7 critical reading strategies and activities to do with students to encourage and develop critical reading ability

This text has been adapted from and extends on a text written by Salisbury University academics. It can be found online at: http://www.salisbury.edu/counseling/new/7_critical_reading_strategies.html

1. Previewing: Learning about a text before really reading it.

Previewing enables readers to get a sense of what the text is about and how it is organized before reading it closely. This simple strategy includes seeing what you can learn from the headnotes or other introductory material, skimming to get an overview of the content and organization, and identifying the rhetorical situation.

**Activity:** choose a reading for your course that students can work with in class, and make sure they have access to it, either in a course reader or through short loan or the library. Ask them to bring it to class or to a tutorial. On their own, ask them to preview the text by reading the title, the abstract, the headings and subheading, and skim-reading the introduction and conclusion. While they are doing this, encourage them to make notes in the margins or in a notebook about what they think the reading is about. Get them to share their impressions with peers and then ask the whole class for feedback. If there are misunderstandings, try to question why these are there and guide students in the right direction through explanation of why the reading has been chosen and what it’s about. This activity prepares students to read the whole text.

2. Contextualizing: Placing a text in its historical, biographical, and cultural contexts.

When you read a text, you read it through the lens of your own experience. Your understanding of the words on the page and their significance is informed by what you have come to know and value from living in a particular time and place. But the texts you read were all written in the past, sometimes in a radically different time and place. To read critically, you need to contextualize, to recognize the differences between your contemporary values and attitudes and those represented in the text.

**Activity:** select a short text relevant to the course you are teaching and assign students to read it before class. Set them guiding questions that they need to answer on the text that ask them to place the text in a historical context. When was it written? What was going on in the world at this time that could have affected the author’s views and ideas? Ask questions about the cultural or biographical context. Who wrote the article? Where are they from? Are there references in the text that are quite specific to that writer’s context, or is the writer trying to be more general or universal in his or her approach? Then ask them to record their impressions of the points or arguments made in the text. What is informing their reactions and thoughts? What information are they drawing on? And how should they approach the reading of the text in order to make sense of it? They can discuss these answers in groups or complete a quiz on the reading that you could take it to read.

3. Questioning to understand and remember: Asking questions about the content.
Hopefully students in your classes will ask you questions about the content of their readings, or at least you will quiz them on what they are supposed to be reading. These questions should be designed to help students understand a reading and respond to it more fully, and often this technique works when the questions are relevant and appropriately phrased. When students need to understand and use new information though it is most beneficial if you encourage them to write the questions that they are asking themselves as they read the text for the first time. With this strategy, they can write questions any time, but in difficult academic readings, they will understand the material better and remember it longer if they write a question for every paragraph or brief section. Each question should focus on a main idea, not on illustrations or details, and each should be expressed in their own words, not just copied from parts of the paragraph.

4. Reflecting on challenges to your beliefs and values: Examining your personal responses.

The reading that you do for this class might challenge your attitudes, your unconsciously held beliefs, or your positions on current issues. As you read a text for the first time, mark an X in the margin at each point where you feel a personal challenge to your attitudes, beliefs, or status. Make a brief note in the margin about what you feel or about what in the text created the challenge. Now look again at the places you marked in the text where you felt personally challenged. What patterns do you see?

Activity (for 3 and 4): get your students to start and keep a reading journal. You could even make this part of the assessment for the course. Each reading must be captured in full bibliographical detail at the top of a clean page in an A4 book that they can use as their journal. Then students should read the whole article through without stopping, from beginning to end. The first part of the activity is to then write in their journal about what they remember and what they found interesting or confusing about the article. What questions do they have? What links can they see to things they have read elsewhere or discussed in class? Where you have put X’s in the margins because you have felt the writer was challenging your beliefs or opinions, what reaction did you have and why? How do you think your beliefs and opinions and being challenged?

Once they have completed this exercise, they should then go back and read carefully, stopping at things they don’t understand and re-reading until they can make sense of it. They can then add to their initial entry in the reading journal with more careful notes, and even make note of quotations that they like or that help them make sense of the author’s argument. This exercise is a lovely blend of reading, thinking and writing, and it helps students learn how to write in their own words about their own learning journey.

5. Outlining and summarizing: Identifying the main ideas and restating them in your own words.

Outlining and summarizing are especially helpful strategies for understanding the content and structure of a reading selection. Whereas outlining reveals the basic structure of the text, summarizing synopsizes a selection's main argument in brief. Outlining may be part of the annotating process, or it may be done separately. The key to both outlining and summarizing is being able to distinguish between the main ideas and the supporting ideas and examples. The main ideas form the backbone, the strand that holds the various parts
and pieces of the text together. Outlining the main ideas helps you to discover this structure. When you make an outline, don’t use the text’s exact words.

Summarizing begins with outlining, but instead of merely listing the main ideas, a summary recomposes them to form a new text. Whereas outlining depends on a close analysis of each paragraph, summarizing also requires creative synthesis. Putting ideas together again -- in your own words and in a condensed form -- shows how reading critically can lead to deeper understanding of any text.

Activity: get your students to write an outline and summary of a text they have read. This can be an assessable assignment, and can be done in lecture time or in tutorials, and could be a solo or group activity.

There is a very useful document adapted here that can help your students do this activity. It comes from: http://www.enotes.com/topics/how-write-summary (accessed 20 May 2012).

1) Divide...and conquer. First off, skim the text you are going to summarize and divide it into sections. Focus on any headings and subheadings. Also look at any bold-faced terms and make sure you understand them before you read.

2) Read. Now that you’ve prepared, go ahead and read the selection. Read straight through. At this point, you don’t need to stop to look up anything that gives you trouble—just get a feel for the author’s tone, style, and main idea.

3) Reread. Rereading should be active reading. Underline topic sentences and key facts. Label areas that you want to refer to as you write your summary. Also label areas that should be avoided because the details—though they may be interesting—are too specific. Identify areas that you do not understand and try to clarify those points. It is really important that you identify the MAIN points that the author is making to support the overall main idea of the article or text. Usually you will not include things like statistics and examples in a summary, so avoid including all that detail. If you are still unclear on what you are reading and what are the main points you need to include in your summary, re-read again. You can repeat this step as many times as you need to until you really understand the text.

4) One sentence at a time. You should now have a firm grasp on the text you will be summarizing. In steps 1–3, you divided the piece into sections and located the author’s main ideas and points. Now write down the main idea of each section in one well-developed sentence. Make sure that what you include in your sentences are key points, not minor details. Well-developed sentences are not necessarily long, but they are complete and tell the reader clearly what the idea is. Here, you need to be using your own words as much as possible and not copying from the original text.

5) Write a thesis statement. This is the key to any well-written summary. Review the sentences you wrote in step 4. From them, you should be able to create a thesis statement that clearly communicates what the entire text was trying to achieve – in this thesis statement you should write what you think the overall main idea of the article or text is. What is the author trying to make a point about? If you find that you are not able to do this step, then you should go back and make sure your sentences actually addressed key points.
6) Ready to write. At this point, your first draft is virtually done. You can use the thesis statement as the introductory sentence of your summary, and your other sentences can make up the body. Make sure they are in order. Add some transition words where relevant to help create overall flow, and to link your sentences together logically (like then, however, also, furthermore, therefore).

And once you are actually putting pen to paper (or fingers to keys!), remember these tips:
- Write in the present tense.
- Make sure to include the author and title of the work.
- Be concise: a summary should not be equal in length to the original text.
- If you must use the words of the author, cite them.

Don’t put your own opinions, ideas, or interpretations into the summary. The purpose of writing a summary is to accurately represent what the author wanted to say, not to provide a critique.

7) Check for accuracy. Reread your summary and make certain that you have accurately represented the author's ideas and key points. Make sure that you have correctly cited anything directly quoted from the text. Also check to make sure that your text does not contain your own commentary on the piece.

8) Revise. Once you are certain that your summary is accurate, you should (as with any piece of writing) revise it for style, grammar, and punctuation. If you have time, give your summary to someone else to read. This person should be able to understand the main text based on your summary alone. If he or she does not, you may have focused too much on one area of the piece and not enough on the author’s main idea.

6. Evaluating an argument: Testing the logic of a text as well as its credibility and emotional impact.

All writers make assertions that they want you to accept as true. As a critical reader, you should not accept anything on face value but to recognize every assertion as an argument that must be carefully evaluated. An argument has two essential parts: a claim and support. The claim asserts a conclusion -- an idea, an opinion, a judgment, or a point of view -- that the writer wants you to accept. The support includes reasons (shared beliefs, assumptions, and values) and evidence (facts, examples, statistics, and authorities) that give readers the basis for accepting the conclusion. When you assess an argument, you are concerned with the process of reasoning as well as its truthfulness (these are not the same thing). At the most basic level, in order for an argument to be acceptable, the support must be appropriate to the claim and the statements must be consistent with one another.

Activity: this exercise could be done verbally or in writing or both. The idea is to get your students, working on their own or in pairs or very small groups, engaged with the task of evaluating the arguments or points put forward in the readings they are doing. Choose a reading they need to do for class, and set them the task of reading it ahead of class, or even during class. Then on their own or in small groups, ask them to write down or verbally identify the claims that are being made and the support used to back up the claims. You could do the first two with the whole class to ensure they are clear on what you mean -- identify the claim and the support. Then they need to discuss whether they think the argument is well-made or well-reasoned. Is the evidence or support used convincing. Why or why not? Is the argument logically made -- is the evidence connected to the claim being made? Are they convinced by the arguments the author is making? Why or why not? This exercise makes them much more active readers in a much more supported and even fun way, and it makes them more aware of the need for good evidence and support for their own claims and arguments.
7. **Comparing and contrasting related readings:** Exploring likenesses and differences between texts to understand them better.

Many of the authors we read are concerned with the same issues or questions, but approach how to discuss them in different ways. Fitting a text into an ongoing dialectic helps increase understanding of why an author approached a particular issue or question in the way he or she did.

**Activity:** choose two readings that students have done during the course and set an activity for them that actively requires them to compare and contrast the views of the two writers. This sort of activity would lead on well from the outlining and summarising activity, and even from the evaluation activity. In order to compare and contrast, they need to start by identifying the main argument made by each text and the main evidence used to support the arguments. How are the arguments saying similar and also different things? If the arguments are the same perhaps the evidence is different. In what ways? You can also look at HOW the arguments are made – the writers’ styles and tones, and the presentation of the argument. How have they made their arguments and structured their texts? What influences do these differences have on the way the text reads, or the way in which you as the reader makes sense of the text? How does the writer include his or her own voice and own opinions?

This kind of activity encourages more critical and deeper interaction with the texts and writers, and with the ideas and arguments. It also builds awareness in students about the different conventions and styles around academic writing, and the different ways in which disciplinary texts can be structured, organised and written.