

2

Read, View and Write with a Critical Eye

AT A *GLANCE*

- Know how to read with a critical eye (see 2a below)
- Analyse visual texts (see 2b)
- Discover how to write with a critical eye (see 2c)

2a

Become a Critical Reader

To become a more effective reader, you need a set of strategies while you read. These strategies help you to engage with material through analysis and reflection.

Preview

No subject is ever completely new; it is likely that many people have written and talked about the subject before. Begin by asking the following questions:

- Who wrote this material?
- Where did it first appear? In a book, journal, newspaper or online?
- What is the topic or issue?
- Where does the writer stand on the topic or issue?
- What else has been written about the topic or issue?
- Why was it written?

Summarise

Summarising means using your own words to explain the main ideas of the material you read, so make sure you understand what is at issue. Take your time to read, circle any terms or references that you don't understand and look them up. Ask yourself these questions before writing your summary:

- What is the writer's main claim or question?
- If there doesn't appear to be a specific claim, what is the main focus?
- What are the key ideas or concepts that the writer considers?
- What are the key terms? How does the writer define those terms?

Respond

As you read, write down your thoughts. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do I agree or disagree with the writer's claims? Why, or why not?
- To what points made by the writer should I respond?
- Which ideas might be developed or interpreted differently?
- What do I need to look up to further my understanding?
- How does this help me in my research?

Analyse

On your second or third reading, analyse the structure (the way in which the parts of the material have been organised) using the following questions:

- How is the piece of writing organised?
- What does the writer assume the reader knows and believes?
- Where is the evidence? Can you think of contradictory evidence?
- Does the writer acknowledge opposing views? Does the writer deal fairly with opposing views?
- What kinds of sources are cited? Are they documented? Are the sources credible (that is, are they from a peer-reviewed journal, government or non-government website or an esteemed organisation)?
- How does the writer represent herself or himself? If the author refers to studies, are the methodologies valid and reliable? Has protocol been followed in research (i.e. ethics approvals and so on)?

2b

Become a Critical Viewer

Like critical reading, critical viewing requires you to reflect in depth on what you see. Think of an image as a piece of writing that needs to be read to be fully understood. However, learning how to read and understand an image isn't easy because you have to investigate who the creator is, the subject of the image and its history. If it is a moving image, such as a video or film, you will need to find out about the director, writer, producers and actors to fully understand the context in which it was made. Use the following strategies.

Preview

Critical viewing requires thinking about the context first.

- Who created this image?
- What or who is the subject of the image? If it's a public figure, how does their background affect the image?
- Why was it created?
- Where and when did it first appear?
- What media and techniques did the creator use?
- What has been written about the creator or the image?

Respond

Make notes as you view the image with these questions in mind:

- What was my first impression of the image and its subject?
- After thinking more about the image and perhaps reading about it, how has that first impression changed or expanded?

Analyse

The following analytical questions apply primarily to still images.

- How is the image composed or framed?
- Where do my eyes go first?
- How does the image appeal to or confront the values of the audience?
- Was it intended to serve a purpose besides art or entertainment?

The Department of Public Works commissioned the photograph on page 7 in 1932 to document the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. In it we can see more than 40 men posing for the photographer. They were about to start painting the bridge. Their faces are filled with pride as they look out over the coastal city. Most of them are smiling, looking directly at the camera and expressing a sense of mateship, as if they knew this iconic structure would become part of Australia's history.

Another approach to critical viewing is to analyse the content as well as the social context in which the image was taken. The interwar period (1919–1939) changed the world order. Europe's political landscape changed, the United States became a world leader, and women continued their fight for equal rights. Western culture reached one of its peaks during the 1920s and during the 1930s financial markets survived one of



Photograph by the New South Wales Department of Public Works, Sydney
Collection: Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences

their worst crises. The men in 'Harbour Bridge painters on central arch' reflect this historical moment. They have hope. They have jobs and they believe living standards will get better. Their work helped to revitalise the local economy in the midst of the Great Depression, connected Sydney's CBD with the Northern suburbs and provided Australia with one of its quintessential sights.

This photograph remains relevant in today's political climate, and can be contrasted with other iconic images captured during the construction of Chicago's high-rises or San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge.

2c

Become a Critical Thinker and Writer

Now that you have learned how to read words and images with a critical eye, you can use similar strategies to develop your critical thinking skills. By thinking about the context of the material and asking questions about the speaker, subject and audience to come up with your own ideas, you are engaging in the critical thinking process.

Analysing what you are reading or viewing and reflecting on the process of communication will help you to learn how to apply similar techniques in your own communication. You will become a more critical writer as you consider your role as speaker and how you need to adjust your subject to appeal to an audience. Use the following strategies.

Preview

- What is my topic or issue?
- What is my argument or claim for this topic or issue?
- What is my purpose with this piece of writing?
- Who is my audience?

Respond

As you write, think about the topic or issue you are addressing and ask yourself these questions:

- Am I clearly responding to the assignment question?
- Am I responding fully to the arguments or claims made in the materials or sources that I have read and referenced?
- Am I acknowledging opposing views in a balanced, objective way?

Analyse

Just as you have analysed other writers' texts and images, you need to apply the same strategies to engage critically with your own writing. After you have written a draft, set aside time to analyse and reflect with the help of these questions:

- Is my writing organised in a logical way?
- Is my position or thesis statement clearly stated?
- Have I used clear topic sentences to guide the reader?
- Have I supported my writing with evidence? Are my sources credible? Have I documented all my sources?
- Have I used language that is appropriate for my purpose and audience?

For tips on revising, editing and proofreading, see Chapter 4.