

## Guidelines for Critical Reading

Adapted from Chapter 1 of *Writing for Sociology* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)<sup>1</sup>

Being a critical reader means questioning the perspectives, assumptions, and evidence behind the author's argument. It means not passively accepting the authority of the printed word. We need to train our minds to ask certain questions and look for clues so we can separate essential points from less important ones. The process of critical reading is similar to reverse engineering—your task entails breaking the argument into its parts to see how the pieces fit together. The following key questions will help you to understand the logic or structure of an author's argument.

### I. Summary, or “What does the text say?”

1. *What is the question being asked and answered in this book?* In other words, what is the author's problem or puzzle? Explicitly formulating a question that “frames” the book, in ONE sentence, with a question mark at the end, is perhaps the most important thing you can do to further your understanding of a text.
2. *What is the author's main argument or thesis?* Identifying this preliminary answer to the question you just formulated will help you to grasp the thread that runs through the whole book and ties everything together.
3. *What claims does the author present to support the thesis?* What is important here is not that you recapitulate all the details of a book or other text, but rather that you identify the sub-arguments that relate back to the central question.
4. *What are the author's conclusions?* Look for ways the author relates the argument of the book or text to broader debates about the subject. According to the author, what are the implications of the claims made in the text?

### II. Analysis, or “What does the text mean?”

1. *Upon what assumptions does the author's main argument rest?* Looking for the assumptions underlying the study—both explicit and implicit—helps evaluate the author's claims. Consider whether or not you agree with the author's assumptions.
2. *What evidence does the author use to support the argument?* Notice the author's evidence and what is omitted. Identifying missing pieces can be an important part of your reading.
3. *Is the argument persuasive?* Think about whether the evidence matches the claims and whether other kinds of evidence would give different results. Is the argument logical, well-reasoned, fair, balanced, and consistent?
4. *How might you critique the author's argument?* Your job as a critical reader is to evaluate the argument and evidence the author presents. Would the author's argument hold if applied to a different, comparable case? Can you identify cases where the author's argument is useful in explaining an observable phenomenon in the social world and cases where it might be less useful?

### III. So what, or “Why does the text matter?”

1. *What is the author's agenda?* People write books and articles for a variety of purposes—to inform, amuse, persuade, and/or goad into action. In sociology, authors are often engaging in political and/or theoretical debates with other writers.
2. *How does the book relate to other readings you have done for the course?* To readings for other courses? To debates about families? To the world around you? Once you have summarized and evaluated the text, think about it in a larger context. How does it make you think differently about families, gender, the state or other topics? What further questions does it inspire?

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<sup>1</sup> Courtesy of Cinzia Solari.