

# Critical Reading v. Critical Thinking

Non-Critical Reading	Critical Reading
passive	active
just the facts	what, how, why
gullible	skeptical
reactive	purposeful

We can distinguish between critical reading and critical thinking in the following way:

- Critical *reading* is a technique for **discovering** information and ideas within a text.
- Critical *thinking* is a technique for **evaluating** information and ideas, for deciding what to accept and believe.

Critical reading refers to a careful, active, reflective, analytic reading. Critical thinking involves reflecting on the validity of what you have read in light of our prior knowledge and understanding of the world.

For example, consider the following (somewhat humorous) sentence from a student essay:

*Parents are buying expensive cars for their kids to destroy them.*

As the terms are used here, **critical reading** is concerned with figuring out whether, within the context of the text as a whole, " *them* " refers to the parents, the kids, or the cars, and whether the text supports that practice. **Critical thinking** would come into play when deciding whether the chosen meaning was indeed true, and whether or not you, as the reader, should support that practice.

By these definitions, critical reading would appear to come before critical thinking: Only once we have fully understood a text (critical reading) can we truly evaluate its assertions (critical thinking).

## The Two Together in Harmony

In actual practice, critical reading and critical thinking work together.

Critical thinking allows us to monitor our understanding as we read. If we sense that assertions are ridiculous or irresponsible (critical thinking), we examine the text more closely to test our understanding (critical reading).

Conversely, critical thinking depends on critical reading. You can think critically about a text (critical thinking), after all, only if you have understood it (critical reading). We may choose to accept or reject a presentation, but we must know why. We have a responsibility to ourselves, as well as to others, to isolate the real issues of agreement or disagreement. Only then can we understand and respect other people's views. To recognize and understand those views, we must read critically.

## **The Usefulness of the Distinction**

If critical thinking and critical reading are so closely linked, why is this still a useful distinction?

The usefulness of the distinction lies in its reminder that we must read each text on its own merits, not imposing our prior knowledge or views on it. While we must evaluate ideas as we read, we must not distort the meaning within a text. We must not allow ourselves to force a text to say what we would otherwise like it to say—or we will never learn anything new!

## **Reading Critically: How Well Does The Text Do What It Does**

We can think of a writer as having taken on a job. No matter what the topic, certain tasks must be done:

- a specific topic must be addressed
- terms must be clearly defined
- evidence must be presented
- common knowledge must be accounted for
- exceptions must be explained
- causes must be shown to precede effects and to be capable of the effect
- conclusions must be shown to follow logically from earlier arguments and evidence

As critical readers and writers, we want to assure ourselves that these tasks have been completed in a complete, comprehensive, and consistent manner. Only once we have determined that a text is consistent and coherent can we then begin to evaluate whether or not to accept the assertions and conclusions.

## **Thinking Critically: Evaluating The Evidence**

Reading to see what a text says may suffice when the goal is to learn specific information or to understand someone else's ideas. But we usually read with other purposes. We need to solve problems, build roads, write legislation, or design an advertising campaign. We must evaluate what we have read and integrate that understanding with our prior understanding of the world. We must decide what to accept as true and useful.

As readers, we want to accept as fact only that which is actually true. To evaluate a conclusion, we must evaluate the evidence upon which that conclusion is based. We do not want just any information; we want reliable information. To assess the validity of remarks within a text, we must go outside a text and bring to bear outside knowledge and standards.