

Does your lecturer ask you to 'read critically'?
What does this mean?

It means you should **think carefully** about a text, **ask yourself questions** about what you are reading, and think about the similarities and differences between what different writers and researchers have to say about a topic.

Questions for critical reading

This checklist has been adapted from University of Wollongong 2006, 'Reading', *Uni Learning*, University of Wollongong, available at <http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/main.html>, viewed 27/4/09.

1. What theoretical approach does the writer take to the topic?

For example, a communist writing about the Australian economy will have a very different opinion from a capitalist writing about the same topic.

2. Is a different theoretical approach to this topic possible?

3. Are there people or things which are important to the topic that the writer has not discussed?

For example, if the topic is '*Problems in Australian universities*', has the writer discussed the point of view of lecturers, as well as the point of view of students?

4. Is the writer an insider or an outsider on this topic? How does this affect their point of view? Does their position make their ideas more or less reliable?

For example, a lecturer writing about '*Problems in Australian universities*' is likely to look at the issue in a different way from someone who doesn't work in a university.

5. What are the writer's main points, and do you agree with them? Do other people who write about this topic mostly have the same position, or are there many different positions?

6. Does the writer use evidence to support their ideas?

For example, if the writer says '*The cost of renting accommodation in Hobart has decreased*' do they give any facts or figures to prove that this is true?

7. Is the evidence the writer uses reliable?

For example: *'The cost of renting accommodation in Hobart has decreased. I pay \$10 less per week than I did 5 years ago.'* This comes from the writer's personal experience, not reliable evidence that can be checked, or evidence that is true for most people.

8. Does the writer give references for the evidence they use, and are the references recent?

9. Does the writer present a balanced picture of the issue?

A balanced picture is one that considers a number of different viewpoints on the issue, and that makes sure all aspects of the issue are covered.

10. Does the writer give their own opinion as if it was a fact?

Language note: opinions and facts

To state facts, verbs in the present tenses are commonly used. For example: *'Humans **need** oxygen, water and food to survive.'* *'Koalas **eat** leaves.'* *'Tasmanian devils **are** currently **suffering** from a serious disease.'*

When writers want to show that they are giving their opinion about a topic where other opinions are possible, they will sometimes use the present tenses in order to present their opinion as a fact. For example *'The government **is** doing a bad job'* *'Students **are** lazy.'*

If the writer wants to show clearly that they are giving their own opinion rather than stating a fact, they may use expressions such as *'**In my view**, students these days are lazy.'* *'**In my opinion**, the government is doing a bad job.'*

However, in academic writing, writers are more likely to do research and then present evidence in support of their point of view. In this case they may use expressions such as *'**Research shows that** students today spend less hours studying than in the past (Liu 2008).'*

In writing about their own ideas or research, academic writers often use expressions to show that another opinion or interpretation might be possible. For example: *'These results **suggest that** students today spend less time studying.'* *'The disease **may** cause the extinction of the Tasmanian devil.'* *'**It is widely accepted that** human activity contributes to climate change.'*

11. Are the arguments logical and rational?

For example *'I forgot my umbrella, so it rained.'* This is an example of bad logic. By forgetting my umbrella, I did not actually cause the rain!

12. Are any of the writer's assumptions made clear to the reader?

Language note: assumptions

The Collins Cobuild Dictionary (1998) states 'If you **make an assumption**, you imagine that something is true, sometimes wrongly.'

Writers sometimes base their arguments on assumptions which may or may not be correct. For example: '*Selling Asian food at an Australian university cafeteria would not be profitable.*' The writer assumes that students at Australian universities do not want to eat Asian food. This assumption may not be correct.

Academic writers will sometimes explain what assumptions they have made. For example: '*In suggesting that it would be profitable for the university cafeteria to provide Asian food, I am assuming that the number of international students will continue to grow, and also that there is a growing market for Asian food among domestic students.*'

13. Does the writer oversimplify complex ideas?

For example: '*Poor grammar is to blame for any problems that international students might face at university.*' This might be partly true, but the challenges that international students may face are more complex. For example, they may have to adapt to life in Tasmania, to the different learning and teaching patterns in Australian universities, to Australian accents, and so on. Thus the statement is oversimplified.

14. Does the writer make unsupported generalisations?

For example: '*International students choose to study in Hobart because it has a cool climate.*' This is a generalisation, since it may be true of SOME international students, but not ALL of them.

15. Does the writer make reasonable inferences?

Language note: inferences

The Collins Cobuild Dictionary (1988) states that 'an **inference** is a conclusion that you make about something.' Writers often make inferences based on facts they have observed, and these inferences may be reasonable (likely to be true) or unreasonable (unlikely to be true).

For example:

'*Exams start next week. There are many students in the library. They are studying for exams.*' This is a reasonable inference.

'*There are many students in the library. Students are too lazy to get a part-time job.*' This is an unreasonable inference.

16. When the writer presents the ideas of other people, do they present them accurately or inaccurately?

To check this you will sometimes need to check the original source.

17. Does the writer use rational arguments to present their ideas, or do they use emotional language?

Language note: emotional language

In academic writing, rational arguments are generally valued more highly than emotional language.

For example:

'Research has shown that babies benefit from staying with their mother for the first months of their life (Macklin 2009). This is a rational position as it is based on research.

'Mothers must stay at home to look after their babies, otherwise the babies will suffer terrible damage.' This is emotional language.

18. What tone does the writer use? How does the tone affect your response to the text?

Language note: tone

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000) describes the **tone** of a piece of writing as the overall 'character' of the writing. The words we use to describe the tone of a text may be similar to words that are used to describe a person's behaviour or feelings, for example *'emotional'*, *'moderate'* or *'passionate'*. The tone of academic writing is often moderate and rational, rather than emotional.

For example:

'The disease which is affecting Tasmanian devils may lead to their extinction.' This is moderate in tone.

'The hideous disease afflicting our beloved Tasmanian devils will lead to the loss of this precious animal.' This is emotional in tone.

To find the tone of a piece of writing, it is useful to look at the kinds of words and sentence structures that are used. Is the writing simple and scientific, with few adjectives? Is it complex and literary, with a lot of description and emotional language? Is it humorous?

19. Does the writer's language, tone, or choice of examples show any bias? If so, does this make the piece of writing less trustworthy?

Language note: bias

The Collins Cobuild Dictionary (1988) states that 'someone who shows **bias** is unfair in their judgements or decisions, because they allow themselves to be influenced by their own opinions, rather than considering the facts.'

20. Do your reactions to the piece of writing show you any bias in your own thinking? Does the text challenge your own values, beliefs, and assumptions?

An important part of critical reading and thinking is becoming aware of the way your own beliefs and opinions influence your response to what you read.

The statement *'Hobart is the best city in the world'* clearly shows the writer's bias! What does your reaction to it show about your own opinions or beliefs?

21. If the paper contains statistics, graphs, or illustrations, are they well introduced and discussed and do they contribute to the author's argument?

Questions for critical reading of research articles

This checklist has been adapted from University of Wollongong 2006, 'Reading', *Uni Learning*, University of Wollongong, available at <http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/main.html>, viewed 27/4/09.

1. **What topic or problem does the research address?**
2. **Is this topic or problem important, relevant and interesting? Why and for whom?**
3. **What is the overall benefit to the field of the findings of this research? (What did they find, who is it useful for and why?)**
4. **Is the methodology or research technique appropriate for the topic/problem?**
For example, are the size of the sample and the method of sampling appropriate?
5. **Are the limitations of the procedures clear?**
If there are any problems with the research method, have these been clearly explained?
6. **Are the results consistent with the objectives?**
7. **Are the results verifiable?**
If the research was repeated by somebody else, would similar results be obtained?
8. **Are the claims the author makes about his or her own research internally consistent?**
This means: Is there a clear connection between the aims, method, results and conclusion of the research? For example, do the results support the conclusions that have been made? Is the research method suitable for achieving the aims of the research?
9. **How is this research useful or relevant to your own research interests?**
What did you learn from this research, and how and why is that knowledge useful to you?

References

The Collins Cobuild Dictionary 1988.
The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 2000.
University of Wollongong 2006, 'Reading', *Uni Learning*,
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