Key Concepts in Critical Reading

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Analysis

Facione (2010) defined *analysis* as the ability “to identify the intended and actual inferential relationships among statements, questions, concepts, descriptions, or other forms of representation intended to express belief, judgment, experiences, reasons, information, or opinions” (p. 6). The process of analyzing involves breaking a piece of work apart, examining what the elements mean separately, and figuring out how they are related to each other, with the goal of understanding the meaning of the work as a whole.

Written material is composed of words that make up sentences, which in turn make up paragraphs, which in turn make up chapters, and so forth (Kurland, 2002). The elements in a well written text will be logically organized and a reader’s approach to analyzing them will generally depend on the reader’s goals and the primary themes that interest him/her. For example, a psychologist’s analysis of a work on mental health will differ from that of a psychiatrist or theologian. The first may focus on the behavioral aspects, the second on the clinical or biological aspects, and the third on spiritual aspects. Because scholarly literature is generally written by researchers or experts who wish to contribute to the knowledge of a particular subject, it is to be analyzed as an argument or communication within that particular social context.

The reader’s analysis can focus on three aspects: content, language, and structure (Kurland, 2002). When analyzing the content one may ask the following questions:

1. Whom is the author addressing?
2. What is the author’s purpose?

3. What evidence is used to support the author’s argument?

4. What is the context of the work?

When analyzing the structure of the argument, one would ask questions such as:

1. How is the argument built? What comes first?

2. Do the points follow a logical sequence or timeline?

3. How did the author divide the sections?

4. Did the author present a problem and its solution?

5. Did the author use a compare and contrast analysis?

When analyzing the language, one would ask questions such as:

1. What is the tone?

2. Does the word selection reveal any biases?

3. Is the language clear and vigorous?

As you analyze the text, it is also important to make connections between what you are reading and what you already know. Are any of the points made in conflict with your worldview or perhaps in conflict with the views of other respected scholars in the field? Is the text significant? If so, what makes it significant? Does it make a worthwhile contribution to the field?

**Inference**

The act of inferring is an important component of the critical reading process as it involves making judgments and drawing conclusions. A literacy study group created by The Project for School Innovation (n.d.) found that a reader’s ability to make correct inferences
resulted in (a) better comprehension, (b) being more involved with the text, (c) becoming a more sophisticated reader, and (d) learning to think about the robustness of one’s thinking process.

An inference (n.d.) is defined as “the act of passing from one proposition, statement, or judgment considered as true to another whose truth is believed to follow from that of the former.” Facione (2010) provided a more comprehensive definition; he defined it as being able to identify and secure elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions; to form conjectures and hypotheses; to consider relevant information and to deduce the consequences flowing from data, statements, principles, evidence, judgments, beliefs, opinions, concepts, descriptions, questions, or other forms of representation. (p. 6)

When inferring, the central question is: “What is the author really saying?” Inferences are made in everyday communication often without much thought. For instance, a husband may tell his wife “do not forget the girls.” From this simple statement the wife may infer several things that are not explicitly stated. She may infer that (a) he is referring to their two daughters, and/or (b) he is reminding her to pick them up from some place. Inference involves reading between the lines. To help her decide what her husband means, she relies primarily on the context, that is, what she already knows and what is most logical: he is her husband, and they have two teenage daughters who are out with friends. One could infer that by girls he is referring to random women; however, in this particular context, that inference though logical is unreasonable. Thus, for inferences to be accurate they must be sensitive to the context.

Making inferences, particularly when one does not have the benefit of a close personal relationship with the author or intimate knowledge of the author’s views, can be tricky and it requires a great deal of care. Like the husband in the example above, writers are trying to
communicate a point and the reader combines the words, assesses how they are related to each other, and tries to understand the ideas or meaning behind the words. Readers will generally rely on indicators or clues within the text and prior knowledge and assumptions to make inferences. This process is thus both intuitive and deliberate and care must be taken when using prior knowledge. Making inferences based primarily on the text will yield the most useful benefits for a reader of academic literature.

Readers must also note that there is a difference between a reasonable inference and a correct one. One may make reasonable inferences based on a text and prior knowledge; however, these may not be correct. One way of ensuring that one’s inferences are correct is to review the evidence and try to determine whether specific reasons can be given to justify the conclusions that have been drawn. Inferences are, after all, speculations that are based on evidence. They are not quite the product of deductive reasoning so it is not unusual for two people to read the same material and make different inferences. The following example demonstrates this point: two people may see a man in tattered clothing lying in a gutter and from this one may infer that the man is homeless and the other that the man needs help; the first assumes only homeless people lie in gutters while the second assumes that a person lying in a gutter needs help (Paul, 1995). Note that Paul’s (1995) example also illustrates the intimate relationship between inferences and assumptions. The key to making valid inferences is thus a careful evaluation of the evidence. Kurland’s (2000) principle “the more evidence we have before us, and the more carefully we reason, the more valid our inferences” is apt. As you read and think through written material, it is important to also pay attention to the assumptions that underlie the inferences you make.
Assumptions

An assumption (n.d.) has been defined as a statement or fact that is taken for granted. It has also been defined as an element that “bridges the gap between an argument’s stated evidence and conclusion … a piece of support that isn’t explicitly stated but that is required for the conclusion to be valid” (Kaplan, 2008, p. 30). Although inferences and assumptions are not identical, they are related in that inferences often find a basis in what is assumed. Understanding assumptions is thus a crucial component of the critical reading process because it enables the reader to:

1. Identify what is holding an argument together.
2. Identify strengths and weaknesses of an argument.
3. Find possible points of critique.

Finding hidden assumptions can be tricky, especially when one is reading dense academic literature. However, identifying them is important because most logical flaws are rooted in problematic assumptions. Here are a few strategies one can employ to identify assumptions:

1. Evaluate the argument and determine whether it is valid. If it is not, what additional premises should be provided to make it so?
2. Look for the gap in the argument. Is there a piece of information missing that may explain how the author concluded X from Y?
3. Find a significant counterexample to the point made. This will enable one to identify what the author ignored.
4. Assess the terms and categories. What meanings are ascribed to key terms? Are the meanings reasonable and justified? Do they reveal any biases?

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Interpretation

Ultimately, the goal of the reading process is to understand the overall meaning of the text. A writer may “paint a picture” for the reader, but it is ultimately the reader who ascribes meaning to what is read. The meaning ascribed to the text will be influenced by the reader’s biases, knowledge of other literature, inferences, and so forth. Interpretation has to do with making sense of or assigning meaning to something. Facione (2010) defined it as the ability “to comprehend and express the meaning or significance of a wide variety of experiences, situations, data, events, judgments, conventions, beliefs, rules, procedures, or criteria” (p. 5). It involves the ability to determine what is significant, recognize and describe a problem without bias, making distinctions between main ideas and subideas, and so forth (Facione, 2010). This skill is particularly important for graduate school students because of the sheer volume of reading that is expected of them and also because much of academic writing involves synthesizing the ideas of multiple authors. To be able to perform these tasks effectively, one must be able to interpret texts. A key skill involved in interpretation is the ability to summarize. When one is able to summarize each paragraph or each key point, one is on the way to effectively interpreting the overall meaning of the text. However, this is only the beginning as one must also be able to draw out the implications of the author’s arguments.

Implications

An implication (n.d.) has been defined as “the conclusion that can be drawn from something, although it is not explicitly stated.” In making connections between the text and the world, it is important to think about the possible consequences that might result if the author’s views are accurate. This however, must be done carefully in order to avoid falling into the
slippery-slope problem, in which one assumes without warrant that a given action will result in a series of increasingly undesirable consequences. For instance, an instructor may argue that he/she cannot make an exception for a particular student because he/she will have to make an exception for all students. This, however, need not be the case as the conclusion/consequence does not logically follow from the premise/action.

Implications provide useful material for critiquing or undermining arguments, so recognizing and drawing them out is an important component of the critical reading process. Drawing implications must begin with an understanding of the facts that are explicitly stated and the conclusions drawn by the author.
References


