Critical Reading Strategies

Strategize. Identify your purpose and time frame, and plan accordingly. What do you want to be able to do with this text after you read it? Know key concepts for a test? Contribute interesting insight and questions in a class conversation? Facilitate a group discussion about the text? Employ ideas from the text in a paper of your own? Determine how much time you have to work on the text. You may not have enough time to memorize the entire book. You may get more out of a close read of the introduction and conclusion than you would out of skimming the entire book. Adopt reading strategies that will best enable you to meet your goals.

Preview. Get a sense of what the text is about and how it is organized before you read it closely. For books: read front cover, back cover, insides of sleeves, table contents, and preface to get a good overview of the book and the intent of the author(s). You may also try using the Internet to find background information about the author, the text, or keywords in the book title or chapter titles. A review of the text will summarize a complicated argument in simpler terms.

Re-read. Good readers re-visit interesting, confusing, or crucial moments in a text. After reading the whole text and gaining a sense of what the author is doing, re-reading carefully chosen portions of the text can help you clarify and deepen your understanding of the work.

Annotate. Each reader will develop their own annotation preferences. Experiment. Unless the text is short and exceptionally uncomplicated, almost every reader will need to annotate in order to understand what the author is saying and to remember it later. To annotate, you might:

- Write short summaries in the margins,
- Write comments and questions in the margins,
- Underline keywords and define them in the margins,
- Underline beautiful or important sentences,
- Bracket important sections,
- Make mini idea maps using words and arrows or other symbols, and
- Number related points.

Most readers add annotations on a second and third reading.

Contextualize. Place a text in its historical, biographical, cultural and/or intellectual context. Especially for a historical or literary text, cultivate an awareness of the ways that your contemporary knowledge base and values may inform your reading of the text. For academic texts, having a sense of the larger conversation surrounding the text will help you perceive the significance of the text’s argument.

Question. Write a question in the margin when you do not understand what an author is trying to say, or when you are not fully convinced by their argument. Writing questions will help you to know what you do and do not understand and to get your confusion cleared up. Also, these questions will help you participate usefully in class discussions.
Reflect. Cultivate an awareness of your own emotional responses to texts. Notice when you feel challenged, frustrated, or excited. Noticing your own emotional reactions to a text will help you engage with it more fully and more fairly. It is important to be able to disagree with some parts of the text, or to dislike an author’s writing style, and still be able to summarize their arguments fairly. It is also important to be able to speak specifically about what annoyed you or thrilled you about a text.

Outline and Summarize. Identify the main arguments and re-state them in your own words. Re-stating them is usually the most difficult, but also the most important part of summarizing, because that is when you really learn the material. Also, you can use these paraphrases later when you write about the text in a paper of your own. You may wish to write a one or two sentence summary of the main argument and a brief outline of supporting points or key concepts at the end of each chapter.

Evaluate. Did the text change the way you think or feel about its subject? What were its most interesting and useful interventions? Are there keywords that you would like to employ in your own work? Did the author accomplish what they set out to accomplish? Is the logic coherent, or are there gaps or contradictions? (Gaps and contradictions do not necessarily mean an argument is flawed. They may indicate a refusal to oversimplify complex material. Gaps and contradictions can be generative.)

Compare. How are the arguments, methods, and prose style of this text similar to others you have read? In what ways are they innovative, or at least new to you?