

CRITICAL QUESTIONING

“Critical questions” derive from a classical dialectical tradition commonly known as the “Socratic method”—a pattern of persistent questioning that is meant to unfold through *dialogue* and is specifically designed to help us see beneath the surface of something, to better understand alternative viewpoints from our own, to brainstorm difficult ideas and solutions more effectively, to examine the assumptions we make about our world, or to avoid being unknowingly influenced by what someone else writes. They are questions that are designed specifically to help you decide exactly what it is you think about a text and why. Critical questions are meant to help you generate ideas and arguments you can use to defend and adapt your positions on a text more intelligently and effectively.

The point here is to pose analytical questions about a text that you might ask *as if you were trying to generate some critical discussion of the writing*. So importantly, these questions should be “open ended”: they should require you to form an academic opinion about how the writer writes, and then support that position with argumentation and references back to the writing. Below are a few examples. Note that most of the questions are not “*what*” questions. This is because “*what*” questions generally lead to closed, yes/no or fact-based answers which do not lead us into further discussion or analysis on their own. “*How*,” “*why*,” “*In what way...*” questions are much better for stimulating complex consideration of the relative effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a given text.

What does the author do in order to achieve this or that given effect?

Or

How does the author use imagery or colloquial language to reinforce his or her point?

Or

In what way does the author’s own political agenda or moral position undermine the effectiveness of his or her argument in the piece of writing?

Or

Who appears to be the audience for this text, and what clues in the text lead you to make that conclusion?

Or

Do you think the position this author is taking is fair or valid or reasonable? Why or why not?

Your questions should be “thesis-generating”: that is, the questions you ask should force you to take a position or form a hypothesis about a writer’s writing in some way, and then they should require you to reach back into the text for evidence and support in order to answer that question. All of these questions, and others like them, share a key common trait: **they require a reader to look under the surface of a text and develop a hypothesis about how it works** (or about how it does something specific in its argumentation, or about how it achieves a certain effect, or about how it appeals to a certain audience, or about how it succeeds or fails for some other reason that you can see in the writing, etc.).

See the next page for a more detailed breakdown of Critical Reading Questions.

See also: the “Analyzing an Argument” question list for more examples of critical questions.

Critical Reading Questions

Use the following questions to help guide your reading of what are sometimes complicated arguments; even when the argument seems straightforward, these questions can help to get at the different nuances in the language and rhetorical style. This is an important step in helping to clarify just what the argument is about, what position the author takes, how this position engages in a larger debate, and why this position and the debate in general are significant. Equally important is the attention you give to your own position on the topic. As you respond to these questions, think about what kinds of assumptions you bring to the argument and what kinds of questions you are left with. Your response to the argument should be guided as much by your understanding of its content and structure, as by your own engagement with the issues and problems it raises in relation to your own understanding of the topic.

1. What question is posed by the author?
2. Thesis/position/argument
 - What is the primary argument made by the author?
 - Where do you first find the argument?
 - What language indicates to you that this is the primary argument?
3. Context
 - Why is the argument significant?
 - What other positions does the author indicate are debated regarding the topic?
 - When was the article written? Where was it published? Who was the intended audience?
4. Evidence
 - What evidence does the author offer in support of the position put forth? (Identify all pieces of evidence you find.)
 - What is the nature of each piece of supporting evidence? For example, is it based on empirical research, ethical consideration, common knowledge, an anecdote?
 - How convincing is the evidence? For example, does the research design adequately address the question posed (#1 above)? Are the ethical considerations adequately explored and assessed? Have you read/heard anything on this subject that confirms or challenges the evidence?
5. Counter arguments
 - What arguments made in opposition to the author's views were described?
 - Were these arguments persuasively refuted?
 - What evidence was used in the refutation?
6. Effectiveness
 - What were the strengths of the article?
 - Was it difficult to read and understand? If so, why? If not, why not?
 - Were you able to follow the moves of the article from thesis to evidence, for example?
 - Did the structure of sentences and paragraphs and the overall organization guide you and help you follow the author's intent?
 - Did all the material seem relevant to the points made?