**What Is Critical Reading?**

**Note: These remarks are primarily directed at non-fictional texts.**

**Facts v. Interpretation**

To **non**-critical readers, texts provide facts.  Readers gain knowledge by memorizing the statements within a text.

To the **critical**reader, any single text provides but one portrayal of the facts, one individual’s “take” on the subject matter. Critical readers thus recognize not only ***what***a text says, but also ***how***that text portrays the subject matter.  They recognize the various ways in which each and every text is the unique creation of a unique author.

A non-critical reader might read a history book to learn the facts of the situation or to discover an accepted interpretation of those events. A critical reader might read the same work to appreciate how a particular perspective on the events and a particular selection of facts can lead to particular understanding.

**What a Text Says, Does, and Means: Reaching for an Interpretation**

Non-critical reading is satisfied with recognizing what a text *says*and restating the key remarks.

Critical reading goes two steps further.  Having recognized what a text ***says***, it reflects on what the text ***does***by making such remarks.  Is it offering examples?  Arguing?  Appealing for sympathy?  Making a contrast to clarify a point? Finally, critical readers then infer what the text, as a whole, ***means***, based on the earlier analysis.

These three steps or modes of analysis are reflected in three types of reading and discussion:

* What a text **says**    – **restatement**
* What a text **does**   – **description**
* What a text **means**– **interpretation**.

You can distinguish each mode of analysis by the subject matter of the discussion:

* What a text says – restatement – talks about the same topic as the original text
* What a text does – description – discusses aspects of the discussion itself
* What a text means – interpretation — analyzes the text and asserts a meaning for the text as a whole

**Goals of Critical Reading**

Textbooks on critical reading commonly ask students to accomplish certain goals:

* to recognize an author’s purpose
* to understand tone and persuasive elements
* to recognize bias

Notice that none of these goals actually refers to something on the page. Each requires inferences from evidence within the text:

* recognizing purpose involves inferring a basis for choices of content and language
* recognizing tone and persuasive elements involves classifying the nature of language choices
* recognizing bias involves classifying the nature of patterns of choice of content and language

Critical reading is not simply close and careful reading. To read critically, one must actively recognize and analyze evidence upon the page.

**Analysis and Inference: The Tools of Critical Reading**

These web pages are designed to take the mystery out of critical reading. They are designed to show you **what to look for ( analysis )**and **how to think about what you find ( inference )**.

The first part —what to look for— involves recognizing those aspects of a discussion that control the meaning.

The second part —how to think about what you find— involves the processes of inference, the interpretation of data from within the text.

Recall that critical reading assumes that each author offers a portrayal of the topic. Critical reading thus relies on an examination of those choices that any and all authors must make when framing a presentation: choices of content, language, and structure. Readers examine each of the three areas of choice, and consider their effect on the meaning.