

Critical Reading & Writing: 9 Essential Strategies

Writing for students as we once knew it has changed. The key difference can be described in one word: Analysis. Traditionally, educators and law makers expected students to rely on sheer imagination, which was often a high criterion for a good writing piece.

The new standards target college and career readiness by having students write to address two or more sources. These are analytical tasks. Students read in a critical way, and respond to reading using two to three passages that they need to analyze.

According to Dr. Douglas Fisher, Critical Reading is an analytic activity. The reader rereads a text to identify patterns of elements – such as information, values, and assumptions. As he often states, this is not simply a “reread” for fluency purposes. It is a purposeful reread for information analysis.

This requirement carries forward for analyzing opinion, informative, and even narrative text. With narrative descriptions, students contemplate questions such as: What might a character do next? What does the scene tell you about the setting, and the overall story? Students are not asking themselves simply: What do I think about it?

Here are some Critical Reading strategies for educators to convey to students:

1. Know **WHY** you are reading. This will help you pull out information from the source that is needed for writing.
2. Depending on the reason for reading, allow enough time for each specific critical reading task. Reading for general information won't take as much time as reading (and, especially, rereading) for a more narrow focus such as looking to support an opinion piece.

3. Background knowledge plays a big part in critical reading. Preview, survey or skim the text before reading so that you know the purpose, the relevance to extracting what you need, its difficulty, and how it connects with ideas or information you already know.
4. Use the first read to get a general idea. Then reread, to get to the more detailed items within the text that might have been unclear during the first read.
5. Keep in mind the importance of each reread. This is a step that is often overlooked, especially with younger students or those who have not been exposed to the rereading process.
6. Particularly during the reread, use study devices to engage with the text. For example: underline, highlight, tag or make notes of important points within the texts.
7. As you are reading, keep in mind not only the summary of the text, but the purpose.
8. Work to understand the author, including: purpose, context, intended audience, authority, agenda, and more. Put yourself in the author's shoes to gain deeper understanding.
9. Use metacognition! Ask yourself questions about your reading. Do you need to read more slowly? Or faster? Make more notes? Can you get key information quickly? These questions will help you gain a sense of what you need to do to improve your critical reading strategies.

For valuable techniques and tips on Critical Reading and writing, look to literacy authors such as Dr. Douglas Fisher, Dr. Timothy Shanahan, and Dr. Nancy Frey.

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