Getting critical with your summer reading

How to become a more critical reader

Critical thinking is a key difference between school and university. Your summer reading might be challenging because there is often

- no clear right or wrong answer
- more than one way to arrive at an answer
- debate among different authors or researchers
- changes to academic debates and ideas over time.

Reading is not just absorbing information. When we click on a link for an online article, it would be a bad idea to just accept the contents. We are aware of fake news, so might check the source, notice highly-charged word choices, spot misrepresentations or omissions, know of the website’s political leanings or reputation, and so on. Just like media literacy, university students need to be critical readers, who learn a specialised skill at weighing up material in their subject area.

This guide

This guide gives examples of three different steps on the way to more critical thinking:

- Describe
- Analyse and explain
- Connect to the bigger picture
Describe

At the beginning of university, thinking critically can feel like an impossible task. Students often ask: how can I question the material when I feel overwhelmed even trying to understand it?

A useful first step towards critical thinking is describing the material to yourself. Focus on describing it

* briefly – including the most important elements
* in your own words – rather than the writer’s words

Don’t repeat the information without thinking. Describe it briefly in your own words so that you decide what’s most important, and begin to see things through your own eyes.

Questions to ask yourself (1)

Choose a small section from one item on your summer reading list – it could be a few paragraphs in a book, a minute from a podcast, or a diagram or picture. After reading or listening to the short section, use two or three of these questions as prompts for describing what you read:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions for describing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What happened? What’s the story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is it / he / she like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What ideas or themes can you see?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What techniques, methods or styles are used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the key details?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When / Where did this occur?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What different options are there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What different steps are there?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not every question will be relevant, so choose the most appropriate.

Getting started

Describing is a chance to get your mind working actively instead of allowing the material to wash over you. To practice, describe this historical photo of the Poplar Estate, London in 1951. Click to see a bigger image: https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/fifties-britain/.

Here is an example of the detailed way you should approach describing the material:

What’s it like…? “These look like houses for families, but they’re quite small…”

“There are curtains, and the table is laid…”

“The estate is empty and looks neat…”

What happened? “The sign says ‘show houses’, so I guess families viewed them…”

“The houses were built recently but they’re not occupied yet…”
Analyse and explain

Describing focuses on understanding material, and often accepts it as it is. However, critical reading also involves analysing the material by asking:

* What does this mean?
* Why does it matter?

In your answers, you might use information elsewhere in the same text, draw on previous knowledge, or refer to other material you’ve read or heard. With these questions and answer, you transform the material by focusing on its inner workings or logic. This process uncovers a lot of uncertainty, as there’s often no clear right or wrong answer, or single approach or method.

Of course, as beginners in a subject, new students feel less confident asking these questions. However, it is important to challenge yourself!

Questions to ask yourself (2)

In the previous exercise you used questions as prompts to describe an item from your summer reading. Consider the follow-up questions to analyse and explain your observations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Describe</th>
<th>Analyse and explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What happened? What’s the story?</td>
<td>Why is the story significant?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is it / he / she like?</td>
<td>What do these features mean?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What ideas or themes can you see?</td>
<td>Why is this idea or theme useful or suitable?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What techniques, methods or styles are used?</td>
<td>Why are these techniques, methods or styles suitable?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the details?</td>
<td>Which details are most significant?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When / where did this occur?</td>
<td>How is timing / location important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What different options are there?</td>
<td>Why would you select each option?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What different steps are there?</td>
<td>How does one step link to the next?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Getting started

To practice, first describe, then analyse and explain this quote from Y. N. Harari’s book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* ([https://archive.org/details/isbn_9780099590088](https://archive.org/details/isbn_9780099590088) (you can create an account to “Borrow” the book for free)).

Quote from Y. N. Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*.

Buddha agreed with modern biology and New Age movements that happiness is independent of external conditions. Yet his more important and far more profound insight was that true happiness is independent of our inner feelings. Indeed, the more significance we give our feelings, the more we crave them, and the more we suffer. Buddha’s recommendation was to stop not only the pursuit of external achievements, but also the pursuit of inner feelings.

Here is an example of one student moving from description to analysis:

What’s the story? External conditions? He says happiness isn’t about material things…
And why is it significant? He suggests that Buddhism, biology, and 1960s culture share the same idea of happiness… Is happiness really universal? I read that environment shapes ideas of happiness…
Connect to the bigger picture

The readings or videos on your summer list might have a narrow focus on one idea, theory, research, or time period. However, there is always a bigger picture, such as

* an ongoing debate or controversy in the subject area
* the appropriateness of a theory or method
* inconsistencies, assumptions or gaps in our knowledge
* the wider political, social, and cultural climate.

Reading and discussing material at university means paying attention to the bigger picture and why the idea matters. In other words, we often ask “So what?”

Questions to ask yourself (3)

Have a look at all the different ways you can connect your reading to the bigger picture of your subject area. Answer a few questions which seem most relevant to your summer reading material:

- Why is this idea significant in my subject?
  - Is it transferable? Can I apply it in another context, time or place?
  - How does it link to other ideas in my subject area?
  - What are the implications of this idea?

- What are we being asked to believe or accept? Is it convincing?
  - What evidence is used to support this?
  - Are there assumptions or omissions?
  - What alternative interpretations are there?

- How might the idea help us understand world events or trends?
- How is this idea relevant to government policy?
- Which communities could it affect? How?
- How might it be relevant to activists or campaigners?

- How does this idea connect to my previous knowledge?
- What further questions does it raise for me?
- How does it connect to my skills and interests?

Getting started

Practise by reading this translation of a poem ‘Cat’ by Baudelaire from ‘Fleurs du mal’ ([https://fleursdumal.org/1868-table-of-contents](https://fleursdumal.org/1868-table-of-contents)).

> Et des parcelles d’or, ainsi qu’un sable fin,
> Etoilent vaguement leurs prunelles mystiques.
> — Charles Baudelaire
>
> And particles of gold, like grains of shingle,
> Vaguely be-star their pupils as they glance.
> — Roy Campbell

Here is an example of a student connecting the translation to the bigger picture:

“Campbell added ‘as they glance’ to his translation. It isn’t in the original. I think he’s keeping the form, even if it changes the meaning…”

What are the implications? “Which is more fundamental in poetry translation -meaning or form?”

How has the debate or idea changed over time? I can look at earlier translations of the poem and see…"
Further Reading

Critical Reasoning for Beginners.

This is a podcast series from Oxford’s Department for Continuing Education. It is a thorough introduction to the nature and validity of arguments: http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/critical-reasoning-beginners