message
2. to find important detail
3. to answer a specific question
4. to evaluate what you are reading
5. to apply what you are reading
6. to be entertained

[From Ron Fry’s Improve Your Reading, 2nd edition, 1994.]

Thus, it is imperative that you understand *why* an instructor has assigned a reading selection and *how* the selection addresses course objectives and recurring course themes. In addition to what your instructor suggests, texts yield clues that will help you discern a purpose for reading certain material. Chapter titles, headings and subheadings, introductions and summaries, visuals such as photographs, graphs, and charts, and discussion questions at the end of chapters all provide direction and focus for the reading material.

II. *Pre-reading and Reading Strategies*

Often we can grasp the message of a text by **pre-reading** or **skimming** the material. The following 6 steps, excerpted from Chapter 6 of Ron Fry’s Improve Your Reading, can be completed within a 20-30 minute skim of average-length texts:

1. Rephrase the heading or title as a question to give you a purpose for reading the selection.
2. In order to identify significant information in the selection, examine subheadings, illustrations, and so forth.
3. Read the introductory paragraphs, summaries, and study questions at the end of chapters.

4. Read the first sentence of every paragraph, which is generally, but not always, the location of the main idea of the paragraph.
5. Evaluate steps 1-4. Can you answer the question(s) that you framed from the chapter title and at the chapter's end? Could you participate intelligently in a class discussion?
6. Write a brief summary of what you have learned from skimming the information in the selection. You should be able to answer the following questions: a) What is the text's central message or viewpoint? b) Is a clear chain of thought revealed? c) What major points are addressed?

Once you identify and understand the basic outline of the text, reading the material becomes more manageable. This process requires that you interpret and evaluate what is written as you digest it for main ideas. Effective analytical reading necessitates distinguishing between explicit, literal meaning of words (denotation) and what suggestions or intentions are implied by the content (connotation).

III. *Summarizing Information*

The final steps in any critical reading are **distilling and summarizing** the information. Nothing is more beneficial and more productive than internalizing and owning the newly read information by condensing it into your own clear, succinct summary. Consider using an outline format or diagramming to summarize information. Concentrate on relationships between various thoughts and ideas. Write lists based on similar or dissimilar information to bring information into clear, sharp focus.

After ensuring that key information is not missing from your outline, list, or diagram, try to write a brief synopsis of what you have learned from the reading selection. Use your own words to summarize the significant elements presented in the text. Your synopsis might include definitions of new concepts introduced in the selection or questions and answers that focus the material. (Unanswered questions should be raised during class discussion for clarification.) Your synopsis should also include summary statements of new insights you acquire as a result of reading the selection. Use this method one chapter at a time. Your outlines, lists, and synopses will serve as study guides later in the semester when you must review them for upcoming exams.