



CRITICAL READING EXERCISES

Have you ever experienced the situation of having read something but for some reason you cannot remember what the passage related? We all have. Why does that happen? Too many times we read as passive readers expecting the act of reading to suffice. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. Even highlighting can't do everything for us; in fact, you'll learn that highlighting is completely superficial coloring of a text. The following 3 strategies support active participation as readers and thus retention of your reading.

Strategy #1: Question while Reading

"Can it be, Ischomachus, that asking questions is teaching? I am just beginning to see what is behind all your questions. You lead me on by means of things I know, point to things that resemble them, and persuade me that I know things I thought I had no knowledge of." Socrates

Research indicates that students who struggle with reading **do not ask questions** as they read—before, during, or after. In fact, even successful readers avoid questioning a text unless it's teacher-driven. While the academy is a place for active debate, most of us read materials given to us as passive voyeurs of a text. Of course, this is saying something about the power dynamic implicit/explicit between the faculty member and the student. Do we read to highlight what we think the faculty member wants us to read? Or do we read to wrestle with ideas. Frankly, given the reality that most of us read multiple texts in each week, we're lucky if we digest even one text. The fact that most of us read – or submit to a text— seldom questioning its content, style, or the intent of the author, disempowers us in the academic enterprise.

So, active reading is essential in bringing the reader into the discourse. Since there are deep and multiple connections between



reading and writing, we all need to learn and use strategies of **active, critical reading**. This first strategy requires the asking a few questions to a text, and thus engage in all the higher level learning of **Bloom's Taxonomy**: analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

Strategy #2: Dialogic/Dialectic Exercise for Critical Reading

This exercise engages you, the reader, in a conversation with the text/author as well as with yourself. In this way, you enter into a dialogue with the text/author and later move into a critical conversation (the dialectic) with yourself about your thoughts (the “I” talking with the “me”).

Preparation: Dual/Double-Sided Journal

Draw a line down the center of your paper to approximately 2/3 down. At that point, draw a horizontal line across your page. On the top 2/3, think of the left side as the other person talking/writing, and the right side reserved for your words. You’re engaging in a dialogue as a reader to the writer.

The Dialogue:

Any lines you want to highlight instead write in the left hand column. Reflect upon the quote and then compose a brief response in the right hand column. Do this several times for the text. Whether you’ve posed questions, summarized thoughts, or posed new ideas for consideration, you’ve engaged in a dialogue with this author. And to dialogue is to converse, to put yourself in an equal status as the writer rather than subordinating yourself as an empty vessel ready to absorb all the information from an author.

The Dialectic:

After reading, take a look at your comments in the right side. Read and reflect for critical engagement. Is there a theme to your responses?



What are you realizing about yourself or your understanding of the topics from your responses? Reflect and respond in writing to the dialogue. Here's the **Dialectic**, *the I responding to the Me*, and its value is directly related to your learning/awareness/metacognition. So, under that horizontal line, compose your reflection.

What have you done in this exercise? You initially engaged in a **dialogue** with a text/author while responding authentically directly to lines in the text. The dialogue supports genuine **reader's response**. Next, you engaged in a **dialectic** upon those responses; in reflecting upon and deconstructing your thoughts, you've generated new meaning. Once again, the value is on **metacognition** (the learning upon the learning) and developing your ideas/knowledge.

Applying New Ways of Reading:

Hopefully, this exercise opened new appreciation that reading takes deliberate engagement. Don't allow yourself to sit passively with book/article in hand. In order to fully appreciate a piece of writing, you must digest it and come to your own understanding. And your understanding is unique to you; according to Vygotsky, one can learn only the next thing. Each reader has a unique perspective and scaffolds new understandings.

Strategy #3: Writing Critical Comments in Margins

Some of us like to have Reading Journals nearby, and others prefer to write directly on the article's page. This direct approach also encourages **reader's response**.

Most of us have made a fair investment into highlighters, and so keep your highlighter handy for this reading exercise. BUT you'll also need a pen/pencil. Rather than just coloring your text with fancy highlighters, you will now have to qualify the purpose of your highlighting in the



article's margins. Have these comments be more than a punctuation mark (! or ?). Take your time to critically engage.

This exercise is going to force you to be more intentional with your highlighting. With each highlight, write a question, critical comment, or note to yourself about the sentence. Since you'll be required to substantiate what is typically done as a reading affectation, you'll find yourself being more cautious or selective and avoid the impulsive highlighting of a text. The result is that you'll have a handy reminder of what value the article had at this reading. Of course, your response changes with each reading – one wonderful reason why great pieces can be read over and over again.

By Anne Maxham, Ph.D.

Director of Writing, Antioch University