

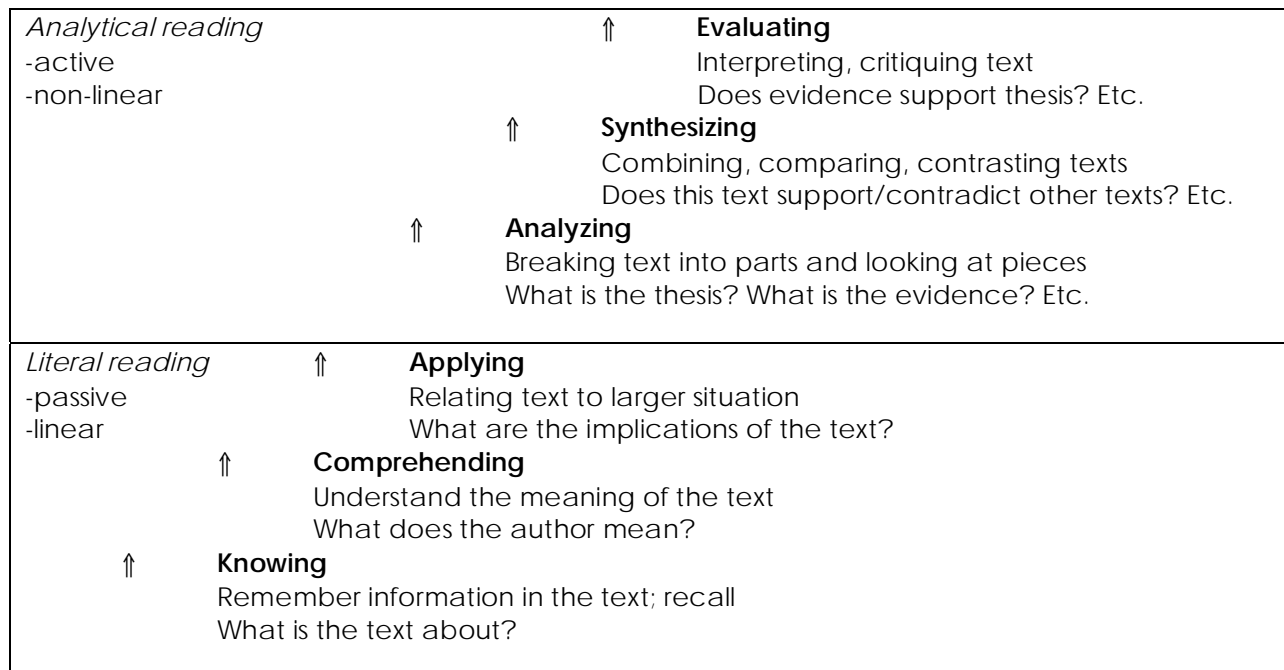
Critical Reading

Text: a physical artifact that conveys information and ideas, such as a book.

Most classes in college ask you to engage with texts. The lectures, the essays, and the tests are all based on those assigned texts. This means that your success as a college student is based directly on how well you read. What many students fail to realize is that reading well is not just about remembering and understanding the information they've read, but also about taking that information apart and using it.

In college, reading often leads to writing. The evidence you use in your essays comes mostly from the texts you read for class. But an essay is not merely a report of information. An essay offers a point of view, an opinion, an interpretation: it has a thesis. That thesis also develops from your reading. So as you read, you need to put your mind to work on the text. You need not only to understand what the text says, but also to analyze how the text says what it says, how the ideas in the text relate to other texts, and how convincing the ideas are. So when you begin to write, you enter into a discussion of a topic that was begun by the texts you read. As you engage texts more actively, you will find that you are more successful in class, and when it comes time to do a writing assignment you have much more to say. On a personal level, you will find that you get a lot more out of the text you are reading and that it will have much more personal significance for you.

The critical reading steps. Educators have broken the reading process into six steps¹. Like with a staircase, you must start on a lower step before you move to a higher one. Each step of the staircase involves more complex thought and more active participation. In college, it is assumed that you can move beyond the literal steps and into the analytical ones. Also notice that evaluation comes from analysis. In other words, an interpretation of a text doesn't come from some vague feeling, but from a careful engagement with that text.



¹ I have adapted this from *The Bedford Guide for College Writers*, Seventh Edition, but the editors adapted their version from Benjamin Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*.

Reading is the starting point for most all college work, but you can read in such a way that you hinder your ability to be successful. Oftentimes, you scan your eyes over the pages, but when you close the book you can't remember what you have read. Or other times, you read something, understand it, but haven't bothered to consider what you really feel about it or how it relates to other things you have read in the class. In both these cases, you aren't reading actively and consequently are unprepared for class.

Memory. When you read, you engage the short-term memory so that you can follow the basic idea of a text from one sentence to the next. But short-term memory is just that: short term. You forget it pretty quickly. So how can you engage your long-term memory? You do that by asking questions. When you form questions and answer them *in your own words* (do not repeat the author's words), you break apart the structure of what you've read (which is analysis) and repack it in a way that you can understand. This act of asking questions and struggling to find answers engages your long-term memory and you find yourself actually remembering what you've read.²

The reading process.

Before you read. Look at the title of the text. Read the biography about the author. Read any words in bold or italics. Look at the questions at the end. Get a feel for what you are about to read before you read it. This provides a context. With a context, you will have a place to put the ideas that are about to be presented to you.

As you read. Learning to read actively is learning to ask questions as you read. Pause every now and again in your reading and reflect on what you've learned and what questions you have about the text. Always read with a pencil and write down insights and answers to your questions in the margin, or write down new questions that you can bring up in class.

Questions to ask as you read. These are just some general ones to get you started. What is the subject of the text? What is the author's opinion about this subject? Has the author made a clear point? Does the author have a particular purpose in mind? Is there a specific audience in mind? What specific evidence does the author use to support the main points? Does the writer make certain assumptions or take certain things for granted? Are there jumps in logic or sequence? Are the connections among ideas clear? Is there sufficient evidence for the opinions stated? Is the tone appropriate to the subject matter? Why does your instructor want you to read this? How does this reading build on, add to, contrast with, or otherwise relate to other readings in the class? Do you agree with what the writer has said? Do you have specific information or an experience that challenges or supports the writer's ideas?

Annotating the text. Otherwise known as "reading with a pencil." The more you engage with a text—the more you underline and write in the margins, or take notes—the more you will get out of a text. Avoid highlighting, because highlighting just calls attention to the original structure of a piece. Sometimes in order to understand something, you have to break apart that structure. With a pencil, you can write down your own comments to help you understand what you are reading. You may also come to realize that the more you annotate a text the easier it is to write about when you compose an essay. So while annotating the text may seem like it takes you more time, it actually will save you time in the long run. Annotating is a type of prewriting.

Reread the text. If you have the time, it is good to reread the text. At least try to reread difficult passages. Often, you will find that you notice things on a second reading that you missed on a first. A second reading is also a good way to understand how the author composed the piece of writing. Since you know where the information is going, you can pay special attention to its presentation. Understanding how authors organize information will help your own writing immeasurably.

² Keith Hjortshoj. *The Transition to College Writing*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001. P.140.