HOW TO READ LITERARY CRITICISM
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General Strategies for Reading an Essay

Pre-read. Before buckling down to a complete, sentence-by-sentence reading, read the beginning and the end: certainly the first and last paragraphs, but possibly (depending on how the essay is organized) opening and closing sections or units of thought that might be bigger than individual paragraphs.

Speed-read. Make a quick pass through the beginnings and ends of body paragraphs, with special attention to the beginnings and ends of sections, if the essay is internally segmented.

Mark it up. Productive reading of a literary critical article requires active reading, especially on your second (or third) pass: marking key passages, labeling sections of the text according to topics or ideas, noting patterns, and asking questions.

Re-read. If you've done a good job pre-reading, speed-reading, and marking up, you should be able to solidify and reinforce your understanding of what you've read by re-reading your mark-up: both the passages you've noted as particularly important and your margin notes.

Specific Strategies for Reading an Essay in Literary Criticism

Components of the argument. Divide and conquer: perform an inventory of the basic building blocks of the essay’s argument. What’s it built out of? Close reading? Author biography? Historical or cultural context(s)? Inter-text(s) (i.e. other specific texts with which the primary literary text is in dialogue)?

Theoretical discussion?

Privileged texts. Which parts of the primary literary text about which the essay has been written occupy the lion’s share of the essayist’s attention? To what extent and in what proportions is the argument based on character(s), or setting(s), or dialogue, or narrative intrusions, or setting(s) (etc.). Does a particular character or scene or pattern or linguistic feature (etc.) or combination thereof play an outsized role in the argument?

Critical conversation. Critical arguments almost always respond to other arguments already made by other readers and scholars. What ongoing critical discussion or controversy or question does the essay respond to? How does the essayist situate his or her topic and purpose in relation the foregoing conversation? What gap does s/he seek to plug, or mistake correct, or mistaken emphasis redress?

Theoretical approach. Every critical argument includes, whether overtly or covertly, a theoretical perspective or angle of approach. What theoretical assumptions or assertions guide the essay's selection of topic and mode of inquiry? Even if you have had no exposure to major “schools” of theoretical thinking (e.g. formalism, structuralism, Marxism, gender studies, deconstruction, historicism), you should nevertheless be able to discern some of the essay's theoretical underpinnings. Does it read the literary text in historical context? In relation to literary history or other literary works? According to some particular theory of gender, sexuality, psychology, or social class?

Issues, problems, questions. Successful literary critical arguments don’t typically set out merely to say a bunch of things about a particular literary text. Rather, they focus on some particular issue, problem, or question that seems to demand further investigation and some kind of resolution. That issue, problem, or question may be inherited from earlier scholars or it may be newly discovered or created by the present author; it may reopen or unsettle or question a conclusion previously accepted as established, or it may seek to identify a new, heretofore unconsidered or under-considered topic with significant interpretive ramifications. As a reader, your identification of the specific issue or problem or question that the essayist is trying to resolve or answer is crucial to your being able to follow the writer's line of argument.

Integrating Others’ Ideas Into Your Own Argument

Select the parts of others’ arguments that are most useful to your own argument, whether by way of agreement, disagreement, or a combination of both; you are not obligated to summarize the other guy’s entire argument. But . . .

You must give your readers / auditors an accurate sense of the main purpose and line of argument of any literary criticism you use or respond to. Whatever you use you put others’ ideas to in your own work, you must be honest and accurate in your representation of others’ ideas.