Critical Reading

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What is your understanding of the word 'critical'?

a) To point out flaws

b) To think 'in depth'

c) To assess claims and justifications

d) I'm not actually sure, but I know it's important!

e) Other / a combination of the above (please detail in the chat)

Why do you think we undertake 'critical reading' exercises?

What do you find most challenging thing about critical reading?

a) I don't know what I'm looking for

b) I don't know how to position my own understanding in relation to the critical reading

c) I don't have the time to do the critical reading

d) Other – please share in the chat

What we'll address today

❖ What critical reading is

❖ How to recognise and assess types of claims

❖ How to read critically

❖ Why critical reading matters

❖ How to use position your interpretation in relation to existing critical readings

Critical reading is:

❖ Recognising a person is making a claim

❖ Recognising the claims is supported by justification and reasoning

❖ Assessing the logical strength behind a *claim* and its *justification*

Critical reading is:

❖ Usually applied to *secondary* reading

  ❖ *Primary* texts/source: original texts (autobiography; piece of fiction; object from the historical context in question)

  ❖ *Secondary* texts: critical studies of original texts (e.g. a critical biography; a study of tactics in the Vietnam War; critical race theory; a comparative study of madness in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*)

  ❖ NOTE: not 'which text was primary/less important for my essay'

  ❖ NOTE: also not applicable to reference works (dictionaries and encyclopaedias) which try to provide irrefutable facts rather than arguable claims
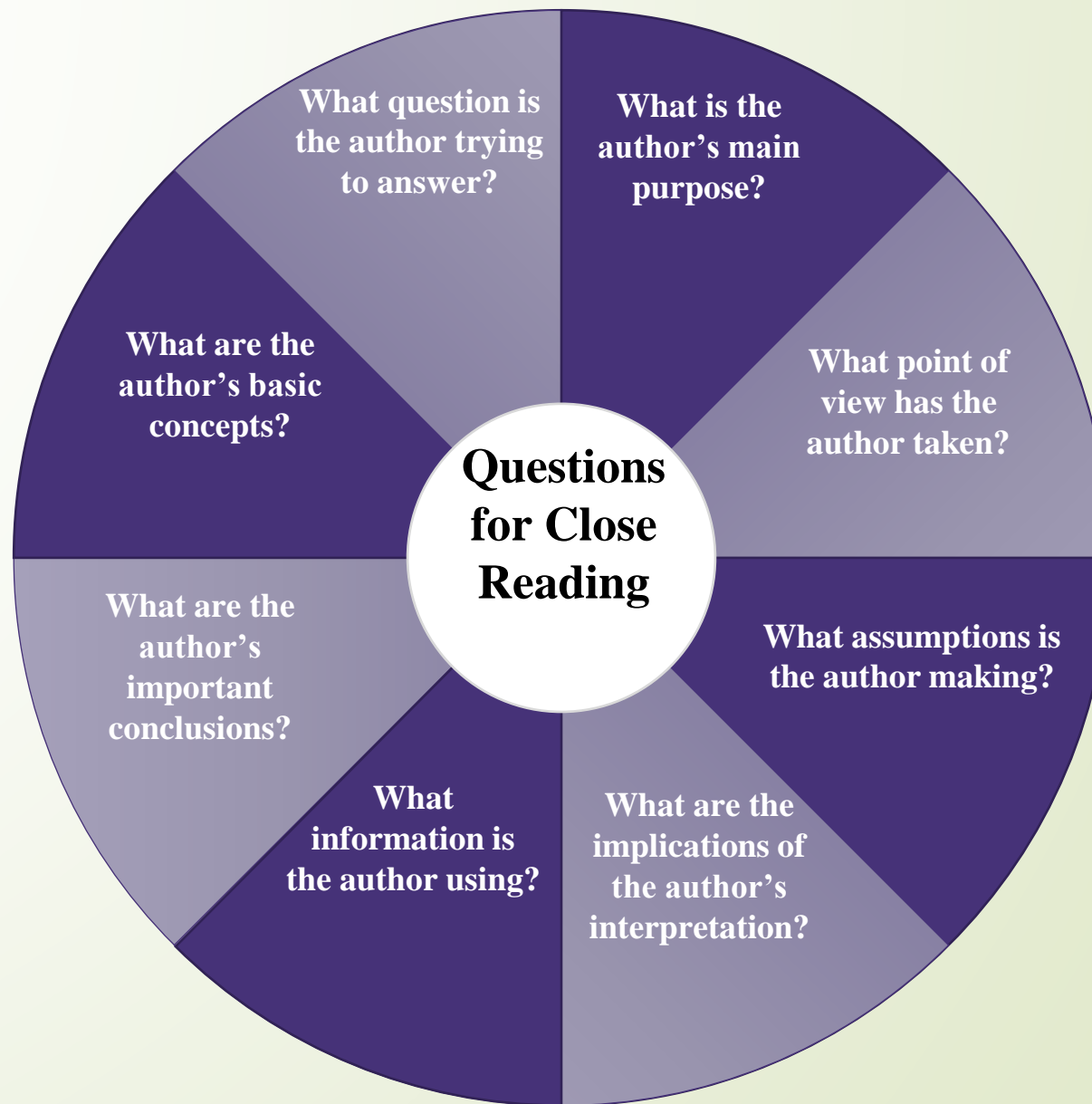
What are you reading?

❖ Most sources can be useful depending on *how* you use them – but not every source is a reliable critical source!

❖ Know *what* you're reading and why

❖ If you are evaluating *critical* sources remember to check:

  ❖ **Academic integrity**: is the research peer reviewed?

  ❖ **How old is it?**: The usefulness of this question varies between disciplines! But if there has been more up-to-date work it should account for seminal research from recent years

  ❖ **Relevance**: is the focus of this study central or tangential to your work? Criteria for relevance includes **relevant case studies, shared methodological approaches**, and **definitions/outlines of key terms and concepts**

Why are you reading?

- *Content* – to understand a situation, concept, or entity

- To assess *interpretations* of a case study

  - Do you agree with the analysis and the interpretation of why that feature matters or what effect it has?

  - How is the case study used? Do you think the case study sheds light on a broader set of claims of fact, claims of policy, or claims of value?

- To see how methodologies have been used to understand a case study

Questions for Close Reading

- What question is the author trying to answer?
- What is the author's main purpose?
- What point of view has the author taken?
- What assumptions is the author making?
- What are the implications of the author's interpretation?
- What information is the author using?
- What are the author's important conclusions?
- What are the author's basic concepts?

Source: 'Study Skills 14 – 17', The Brilliant Club, url <https://thebrilliantclub.org/already-working-with-us/phd-tutor-hub/tutor-study-skills-ks4/> [accessed August 3 2021]

A structural breakdown of critical readings

❖ Most critical texts include a combination of:

  ❖ Claims

  ❖ Justifications for the claim or claims (references to case studies)

  ❖ Applications of the logic of the claim to specific case studies (analytical breakdown of case studies **and** interpretation of the data)

What is a claim?

❖ Claims are arguable statements

  ❖ Claims always have potential for disagreement!

❖ Three main types of claims:

  ❖ Claims of fact

  ❖ Claims of policy

  ❖ Claims of value

Claims of Fact

❖ These posit that something is true or untrue – but there must always be space for disagreement

❖ Usually specific regarding time, place, situation, and/or people involved

❖ Examples: '*Hamlet* is about the dangers of procrastination'; 'Lady Macbeth's irresolvable guilt shows the inevitable costs of ambition'

Claims of Policy

❖ The method by which a problem can be solved or a situation improved; a suggested process

❖ Examples: 'This essay interprets *Wuthering Heights* by exploring the incessant, multiple narrative frames'; 'This article examines grief and mortality in Dylan Thomas's poem "Do not go gentle into that good night" by arguing the poem has to be read as a villanelle'

Claims of Value

- ❖ The most obviously subjective claims that deal with taste, preference, moral or aesthetic values

- ❖ Claims of value usually position one thing in opposition to another

- ❖ Examples: 'The naval blockade was *more* important than technological developments in leading to the Allied victory in World War One'; 'Barack Obama made a *more* effective use of rhetorical techniques in his 2008 election campaign speeches than in his 2012 campaign'

Why think in terms of claims?

❖ A concise framework from which to understand the purpose of a text

❖ Enables you to agree with *part* of a critical work

   ❖ e.g. agreeing with a claim of fact or a claim of value while disagreeing with a claim of policy

   ❖ e.g. Agreeing with the *analysis* but disagreeing with the *interpretive* claim (the claim of fact) drawn from the analysis

❖ If all critical writing makes claims, what assumptions or biases does each author have?

   ❖ Enables space for reasonable interpretive disagreement

Assessing critical claims

❖ Consider the *limitations* and *biases*

  ❖ Are writers explicit in acknowledging definitions of terms, the limitations or their argument and claims, or their relevant backgrounds?

  ❖ Are there case studies or analytical approaches prioritised over others – and if so, what is the justification?

  ❖ NOTE: biases and assumptions aren't always bad! Sometimes biases helpfully highlight certain perspectives or experiences – but it is important to recognise the bias

❖ Your writing will have its own biases and assumptions

  ❖ Be willing to challenge your own interpretation if your analysis of the data does not support your reasoning!
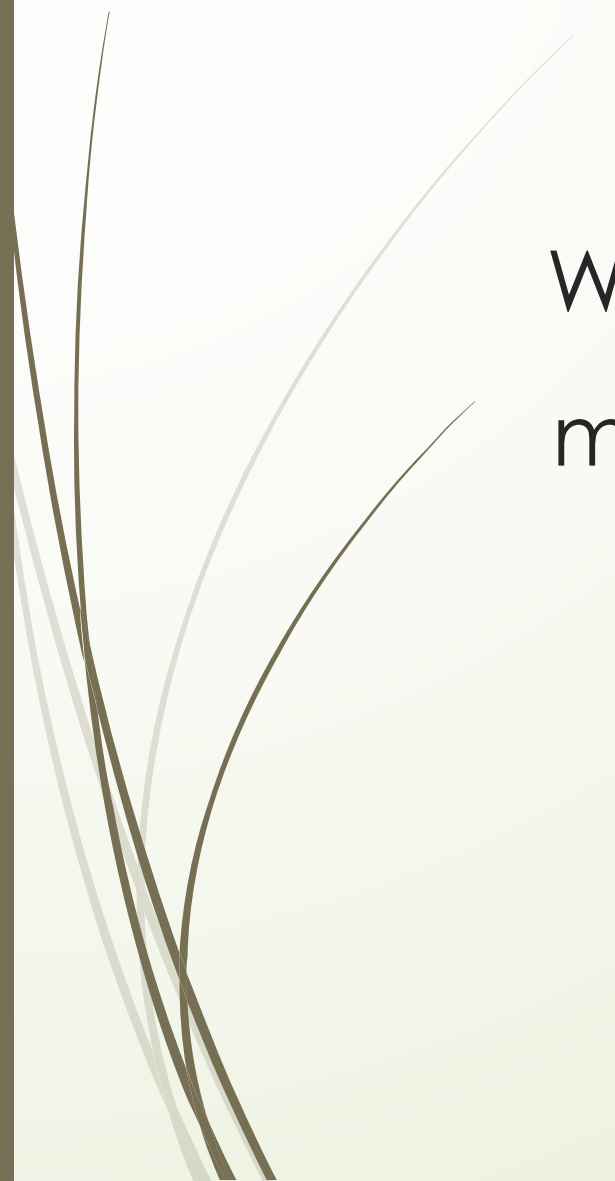
The 'scholarly conversation'

❖ Critical writing is like a slow moving conversation

  ❖ Each contribution is a person or group offering their interpretation of why a particular interpretation of a particular set of data is significant

  ❖ We *build from* people's insights

  ❖ We *diverge from* people's insights

❖ Apply the framework of 'conversation' to the way you respond to critics and their critical claims!

  ❖ Don't just invoke a critic's name to dismiss a minor claim! Engage with their ideas

Modelling critical reading:

'A market for a variety of literatures specifically designed to cater to the pedagogical needs of children emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century out of a complex nexus of historical, economic, social and cultural factors unique to this period in England. The onset of the industrial revolution, the democratic revolutions in America and France, and the rationalization of the sciences and of medical practices ushered in radical changes to class relations and led to the formation of new subject categories, among them the modern child. Instrumental in these developments were the middle classes who generated the vast majority of the pedagogical and pediatric literature, as well as the children's books proper, which defined the child-subject and situated it within a changing set of discourses.'

- Andrew O'Malley, *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p. 1

What did I do in my response, and what might you apply to your critical reading process?

Group exercise

What is Lawson's central claim?

What is Lawson's 'case study'?

What do we know about Lawson's methodological approach?

The three novels that make up the *Emily* trilogy—*Emily of New Moon, Emily Climbs*, and *Emily's Quest* — were written by L. M. Montgomery from 1923 to 1927. The *Emily* series is a marked departure for Montgomery from what had become the "stale" *Anne* books. Although similar in tracing the growth and development of an orphan girl from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, the *Emily* trilogy as a whole hints at darker forces of personality and identity than are evident in *Anne of Green Gables* and its immediate successors.[1] This essay examines the repeated psychic or supernatural experiences in Emily's life and argues that they point to or figure a traumatic lack and absence. Seen through the lens of Freud's paradoxical notion of the *unheimlich*, Emily's uncanny experiences reveal that the familiar world in which she lives is also inhabited by figurations of loss and estrangement.

- Kate Lawson, 'The "Disappointed" House: Trance, Loss, and the Uncanny in L. M. Montgomery's *Emily* Trilogy', *Children's Literature* 29 (2001), 71 – 90, p. 71.

Citation Matters

- ❖ Acknowledge other people's intellectual property!
- ❖ Chart the history of your own critical formation
- ❖ Allow people to recreate and test your critical reasoning
- ❖ Avoid plagiarism
- ❖ Things to include:
    - ❖ Varies depending on whether you're citing in a closed-book exam or a longer-term assignment
    - ❖ Always: the names of the critics
    - ❖ Ideally always: the year in which the critical comment was published
    - ❖ Longer-term assignments: Publication details
    - ❖ Follow the recommended citation styles. Popular humanities citation styles include MHRA and APA (slides at the end)

Principles of critical reading

❖ Identify the claim(s)

❖ Identify the reasoning

❖ Assess the strength of logical links between the claim; the case studies; the analysis and interpretation

❖ Establish your interpretative stance based on your interpretation of the case study

❖ View critical reading and critical writing as a *scholarly conversations*: enter the conversation and engage with critics; it's not about disagreeing or picking faults ☺
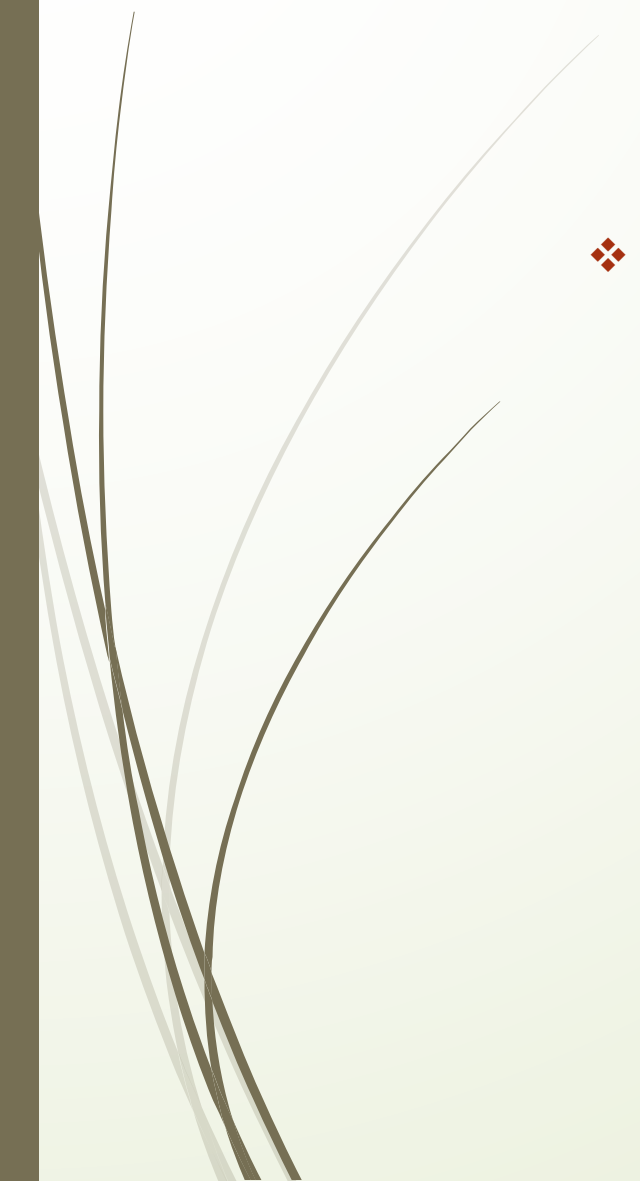
Some more on citation methods...

APA (American Psychological Association)	In-text references	Bibliographies	Benefits	Drawbacks
- parenthetical system: bracketed references linked to full length citations in the bibliography	Brackets contain: the author's surname, the date of publication and the page or page numbers you are referring to: There are [...] four [referencing systems] that are used most widely (Kennedy, 2003, p. 17). The reference always goes at the end of the sentence before the full stop.	- Items listed alphabetically by the author's last name. Each entry should include, in the following order: the author's surname, their first initial, the date of publication in brackets, the title of the book, the place of publication and the publisher. For example: Kennedy, D. (1996) *New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980-1994*. Bridgend: Seren.	- Allows readers to see the *year* of the study – helpful for scientific and empirical papers! - Allows readers to focus more on your ideas and less on the format - Great for comparing well-known studies - Also good when focusing on one main study	- More confusing in many Humanities subjects – the year of publication isn't always the most helpful in showing when a field has received critical attention

MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association)	In-text references	Bibliographies	Benefits	Drawbacks
- In-text citations with footnotes :D - Footnotes or endnotes should be placed (for ease of reading) after commas, full stops, and semi-colons, but *before* em-dashes	The *first* footnotes contain the complete bibliographic data, with a footnote at the end. - Janet Woods, *Imaginary Menagerie,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2021), p.13. - Janet Woods, 'Imaginary Words', *Hypothetical Journals* 12 (1998), 32–43. - Subsequent references: Woods, p. 14 - If author has written multiple texts referenced in your essay: Woods, 'Imaginary Words', p. 38.	- Items listed alphabetically by the author's last name. - No full stop at the end - Each entry should include, in the following order: Woods, Janet. *Imaginary Menagerie* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2021) Woods, Janet. 'Imaginary Words', *Hypothetical Journals* 12 (1998), 32 - 43	- Easily allows readers to recreate your research journey - You don't need to flip to the bibliography to find the full source! - It can provide a 'conversation' between your footnotes and main essay	- Footnotes can be visually overwhelming - Can be mildly time-consuming to edit

Citation notes (extra)

- ❖ The previous slides were not exhaustive – you can find more about reference styles using the reference guides, most of which are available online!

Extra exercise (critical listening)

Watch this extract (from 8'35 – 11'53) which provides a musicological analysis of a theme in *Star Wars* and try to identify:

❖ What are some of claims being made about the John Williams's film music?

❖ How does this critic justify the claims? (i.e. what musical frameworks and case studies does the critic highlight?)

❖ What is one example of an analytical identification and interpretative claim?

Note: this extra exercise is a fun way to listen to John Williams's music and to do so in the name of study – developing your critical thinking skills!

the genius of John Williams.