

READING CRITICALLY

HOW TO READ
CRITICALLY WHEN
PLANNING AN ESSAY



To avoid feeling swamped by reading - and feeling overwhelmed by too much information - it can help to build an argument as you go –

THE INTERACTION BETWEEN READING AND THINKING IS IMPORTANT.
BY THINKING CRITICALLY AND TARGETING YOUR READING YOU WILL BE
ABLE TO BUILD AN ARGUMENT AS YOU GO

Build your argument by targeting your reading to gather evidence that will help you answer the brief for the written assignment you have been given

- Look carefully at the essay title or assignment brief and underline key words
- Look for the topic/subject
- Look for the focus/context
- Look for the form/ word-count

Begin by reading something general to give you an overview of the subject.

- Use your lecture notes
- Notice important themes relevant to your topic
- Make some clear, helpful notes as you go along
- Write a rough, basic answer in a couple of sentences as a starting point – you can change this later

Make a list of more things to find out about in order to test whether or not this rough or ‘draft’ answer or hypothesis is a good one. Ask yourself

- What evidence do I need to support or disprove this answer?
- What theories fit this view or do not fit?
- Are there any major artists/designers/ theorists with relevant things to say?

Now look for more specific material to read that will help you answer your questions about your rough hypothesis. Evaluate the usefulness of this material– is it out of date or current, for example? Compare texts with each other. Do the authors agree or disagree? Make good, clear and helpful notes about the material that you read. Do you now need to change your hypothesis, or keep it the same? Why? Are there any new issues you need to address?



- Data produced during experimentation?
- Experiences recorded in a reflective journal or portfolio?
- A report about the context in which information was gathered?
- Interview material?
- Surveys and questionnaires?
- The material trace of creative experimentation?
- An analysis of themes in a novel?
- **Everything that you read?**



DEFINING EVIDENCE

However broad our view of what constitutes ‘evidence’ is, evidence by itself is inert and cannot make any contribution to academic debate. It needs to be evaluated, considered in context, presented clearly and then interpreted (not just described)

Even in a strictly scientific context, questions can still be asked about the motivation for conducting the inquiry in the first place and the choice of particular methods

So rather than accepting everything you read as ‘fact’, think about it as the point of view of the author.

When you read critically you challenge this point of view by paying attention to any prejudices, limitations, weaknesses, and how relevant it is to your topic— not to find fault but to assess how useful their point of view is to your own argument

Reading critically is the basis for writing well at university