Seven Steps to Critical Reading

1. Pre-read
Before you jump into the text, take a moment to familiarize yourself with its length, format, and structure. Notice the title, headings, or any subheadings present that will give you an indication of the text’s layout. If present, read author notes and/or historical context for the text. Note the publication date.

2. Read (and then Re-read!)
Once you have an idea of the text’s structure, read through the text in its entirety. Immediately follow with a second reading to reinforce the text’s purpose and organization.

3. Annotate
Now it’s time to write! As you read through the text again, use a colored pen or highlighter to mark significant passages. Look for particularly powerful statements or words, or repetition of certain ideas. Using the margins, summarize each paragraph’s main idea in a short phrase or one or two sentences. Note connections between passages or examples, other texts you’ve read, or experiences that contradict or validate the text’s claims.

4. Question
As you annotate, be sure to note your questions as well. Leave them in the margins to return to at a later date or to bring up in class discussion. If your question is answered later in the text, write the answer or information beneath the original question; also indicate the page and/or paragraph number where you found the information.

5. Outline
Once you’ve completed your annotations, use the brief summary of each paragraph to construct an outline of the text. This will be helpful as a roadmap should you need to return to the text for an exam or for an essay or paper.

6. Review and Summarize
Using your notes and annotations, write a one-paragraph summary of the text. What is its purpose? What are its main arguments and points of support? What conclusions does it draw?

7. Reflect
Finally, spend 2-3 minutes responding to these prompts. (E.M. Forster wrote, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” These two prompts will help you understand what you now know from the text, and what questions you still need answered.)

After reading this text, I now understand…
After reading this text, I still need clarification on…

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