

How to Read Critically

As a large part of university life students are required to read and interpret various texts. In order to get the most out of these texts you must be able to read **critically**. This involves being able to uncover word meanings as well as being able to differentiate among main ideas, major details and minor details. This helps you to better understand what you are reading and then to interpret what you have read.

Distinguishing main ideas from details

The topic sentence expresses the main idea of the paragraph. It lets you know in a general sense what the writer wants to say about the topic and it sums up all or most of the remaining sentences.

The sentence with the main idea always mentions the topic which explains why it is referred to as the [topic sentence](#). The rest of the paragraph then consists of [details](#) that provide more information in order to make the idea clearer.

Details

Not all details are of equal importance. Some lend direct support to the main idea and are called [major details](#). Others are called [minor details](#) – these lend direct support to the major details but only indirect support to the main idea.

In other words, major details explain main ideas more specifically, and minor details explain the major details more specifically.

When the main idea is stated, it can be found anywhere in a paragraph – at the beginning, at the end or somewhere in between. Some paragraphs have the main idea expressed in more than one sentence.

Certain phrases such as “in short,” “in brief,” “in summary,” “in fact,” “clearly,” “thus,” and “as these examples show...” are sometimes used to introduce the main idea.

Simple lists of sentences that begin with words such as “first,” “second, third,” and finally” are often major details.

Unstated main ideas

Some paragraphs consist of just details with no topic sentence or stated main idea. However, that does not mean that there is no overall message on the topic. It is simply unstated. The details can point you in the direction of the message which you can then put it into your own words.

Every paragraph has a topic or subject and an overall message about the topic that is expressed as the main idea. When there is no stated main idea, consider carefully what most or all of the major details in a paragraph have in common. This should help you figure out what is the unstated main idea.

Patterns of organization

Patterns help by adding meaning to given situations.

Writers often help readers recognize important details by arranging them in a certain way. These arrangements of details are called **pattern of organization**. There are four major patterns of organization:

- (a) simple listing of facts
- (b) time sequence
- (c) comparison/contrast
- (d) cause and effect

(a) Simple listing of facts

This pattern involves a list of details that could include the causes, characteristics, examples, or types of something.

Writers often use transition words to help you recognize this pattern:

also	another	finally	following	in addition
last	list	many	factors	
numerals	(first, second, etc.,)			

The main idea can also give you information about what is being listed.

(b) Time Sequence

This pattern involves details placed in the order in which they occur in time. Transition words used with this type include:

after	before	beginning	dates	final	last	next	prior	once
repeat	steps							

Historical materials with dates of events and times of day are the most obvious place to find this pattern.

This pattern can also include the steps in a process, directions, or anything else that is accomplished in a definite time order.

(c) Comparison/contrast

This pattern organizes details that deal with the similarities and differences between persons, events, ideas or things. Transition words used with comparison and contrast include:

alike	between	common	compare	contrast	debate
differences		likeness	like	on the other hand	
disagree		unlike	whereas		

The main idea tells you exactly what is being compared or contrasted.

(d) Cause and Effect

This pattern organizes details that present causes or reasons along with their effects or results. In other words, it explains why something has happened.

This pattern uses the following transition words:

affects	because	brings out	consequences	
contributed		create	effects	leads to
reaction /reason		result	therefore	whereas

Sometimes the causes are stated first. This pattern may present effects first followed by causes or it may present the causes first.

The skills used to find these things in paragraphs can be applied to selections or passages with several paragraphs such as articles, essays, textbook selections and chapters.

Summarizing and Paragraphing

When you truly understand the reading material, you are able to first interpret it and then to condense or shorten it, and finally to put it into your own words. When you condense or shorten information you are **summarizing** the main points by using many of the writer's own terms.

Putting the information into your own words is called **paraphrasing**. Paraphrasing involves rewording or substituting your own words – not your opinions – for the author's except for certain key terms which are essential to the meaning.

To summarize you must be able to pick out the most important information usually found in the main ideas, major details and context definitions.

Underlining and **highlighting** with a marker are techniques that help you focus better by getting you more actively involved in your reading, while enabling you to separate the material that you need for your summary.

Underlining and highlighting serve several purposes.

First, the physical act forces you to be more attentive, and helps to boost your level of concentration; you are less likely to daydream or fall asleep.

Secondly, in determining what you should underline or highlight, you first must evaluate carefully what you are reading, resulting in better comprehension.

Thirdly, because underlining and highlighting involve increased concentration, thought and evaluation, they help you to better remember what you have read.

When underlining and highlighting, concentrate only on the information you find in main ideas, major details and context definitions. Use patterns of organization and context clues to help you locate them.

Instead of passively accepting the ideas an author presents, a critical reader attempts to engage in a dialogue with the text, posing and working out answers to questions concerning the material's purpose, audience, language and content.

Typical questions you should ask of a reading include:

- Who is the author of this piece?
- What is his/her stand on the issue he/she is addressing?
- What are his/her interests, qualifications, possible biases?
- What was his/her intent when writing the piece?
- Who is the intended audience?
- How does the author support his/her contentions?
- What language has he/she used to convey his/her ideas on this topic to this audience for this purpose?
- Based on my knowledge and experience, what do I think about his/her ideas, intent, language, and support?
- How does the author achieve his/her goal?