

Critically Reading Scholarly Sources

Reading critically involves identifying and analyzing arguments, understanding context, evaluating evidence, assessing methodology, determining strengths and weaknesses, and recognizing problematic assumptions or assertions. **Reading a source critically does not necessarily mean that you must *criticize* the source--your evaluation does not have to be negative.** It is quite possible to find that an article is well-written, the methodology appropriate, and the conclusions supported by the evidence. But this needs to be determined by a careful evaluation of the source, it should not be assumed.

As you read, consider the following questions. Keep in mind that because there are many different types of sources, not all questions will be appropriate for every source.

1. Background & Context

- What type of source is it?
- Who wrote the source?
- What are the author's credentials?
- Who is the intended audience?
- Does the author provide any context for the source?

2. Argument & Purpose

- What is the research question?
- What is the author's thesis or main argument?
- Is the argument clearly stated, or only implied?
- What were the goals or purpose of the source?
- How is this source different from other sources on the same topic?

3. Evidence

- What type(s) of evidence does the author provide to support her conclusions?
 - Personal experience?
 - Observations?
 - Primary documents?
 - Research study?
- Does the evidence actually support the author's conclusions?

4. Methodology

- What research method was used? How and where was the research conducted?
- Was the research qualitative or quantitative?
- Who were the subjects? How were they selected? What was the sample size?
- What were the variables?
- Was the research method appropriate to achieve the aims of the study?

5. Results/Findings

- Were the results statistically significant?
- Do the results support the author's thesis and/or conclusions?
- Is the author interpreting the results correctly and without bias?
- Did the author overlook other possible reasons for their findings?

6. Relevance

- Does the source make a valuable contribution to the literature on this topic?
 - Does the source help in some way to fill in a knowledge gap related to this topic?
- Note: A study with negative results can still make a valuable contribution—proving that something doesn't work can be as valuable as proving that it does.