

Critical Reading in the Social Sciences



1. What is Critical Reading?

Critical reading is reading actively with the goals of identifying arguments, weighing evidence, and evaluating the larger significance of a scholarly article or book to its field of research. This means identifying the main idea or claim presented by the author, explaining the key arguments and concepts used to support the main claim being made, and assessing the underlying assumptions that the view expresses. Critical reading also involves being aware of how a text is part of an intellectual lineage or an on-going conversation in which the current author of the article or book is engaging with other authors' ideas. This means identifying the research question being asked, what has been said about the broader problem engaged in the text, and what the author is contributing to the analysis.

Whenever you read a scholarly book or article, you always want to look for and carefully consider these elements:

1. The research topic or problem:

What is the specific research question? What does the author want to know about his or her topic?

2. The thesis:

What is the answer to the research question? What is the main idea or claim that the author wants to convince his or her reader of?

3. The supporting arguments:

What arguments and evidence does the author provide to support his or her thesis?

4. The concepts being used:

What are the key terms that are central to the main points of the text?

5. The larger significance:

Why is the argument important to the field? What can it help readers to understand? How can it inform your own research or help you write your assignment?

The only way to identify all these elements is to read, reread and reread! Slow, careful reading and rereading will both help you have a better understanding of the different parts of the text and enable you to make connections that went previously unnoticed.



2. Research Topic or Problem

You will not make much sense of the answers that are being offered if you haven't identified what problem or question someone is responding to. Academics write articles and books in order to communicate with one another and the larger public about a particular question or problem. A research problem is a question that a researcher wants to answer or a problem that a researcher wants to solve. It is an interrogative sentence or statement that asks what relation exists between two or more phenomena.

What general problem and specific question does the author claim to address? Every article has a purpose or a main research question to guide it. Sometimes this is formally stated while other times the reader must collect this information:

- You can find this information in the introduction, and sometimes in the abstract of an article, where the author introduces the readers to an unresolved problem or paradox, or an explanation of something important that we need to know.
- You can identify the problem statement by looking at the definition of the area of concern, a difficulty to be eliminated, a troubling question that exists in the literature, or existing practices requiring a meaningful understanding for future investigation.

It is often addressed in the 'literature review,' which critically engages with others' ideas and aims to address the literature gap, defining the research significance. Highlighting unresolved issues or questions within existing understandings of the phenomenon under study is a good way to identify the problem than an author tries to solve.

- The research problem can also be found in the statement of the aims and objectives of the research that indicates how an author will address the literature gap. For instance, pay attention to any mention made by an author to the effect that his or her research "investigates," "compares," "examines" or "explores." It generally expresses the relationship between two or more phenomena that the research seeks to explain.
- Finally, the statement of the research problem often leads to the formulation of one or a series of questions to which an author wants to provide an answer. The research question(s) generally immediately follows the literature review, summarizing in a concise manner the literature gap that the author aims to clarify or resolve.

For example, an author may be interested in explaining the nature and function of political parties in Canada today. Reviewing the literature, the author observes that the most traditional explanation of Canadian political parties is the broker system theory. The theory suggests that maximizing their appeal to as many divergent interests as possible is not only the best way for parties to gain power, but, in the fragmented Canadian society, they should also be conciliators, mediators, or brokers among the multiple cleavages already identified in order to keep the country together. The author may then mention that recent developments in Canadian electoral politics contrast with our conventional understanding of the role of political parties in Canadian politics. As a result, the author announces that the present article will further investigate the apparent discrepancy between the theoretical explanation of Canadian political parties and their actual behaviour in order to find out whether the broker system theory is still useful to understand Canadian political parties or we need to elaborate a new theory to make sense of actual transformations in Canadian electoral politics. Finally, the author indicates that the present article aims at answering the following question: "To what extent can the five federal parties currently holding seats in the House of Commons be identified as brokerage parties?"

3. Thesis Statement

The thesis is the answer that an author provides to his or her research question. It is the main idea or claim of the text, and it relates to the author's purpose for writing. Sometimes the thesis is not explicitly stated (e.g. In this article, I will argue...), but is implied in the text. You should nevertheless still be able to paraphrase an overall idea the author is interested in exploring in the text.

- Read the introduction and conclusion of the article to identify the thesis of the text. Usually, authors will foreshadow the main argument of their text in the introductory paragraphs. As well, in the concluding paragraphs they will usually review the ground they have covered as well as re-state their argument.
- The thesis usually follows the statement of the problem (and the research question if there is any), because it is the answer that an author provides to his or her research question.
- If the thesis is not clearly announced (In this article, I will argue...), look for any positive affirmation of the relationship between the main phenomena covered in the problem statement, or any other formulations that presents a way to understand or interpret the problem under consideration.

For example, after presenting his/her research question, the author states that the Canadian party system is no longer a brokerage system but a polarized system.

4. Supporting Arguments

After presenting their unique answer to the research question studied, authors provide arguments and evidence to prove and support this thesis throughout the rest of the article or book.

- What is conveyed by the opening sentences? Quickly skimming over the opening sentences of paragraphs should give you a good idea of the main ideas contained in the piece.
- Also, the main points are the major subtopics, or sub-ideas the author wants to explore. Main points make up the body of the text and are often signalled by major divisions in the structure of the text.
- The main results and arguments supporting the thesis are generally presented before the discussion of evidence, such as citations from other research, governmental documents, statistics, or case studies. Evidence is usually descriptive, whereas arguments explain the data and draw out its significance for the central research question or problem.

For example, in order to demonstrate that the Canadian party system is now a polarized system, the author may argue that the 2011 federal election has changed Canada's brokerage party system. The author will then provide evidence and interpret it to prove that the 2011 federal election does indeed mark a transition toward a different party system than the system that prevailed before 2011. Overall, the analysis of the 2011 federal election aims at convincing the reader of the validity of the thesis statement.

5. Concepts

Critical reading always involves interpreting the author's key concepts, ideas, and terms that are central to the main points of the text. Concepts are abstract words that summarize many concrete observations and stand for what they have in common.

- It is possible to determine the most important concepts of an academic source by identifying key terms that keep popping up in your reading. The fact that the author uses key terms to signal important and/or recurring ideas means that you should have a firm grasp of what they mean.
- Main concepts are also usually indicated in the title of an article, book or chapter of a book.
- Sometimes the author will define or characterize key concepts. When an author provides a definition, it is certain that this is an important concept to the text and one for you to make note of. Some concepts must be interpreted from their role in the text. In this case, you want to pay attention to the different phenomena subsumed under the name of the concept and the relationship that exists between them.

For example, in order to understand the current trajectory of the Canadian party system, the author would need to know what a political party is. The author may provide a definition of the concept of "political party" in one sentence: "Political parties are organizations of people that nominate candidates and compete in elections in order to win control of the government."

In some cases, the definition may be implicit in the text. For instance, the concept of "party system" is not defined explicitly and it needs to be assembled from the different characteristics that surround its use in the text. For instance, references to the number of political parties with legislative representation and the position they hold vis-à-vis the other parties point toward an understanding of a party system in terms of the system of government by political parties in a democratic country.

6. Larger Significance

Critical reading is not simply close and careful reading. To read critically, one must actively engage with and assess the relevance and/or credibility of the argument(s) presented in a text:

- Consider any assumptions the author is making. Assumptions may be unstated in the piece of writing you are assessing, but the writer may be basing her or his thesis on them. What does the author have to believe is true before the rest of her or his essay makes sense?

For example: If an author suggests that Canadian political parties should act as agents of national integration and attempt to reconcile as many divergent interests as possible, the unstated assumptions are (1) that the Canadian society is fragmented along multiple cleavages (e.g. regions, linguistic and ethnic groups, genders, classes, religions, ages, urban and rural locations) and (2) electoral politics should be the process by which class conflicts and ideological differences are being depoliticized in order to achieve the unity of country.

- What is the author's main analytical point as opposed to the ideas of other thinkers in the text?
- Write on the various ways you think the text links up to the preceding texts covered in class and/or in your research. What are the similarities and differences in terms of subject matter, research question, geographical/temporal focus, types of data, and argument?
- Analyze the extent to which the article did or did not meet your expectations. Were you persuaded by the evidence/arguments? Why or why not?