



Reading Critically

by Daniel R. Snyder

So you've started your research, and sitting in front of you is something you've just finished reading.

Where do I start?

After you've read it several times, marking and annotating along the way, put it aside. Now, without looking at it again, try to summarize it briefly, putting the most important points into your own words. If you cannot do this, go back and read it again, and again, and again, until you are able to write that summary. Until you've written a good summary, you cannot be confident that you understood everything you read.

Now that I've summarized it, what do I do next?

It's tempting to simply summarize your findings, but a research paper is not the same as a report. A research paper is not about what you learned; rather, it discusses what you think about what you learned. This is a considerably different type of task. Research is the beginning of a research paper, not the end. Quite honestly, about 90% of a research paper should come from your own thinking, not from your sources.

But if I'm not an expert on the subject, how can I possibly write anything?

That's one of the reasons you're doing research--to develop a certain level of expertise, which means you will always be reading far more than you will ever need to incorporate in your paper. However, you don't need to know everything there is to know about the subject because a research paper is more about critical thinking than it is about locating and incorporating sources. The important part is not knowing everything, but thinking about what you do know.

How do I do that? What should I write about?

Try writing in response to the following questions. I guarantee that if you attempt to write about even half of these questions for every source that you read, you will be well on your way toward writing a good paper. These prompts are designed to help you think critically about what you have read.

Questions for Critical Reading and Writing

Personal Reactions

- Do you agree with the author? Why or why not?
- Where are specific parts of the text with which you agree or disagree? Why?

- What experiences from your own life cause you to believe or disbelieve what the author has written?
- What basic beliefs and assumptions do you share with the author? Why?
- How might this affect your reading? Why?
- What questions come to mind as you read each paragraph? Why?
- How do you feel about the author? Why?
- Does the author seem credible? Why or why not?
- Based on your reading, what else do you need to learn about the subject? Why?
- What must you do to find out what you need to learn?

Examining Your Source

- Who is the author, and what qualifies the author to write this?
- What do you know about the author?
- What biases and basic assumptions does it appear the author has about both the subject and the audience? Why?
- From what type of publication does this come?
- What biases might be assumed based on the publication? Why?
- How does this article differ from/expand upon/connect to/contradict other articles? Why?
- Who do you suppose is the intended audience of this article?
- What prejudices, biases, and assumptions might this audience already have?
- How does this affect how the author structures the argument?
- If two articles share differing viewpoints, are there points on which the authors might agree?

Examining Logic

- What alternative conclusions might be possible based on the author's evidence?
- Is the author using any logical fallacies? Which ones?
- On what implicit and/or explicit assumptions is the argument based?
- Can these assumptions be questioned?
- What areas need further elaboration, examples, or proof? Why?
- Based on the assumption the argument is built upon, how can you prove it valid or invalid?
- Based on the assumption the argument is built upon, how can you provide it sound or unsound?
- For the moment, if you accept the author's argument, what might be the possible outcomes?

Examining Terminology

- What terms need further explanation or definition? Why?
- How might someone else define this term? Why?
- Why is the author using this term in this context?
- What does the use of this specific term reveal about the author? Why?
- If you adopt a different definition of a term, how does that affect the argument? Why?