

# CRITICAL READING

Critical reading involves developing a deep understanding of the content of a text as well as an analysis of the author's claims, evidence, arguments and conclusions. It involves examining the text to identify the main ideas and perspectives, but it also includes interpreting and evaluating the strength of the argument or conclusions.

You can read a text on at least **four different levels**.

**Comprehension:** Read to find out what the text says.

Ask yourself: what are the main ideas of the text?

**Analysis:** Read to see what the text does.

Ask yourself: how is the information used, how is it structured, how is it trying to persuade me?

**Interpretation:** Read to find out what the text means in a broader context.

Ask yourself: what is the deeper meaning of the text? What are its implications?

**Evaluation:** Judge the text's strengths and weaknesses.

Judge whether the text is important in terms of its contribution to the field.

These four levels are illustrated using the text below.

The discovery of antibiotics was contributed to by two scientists, Alexander Fleming and Howard Florey. Prior to 1942 patients in hospitals were dying from sepsis after amputations or from other invasive procedures. Women died in large numbers from infections caused by childbirth, and there was no great effort being made to find some form of antibacterial agent. In 1930, the microbiologist Fleming, who was studying micro-organisms and their growth patterns, wrote up his observations of the effect of bacteria on an organism for a small medical journal in London commenting that this might be worth further investigation; however, it wasn't followed up for 10 years. During the Second World War, men injured in battle were dying from sepsis in wounds. An Australian, Florey, who was working at Oxford University, was given the job as part of a PhD to try and find some bacterial agent. He came across the article written by Fleming and decided to follow it up. He managed to isolate enough penicillin from the penicillium fungus to treat one patient. America put money into this research and Florey and his assistant started to produce penicillin on a mass scale. There was enough produced in 1942 and 1943 to treat most of the allied soldiers, sailors and airmen that were being injured.

This text was devised for teaching purposes only. The content is regarded as general knowledge.

The passage about the contributions of Fleming and Florey can be critically analysed by considering the following points.

1. Florey, building on the work of Fleming, managed to isolate penicillin during the Second World War.  
(**Comprehension:** This presents the same information as the original. It restates the information.)
2. The passage compares the contributions made by two scientists to the development of a life-saving anti-bacterial agent.  
(**Analysis:** This discusses the way the material is presented and structured, showing deeper insight.)
3. The high numbers of soldiers dying of wound infection in the Second World War was the possible catalyst for the invention of penicillin.  
(**Interpretation:** This attempts to find a deeper meaning, interpreting the overall meaning of the passage.)
4. The article provides a good basic summary of the early history of penicillin, but it ignores the work done by Moyer which allowed the drug to be produced in large quantities.  
(**Evaluation:** This judges the text in terms of its strengths and weaknesses.)

STUDY TIPS

Critical reading process

Reading critically requires **active** reading. Asking questions as you read forms the basis of critical reading. Questions like those listed below help you to maintain focus while reading, to examine the claims and evidence presented, and to think about the deeper implications.

<p>1. What is the writer’s argument? What is the main claim (in one sentence)?</p>	<p>Argument</p>
<p>2. What are the main points/claims that support that argument (one sentence each)?</p> <p>Does the writer attempt to address the stated point of view? Is it successful?</p>	<p>Support</p>
<p>3. What kinds of evidence does the author present to support these points (quality and quantity)?</p> <p>Consider: is the evidence provided relevant, reliable and current? Where does it come from?</p>	<p>Evidence</p>
<p>4. Are the main points directly and logically linked to the argument?</p> <p>Look for examples of how they are linked. Also look for examples or information that is not relevant or explained well.</p>	<p>Logic</p>
<p>5. Are there assumptions/perspectives that underpin the argument? What are they? Are there assumptions based on a theoretical perspective?</p>	<p>Assumptions</p>
<p>6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this text? Does it make an important contribution to the field?</p>	<p>Evaluation</p>

Additional tips

- Use efficient reading skills to survey, skim and scan the text before you analyse, interpret and evaluate the text. (See Learning Lab: [Efficient reading](#))
- Have a pen or pencil with you as you read to note down key ideas and supporting information or evidence that the writer uses as well as noting your own ideas and reactions to the reading.
- Add short summaries or comments in the margins of a text. Post-it notes and coloured labels can assist in your note taking.
- Many e-books and articles in PDF can be annotated and highlighted, so you can add your own comments and export them to your files.