A PCTC Tip Sheet on
Encouraging Students to Read Critically

What is Critical Reading?
Simply put, to read critically is to go beyond the page, to delve beyond the surface, and to acknowledge that the writer has made choices about what to include and what to exclude.

Critical reading means being aware not only of one’s own reaction to or understanding of a particular text but of how the author’s choices have been made deliberately in order to regulate or control the reader’s reaction and understanding.

Critical readers take control of the text; they don’t simply accept and repeat its assertions. They “become the authors of their own understanding.” (Kurland)

The uncritical or pre-critical reader follows along with the author and accepts what a text says; a more sophisticated reader can describe what a text says and also what it does; by considering many components of a text in combination, a critical reader can interpret what a text means.

Towards Critical Reading

How Do You Set The Stage For More Critical Reading?
Bean (1996) identified various sources of students’ reading difficulties including the following:

1. Misunderstanding the reading process;
2. Struggling to adjust strategies for different purposes and varieties of academic discourse;
3. Struggling to perceive an argument’s structure or rhetorical context;
4. Lacking adequate vocabulary or facility with complex syntax;
5. Not seeing themselves “in conversation” with the author.

To this we might add a lack of persistence: a tendency to stop after a first, superficial, unquestioning reading.

Students require practice and guidance to develop the habit of critical reading:

- Encourage your students to develop a questioning or productively skeptical approach to any piece of non-fiction prose.
- Encourage them to write—not just highlight—while reading: asking themselves questions; making connections, comparisons or contrasts; identifying key arguments or “landmarks” in the text.
- Show them how to make and justify inferences based on the evidence within the text.
- Model how they can engage in conversation with the author: e.g., “Why did you choose those words or that example?”

Critical reading is “Deciding to what extent you are prepared to accept the author’s arguments, opinions, or conclusions.” (University of Leicester)

Bosley (2008) notes that students tend to “give up when the going gets tough.” He advocates for specific instructions that help students engage with difficult texts and “probe for the author’s underlying assumptions or intentions.” The following six questions may form such a useful framework as you develop your own guidelines for students:

Questions to Encourage Critical Reading

1. What can you tell about the reading’s background (bibliographic details)?
   a. What kind of text is this: print or online: type of site; peer-reviewed?
   b. Author/authority
   c. Date/significance of timing

2. What is the general topic under discussion?
   a. What’s it about?
   b. What do you already know about this topic?

3. What is the specific issue at hand?
   a. What specific aspect of the topic is up for debate or discussion?
   b. What’s the author’s purpose?
   c. Why is this worth writing about?

4. What position does the author take? What argument/claim is the author making? E.g.
   a. Theoretical perspective
   b. Rhetorical devices—persuasion, exaggeration, humour, satire; overall tone
   c. Reasoning/logic—cause-effect; comparison; induction, etc.
   d. Language—vocabulary choices (literal/evocative; patterns)
5. What evidence does the author provide to support the argument/claim? E.g.
   a. Methodology, sources, data collection, survey construction
   b. Examples, illustrations, graphs
   c. Connection between evidence and claim
   d. Assumptions/generalizations

6. How credible is the evidence?
   a. Is it evidence, anecdote, or opinion?
   b. Is there enough evidence to justify the conclusion? Or is there an alternative conclusion?
   c. Omissions? Choices? Bias?
   d. Do you have unanswered questions?

(Adapted from S. Crooks, 2010)

Critical reading is the result of a questioning, iterative process. A single encounter with an academic text is very seldom enough to grasp its full meaning. It takes time and practice.

Works Cited


University of Leicester. (n.d.). What is Critical Reading? http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/critical-reading

Colorado State University has also developed an excellent Critical Reading Guide available at http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/page.cfm?pageid=640&guideid=31.