

How to be a critical reader



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Introduction

In this course you will focus on how to be a critical reader. Reading critically is an essential skill at university. It means being aware of your own purposes and opinions as you read and being able to recognise the author's purposes and opinions in their writing.

The texts used in this course all present arguments in different ways. Argument texts are common across disciplines. For example, science texts will provide evidence to support theories, texts in social sciences will debate the theoretical aspects of a range of topics. Whether you are studying humanities, social sciences, science or technology, you will need to judge whether a text is an appropriate and reliable source. Some texts will be more factual than others and some will attempt to influence your opinions.

The purpose of the questions you ask in this course will be to evaluate what you are reading. As you do the activities you will develop your ability to read critically by asking questions about:

- the source of the text and the status of the author
- which subject area the text is from and your own knowledge and opinions on the subject
- the author's beliefs and attitudes and how these are expressed in the text
- what the text says and does, and how
- what the author's purpose is in writing
- the use of evidence to support claims and the balance of fact and opinion.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course L185 [English for academic purposes online](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- consider the importance of examining attitudes to texts
- understand the organisation of argument texts
- distinguish between facts and opinions in texts
- examine hedging as a technique used by writers to express opinions and avoid making unsupported generalisations
- consider the importance of reliable evidence to support claims.

1 What is critical reading?

The following activities will introduce you to critical reading as you start to apply the questioning approach outlined in the Introduction.

1.1 Thinking about your opinions

In the first activity you are going to read two short extracts and examine your opinions on the subject of the texts.

Activity 1

Task 1

Read Extracts 1 and 2 and consider to what extent you agree or disagree with the view of the authors.

Extract 1

I have been teaching full time for over thirty years. During that span of time, one sees many, many students, and it amazes me how different they have been over time, and the inequality continues to grow. Compared with the students in the 1970s, today's students are uneducated and unfit for a college education.

(Adapted from www.joannejacobs.com/2009/02/unfit-for-a-college-education/#comments)

Extract 2

Students today do not write merely to obtain good grades. They write to shake the world. Moreover, they are writing more than any previous generation, ever, in history. Popular beliefs that Google is making us stupid and Facebook is frying our brains are totally inaccurate. New technologies are leading to the development of new ways of being literate.

(www.chronicle.com/blogPost/Bad-Student-Writing-Not-So/7853/)

Task 2

Write down your ideas on the following questions.

- What are your thoughts or feelings about Extracts 1 and 2?
- Do you believe, for example, that 'Facebook is frying our brains'?
- Do you think that technology has helped you to read and write in new ways from earlier generations?
- What would you like to say to either writer?

Comment

There are no correct answers here. Some people have very strong opinions about this subject. Do you? Having opinions can influence the way you read. If you disagree with a writer you might find you are tempted to reject what they say without following their argument. On the other hand, if you have strong opinions in favour of what a writer says, you might accept what you read as the truth. For these reasons it is important to be aware of your own opinions as you read, and to consider whether the writer's opinions are supported by evidence.

1.2 Two meanings of 'critical'

In the next activity you will read two responses to Extract 1 from an online forum and will think about what being 'critical' means.

Activity 2

Task 1.1

Before you read, answer the following questions.

What do you think the expression 'to make sweeping generalisations' means?

Provide your answer...

Answer

The expression 'to make sweeping generalisations' means to make general statements about a whole group of things or people without sufficient evidence.

Task 1.2

Read the statements below. Which ones do you think are 'sweeping generalisations'?

- (i) All women like fashion.
- (ii) Drinking too much wine can be bad for your health.
- (iii) Studying abroad can be quite challenging.
- (iv) Children like sweets.

Answer

The sweeping generalisations are: (i) *All women like fashion* and (iv) *Children like sweets*.

At university it is considered that writers should not make sweeping generalisations, but should express their opinions more cautiously. This is what happens in the statements *Drinking too much wine can be bad for your health* and *Studying abroad can be quite challenging*. Note that the words 'can' and 'quite' make these statements more cautious.

Task 2

Read the forum entries in Text 1 and Text 2, which are responses to Extract 1. Then answer the questions underneath.

Text 1

Mark: Sweeping generalisations about a whole generation are frighteningly ignorant, especially from an educator.

Text 2

Sonia: I can see some truth in this. I interview job applicants now and then. My experience is that core skills (reading, writing, math) are in decline. I had to explain the difference between mean and median to a college graduate the other day. I wouldn't generalise my experience to a whole generation, but one certainly does see more and more articles like this one.

(Adapted from www.joannejacobs.com/2009/02/unfit-for-a-college-education/#comments)

How would you describe the attitude of the writer of Text 1 from these options?

1. angry
2. reasonable
3. very sympathetic to the author

What gives you this impression? Note any words or phrases from the text which led you to your answer.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Strong criticisms like *sweeping generalisations* and *frighteningly ignorant* indicate that Mark is angry about Extract 1.

How would you describe the attitude of the writer of Text 2 from these options?

1. angry
2. reasonable
3. very sympathetic to the author

What gives you this impression? Note any words or phrases from the text which led you to your answer.

Provide your answer...

.....

Answer

Phrases like *My experience is that...* and *I wouldn't generalise my experience to a whole generation, but...* typify a reasonable response. They show that, while drawing on her opinion to support the author of Extract 1, Sonia can also see that he is making a sweeping generalisation.

.....

Comment

Both writers have responded in a 'critical' way to what Jon (the writer of Extract 1) says but they are critical in two different ways: the first writer (Mark) makes negative **criticisms** of Jon whereas the second writer (Sonia) is much more balanced in her opinion and assesses Jon's views in a reasonable way. Critical reading is about doing what Sonia does. It is about judging what you read in a balanced, reasoned way based on your analysis of a text.

1.3 Thinking about what a text is saying and doing

When you read critically it is important to ask yourself first what the text is saying and then what it is doing: for example, how it develops an argument. This is called the **function of a text**. A part of a text can also have a function. Understanding what a text and its parts are doing – their functions – can help you to recognise what the writer's purpose is. You are now going to read the text from which Extract 1 was taken and think about what it is saying and doing.

Activity 3

Task 1

Read Text 3, 'The accounting cycle: students then and now' (below), reasonably closely to get an idea of what it is about. As the writer is talking about accountancy students, there is some specialised vocabulary. Try to decide whether unknown words are important and, if possible, use other words in the text to try to understand the ones you are not sure about. Only use a dictionary if that doesn't work. You might want to record useful words.

The accounting cycle: students then and now

January 2009 – Compared with the students in the 1970s, today's accounting students are uneducated and unfit for a college education.

[1] I have been teaching full time for over thirty years. During that span of time, one sees many, many students, and it amazes me how different they have been over time, and the inequality continues to grow. Compared with the students in the 1970s, today's students are uneducated and unfit for a college education.

[2] Before proceeding, let me state two premises. First, I do not think there is any significant difference between the two groups in terms of native, raw intelligence. Instead, the distinction between yesterday's and today's students when they first set foot on college campuses rests in their educational backgrounds, analytical thinking, reading abilities, willingness to work, and their attitudes concerning the educational process. In short, they differ in terms of their readiness for college. Second, I am focusing on the average student who majors in accounting. Both groups arise from a distribution of students. The less able of yesteryear's population had some weak students, and the more able of the present-day population has some very strong students; however, when one focuses on the means of these two groups, he or she finds a huge gap.

[3] Thirty years ago I required my Intermediate Accounting students to derive the future and present value formulas, including the present value of a perpetuity, which requires a knowledge of limits. I gave up on that over a decade ago when I observed that the average student had no idea what I was talking about. Worse, they didn't care.

[4] Today's students cannot read at what used to be a tenth-grade level. I learned this dramatically when I wrote a couple of textbooks in the 1990s. Editors at both publishing houses insisted that I rewrite my materials so today's student could read it. I was forbidden to employ large or 'fancy' words and had to simplify the grammar. Today's students cannot read critically. If I really want them to perceive anything, I have to tell them. Of course, that doesn't work in the long run because I won't be there in the future to help them read essays.

[5] Worst of all is attitude. Yesterday's student was willing to work; today's student is not. Past students thought of education as a privilege; current students view it as an entitlement. Earlier students took responsibility for their mistakes; contemporary students call mom and dad, who in turn call their attorneys. Previously, it was honorable to obtain a B and at least acceptable to receive a C, especially with the harder classes. Nowadays, students want at least a B for signing up for class and an A with any effort expended on the course, regardless of knowledge displayed in the classroom.

Ketz, J.E. (2009) 'The accounting cycle: students then and now', [www.joannejacobs.com/2009/02/unfit-for-a-collegeeducation/# comments](http://www.joannejacobs.com/2009/02/unfit-for-a-collegeeducation/#comments)

The following paragraph summaries are in the wrong order. Drag and drop them into the correct order to form a summary of Text 3.

Students today don't understand accounting as well as they did 10 years ago and don't care.

Students today think they are entitled to education and to get good marks without making an effort.

Students today can't read well or read critically and have to be told what they are meant to understand.

Students today are uneducated and unsuitable for higher education.

The average student today is less able for several reasons which have nothing to do with intelligence.

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Paragraph 3

Paragraph 5

Paragraph 4

Paragraph 1

Paragraph 2

Task 2

Identify the main function of each of the paragraphs of Text 3. To do this, you will need to follow the author's argument as you read the text. Remember that the function of a particular paragraph may depend on the function of the paragraphs before or after it. Three paragraphs in Text 3 have the same function.

Hint: A claim is a statement which can be true or false and which shows the opinion of the author. To 'qualify' a claim means to be more specific about what you mean and what you don't mean.

Paragraph 1

I have been teaching full time for over thirty years. During that span of time, one sees many, many students, and it amazes me how different they have been over time, and the inequality continues to grow. Compared with the students in the 1970s, today's students are uneducated and unfit for a college education.

- States a claim
- Gives supporting evidence
- Qualifies the claim

Paragraph 2

Before proceeding, let me state two premises. First, I do not think there is any significant difference between the two groups in terms of native, raw intelligence. Instead, the distinction between yesterday's and today's students when they first set foot on college campuses rests in their educational backgrounds, analytical thinking, reading abilities, willingness to work, and their attitudes concerning the educational process. In short, they differ in terms of their readiness for college. Second, I am focusing on the average student who majors in accounting. Both

groups arise from a distribution of students. The less able of yesteryear's population had some weak students, and the more able of the present-day population has some very strong students; however, when one focuses on the means of these two groups, he or she finds a huge gap.

- States a claim
- Gives supporting evidence
- Qualifies the claim

Paragraph 3

Thirty years ago I required my Intermediate Accounting students to derive the future and present value formulas, including the present value of a perpetuity, which requires a knowledge of limits. I gave up on that over a decade ago when I observed that the average student had no idea what I was talking about. Worse, they didn't care.

- States a claim
- Gives supporting evidence
- Qualifies the claim

Paragraph 4

Today's students cannot read at what used to be a tenth-grade level. I learned this dramatically when I wrote a couple of textbooks in the 1990s. Editors at both publishing houses insisted that I rewrite my materials so today's students could read it. I was forbidden to employ large or 'fancy' words and had to simplify the grammar. Today's students cannot read critically. If I really want them to perceive anything, I have to tell them. Of course, that doesn't work in the long run because I won't be there in the future to help them read essays.

- States a claim
- Gives supporting evidence
- Qualifies the claim

Paragraph 5

Worst of all is attitude. Yesterday's student was willing to work; today's student is not. Past students thought of education as a privilege; current students view it as an entitlement. Earlier students took responsibility for their mistakes; contemporary students call mom and dad, who in turn call their attorneys. Previously, it was honorable to obtain a B and at least acceptable to receive a C, especially with the harder classes. Nowadays, students want at least a B for signing up for class and an A with any effort expended on the course, regardless of knowledge displayed in the classroom.

- States a claim
- Gives supporting evidence
- Qualifies the claim

.....

Answer

Did you notice that the author made a claim and then provided supporting evidence? In academic texts it is considered important that writers support their claims with evidence, but it is also considered important that they present balanced arguments by looking at alternative views. As you can see, the author of Text 3 does not do this.

.....

Comment

Once you know what a text is saying and doing, the next question to ask is how is it doing this? This involves looking more closely at the language and style of the text and what sort of evidence is used to support any claims.

1.4 Facts and opinions

1.4.1 Fact or opinion? (1)



(a)



(b)

Fact or opinion? (a) 'Water boils at 100 degrees centigrade'; (b) 'Overweight people are lazy'.

Some of the texts you read at university will be factual, others will be more opinion-based and some will be a mixture of facts and opinions. An important aspect of critical reading is to be able to distinguish between facts and opinions because opinions are not reliable unless supported by references to other writers, research or evidence.

A **fact** is something that everyone knows is true – there is no argument. On the other hand, an **opinion** is a viewpoint that other people might not share; they might argue about it.

The next activity helps you to discriminate between facts and opinions in Text 3.

Activity 4 Part 1

Task 1

Read the following statements. Which are facts and which are opinions? Choose Fact or Opinion for each statement.

1. Water boils at 100 °C.

- Fact
 - Opinion
-

2. Overweight people are lazy.

- Fact
 - Opinion
-

3. The Earth is a sphere.

- Fact
 - Opinion
-

4. It snows a lot in Canada in the winter.

- Fact
 - Opinion
-

5. A vegan diet will damage your health.

- Fact
- Opinion

1.4.2 Fact or opinion? (2)

Activity 4 Part 2

Task 2

Read just the sections of Text 3 that are in bold type (below). Decide whether they express facts or opinions and choose Fact or Opinion for each section. What helped you to decide? Give the reason for your choice in the boxes below.

The accounting cycle: students then and now

January 2009 – Compared with the students in the 1970s, today's accounting students are uneducated and unfit for a college education.

[1] **I have been teaching full time for over thirty years.** During that span of time, one sees many, many students, and it amazes me how different they have been over time, and the inequality continues to grow. [2]

Compared with the students in the 1970s, today's students are uneducated and unfit for a college education.

Before proceeding, let me state two premises. [3] **First, I do not think there is any significant difference between the two groups in terms of native, raw intelligence.** Instead, the distinction between yesterday's and today's students when they first set foot on college campuses rests in their educational backgrounds, analytical thinking, reading abilities, willingness to work, and their attitudes concerning the educational process. In short, they differ in terms of their readiness for college. Second, I am focusing on the average student who majors in accounting. Both groups arise from a distribution of students. The less able of yesteryear's population had some weak students, and the more able of the present-day population has some very strong students; however, when one focuses on the means of these two groups, he or she finds a huge gap.

[4] **Thirty years ago I required my Intermediate Accounting students to derive the future and present value formulas, including the present value of a perpetuity, which requires a knowledge of limits.** I gave up on that over a decade ago when I observed that the average student had no idea what I was talking about. Worse, they didn't care.

Today's students cannot read at what used to be a tenth-grade level. I learned this dramatically when I wrote a couple of textbooks in the 1990s. [5] **Editors at both publishing houses insisted that I rewrite my materials so today's student could read it.** I was forbidden to employ large or 'fancy' words and had to simplify the grammar. Today's students cannot read critically. If I really want them to perceive anything, I have to tell them. Of course, that doesn't work in the long run because I won't be there in the future to help them read essays.

Worst of all is attitude. [6] **Yesterday's student was willing to work; today's student is not. Past students thought of education as a privilege; current students view it as an entitlement.** Earlier students took responsibility for their mistakes; contemporary students call mom and dad, who in turn call their attorneys. Previously, it was honorable to obtain a B and at least acceptable to receive a C, especially with the harder classes. [7] **Nowadays, students want at least a B for signing up for class and an A with any effort expended on the course, regardless of knowledge displayed in the classroom.**

Ketz, J.E. (2009) 'The accounting cycle: students then and now', www.joannejacobs.com/2009/02/unfit-for-a-collegeeducation/# comments

Question 1a

Section 1

- Fact
- Opinion

Question 1b

Reason

Provide your answer...

Answer

Details about the author's life.

Question 2a

Section 2

- Fact
 - Opinion
-

Question 2b

Reason

Provide your answer...

Answer

Broad generalisation, which won't apply to all students.

Question 3a

Section 3

- Fact
 - Opinion
-

Question 3b

Reason

Provide your answer...

Answer

The author says 'I do not think', which indicates he is about to give an opinion.

Question 4a

Section 4

- Fact
- Opinion

Question 4b

Reason

Provide your answer...

Answer

Details of the author's past history, therefore fact.

Question 5a

Section 5

- Fact
- Opinion

Question 5b

Reason

Provide your answer...

Answer

Details of the author's past history, therefore fact.

Question 6a

Section 6

- Fact
- Opinion

Question 6b

Reason

Provide your answer...

Answer

Broad generalisation, which won't apply to all students.

Question 7a

Section 7

- Fact
- Opinion

Question 7b

Reason

Provide your answer...

Answer

Broad generalisation, which won't apply to all students.

Comment

Did you find it difficult to work out what was fact and what was opinion in Text 3? This may be because the author makes several sweeping generalisations and presents opinions as fact. As you saw in Activity 2, authors of academic texts usually express their opinions with caution. This is called 'hedging'. In the next section you will see how hedging works.

1.5 Hedging

The use of **hedging** helps writers to avoid expressing opinions as facts and to speculate or express caution in the statements they make. It also signals to the reader that the writer is expressing an opinion. When writers 'hedge', they use the following kinds of words and any others which create distance between the writer and the opinion and show that the writer knows there may be people who have other opinions:

- may, could, can, seem, appear
- probably, possibly, clearly, undoubtedly
- likely, probable, possible
- likelihood, possibility, probability
- quite, sometimes.

For example: 'It is **likely/probable/possible** that we will all become literate in new ways with advances in technology.'

The next activity helps you to think about how the use of hedging might change the meaning of sentences in Text 3.

Activity 5**Question 1**

Read the following three pairs of sentences. The first sentence in each pair comes directly from Text 3. The second sentence is the same as the first except that it contains hedging. In each case, copy and paste the hedge word(s) into the box and make a note about how hedging changes the meaning of the original sentence.

1. Today's students cannot read critically.
2. It seems that today's students cannot read critically.

Provide your answer...

Answer

The hedge words are highlighted in bold below.

1. Today's students cannot read critically.
2. **It seems that** today's students cannot read critically.

Question 2

1. Earlier students took responsibility for their mistakes.
2. Earlier students appear to have taken responsibility for their mistakes.

Provide your answer...

Answer

The hedge words are highlighted in bold below.

1. Earlier students took responsibility for their mistakes.
2. Earlier students **appear to** have taken responsibility for their mistakes.

Question 3

1. Past students thought of education as a privilege; current students view it as an entitlement.
2. Past students probably thought of education as a privilege; current students undoubtedly view it as an entitlement.

Provide your answer...

Answer

The hedge words are highlighted in bold below.

1. Past students thought of education as a privilege; current students view it as an entitlement.
2. Past students **probably** thought of education as a privilege; current students **undoubtedly** view it as an entitlement.

In all cases, the hedge words make the opinion more cautious. However, hedges vary in terms of the amount of caution they express. Hedges such as *seems* and *appear to* are more cautious than *probably*. Yet again, *probably* is more cautious than *undoubtedly*. Words such as *undoubtedly* signal to the reader that the writer is quite sure of their opinion – but it is still opinion and not fact.

Comment

Hedging is an acceptable way for academic writers to express opinions. Through the language of hedging, writers (a) signal to the reader that they are expressing opinions; (b) avoid sweeping generalisations by expressing caution to varying degrees; and (c) recognise other people's opinions.

1.6 Supporting opinions through evidence and examples

In order to have academic credibility, opinions need to be supported by reliable evidence in academic texts. 'Reliable' means the kind of evidence that most readers would accept as valid. The aim of the next activity is to identify how opinions are supported by evidence in the text.

Activity 6

Task 1

In Text 3, the author provides evidence to support examples of his central claim that today's students are uneducated and unfit for a college education. Read Text 3 again and drag the supporting evidence alongside the matching examples listed below.

[View document](#)

Editors requesting simplification of textbooks

Students calling parents for support

The author needing to explain things he wants students to perceive

Students wanting an A for any effort they make on a course

Students' inability to derive future and present value formulas

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Inability to read

Inability to take responsibility for mistakes

Inability to read critically

Poor attitude to work

Inability to understand complicated ideas

Task 2

Think about how well the author supports his claim with examples and supporting details.

Task 3

Now write down your answers to the following questions.

- Do you still agree or disagree with the author's views to the same extent as in Activity 1?
- The author supports his opinions or claims by giving examples. Do you find this supporting detail helps to convince you about his point of view?

Answer

- There is no correct answer to this question.
- All of the supporting detail is 'anecdotal' in that the author draws on examples from his own experiences. This type of supporting detail is not objective. It would not be considered generally valid because the author has selected from his experience. You need to read it with caution.

Comment

As a critical reader, you will assess whether or not the supporting evidence a writer uses is valid. The next section looks at how writers can use facts or opinions from other sources to support an argument.

1.7 Using evidence from other sources

Academic writers commonly use opinions and facts from other sources to support their arguments. In the next activity you practise identifying how references to other sources can signal whether a writer is drawing on fact or opinion as support.

Activity 7

Task 1

Examine the nine statements below. Each refers to one or more researchers or writers, and some of the statements give facts, while others give opinions.

For each statement, choose one of the options: 'Fact' or 'Opinion'. Then type the word in the box below which signals that the writer is putting forward either a fact or an opinion to support their argument.

Question 1

Chomsky proposed that language is rule-based.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Chomsky **proposed** that language is rule-based.

- Fact
- Opinion

Question 2

Thorndike, Watson and, later, Skinner, Eysenck and others argued that psychology should be scientific in its approach.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Thorndike, Watson and, later, Skinner, Eysenck and others **argued** that psychology should be scientific in its approach.

- Fact
- Opinion

Question 3

Greer et al. developed a form of computational model called a 'connectionist network'.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Greer et al. **developed** a form of computational model called a connectionist network'.

- Fact
- Opinion

Question 4

Claude Shannon in 1938 showed how core aspects of reasoning could be implemented in simple electrical circuits.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Claude Shannon in 1938 **showed** how core aspects of reasoning could be implemented in simple electrical circuits.

- Fact
 - Opinion
-

Question 5

Brentano believed that mental states comprise mental acts and mental contents.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Brentano **believed** that mental states comprise mental acts and mental contents.

- Fact
 - Opinion
-

Question 6

However, research by Mumford and Power (2003) has revealed a strong sense of community spirit and strong social networks in two deprived areas of London, both of which have experienced considerable population change.

Provide your answer...

Answer

However, research by Mumford and Power (2003) has **revealed** a strong sense of community spirit and strong social networks in two deprived areas of London, both of which have experienced considerable population change.

- Fact
 - Opinion
-

Question 7

Raymond Gibbs has carried out several experiments designed to tap into people's metaphorical understanding of words and phrases.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Raymond Gibbs has **carried out** several experiments designed to tap into people's metaphorical understanding of words and phrases.

- Fact
- Opinion

Question 8

Milgate (1990) uses Conversation Analysis to explore interaction in the language classroom.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Milgate (1990) **uses** Conversation Analysis to explore interaction in the language classroom.

- Fact
- Opinion

Question 9

Hurst (2006) suggests that mind maps are a useful way of representing grammatical structures visually.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Hurst (2006) **suggests** that mind maps are a useful way of representing grammatical structures visually.

- Fact
- Opinion

Comment

When writers use evidence to support their opinions or claims, this evidence needs to be based on the research or opinions of other writers.

1.8 Style and language

The aim of the next activity is to look more specifically at the style and language of Text 3, 'The accounting cycle: students then and now'.

Activity 8**Task 1**

Read Text 3 again and say whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the text. Give examples to support your view or make comments.

[View document](#)

Question 1a

It is personal.

- Agree
- Disagree

Question 1b

Example or comments

Provide your answer...

Answer

It uses 'I' and personal views and opinions all the way through.

Question 2a

It has some examples of general academic language.

- Agree
- Disagree

Question 2b

Example or comments

Provide your answer...

Answer

It uses general formal words such as *education process, distribution of students.*

Question 3a

It has lots of opinions which express the views of the author.

- Agree
- Disagree

Question 3b

Example or comments

Provide your answer...

Answer

Today's students are uneducated. Today's students cannot read critically.

Question 4a

It contains language which shows the attitude of the author.

- Agree
- Disagree

Question 4b

Example or comments

Provide your answer...

Answer

Worst of all is attitude.

Question 5a

It contains paragraphs that are well organised around a central idea.

- Agree
- Disagree

Question 5b

Example or comments

Provide your answer...

Answer

All paragraphs are logical and one paragraph leads logically to the next.

Comment

Did you agree with the statements? The text is well organised and contains general academic language, but it does not conform to academic convention in the ways you have already seen.

1.9 Context

1.9.1 Author and type of text (1)

In the next activity you use your previous analysis of Text 3 to place the text in context according to its author and what type of text it is.

[View document](#)

Activity 9 Part 1

Task 1

Answer the questions below. Give reasons for your answers.

Question 1a

Who is the author?

Provide your answer...

Answer

A university teacher.

Question 1b

Reasons:

Provide your answer...

Answer

There are references to his teaching experience in higher education.

Question 2a

What is his purpose in writing?

Provide your answer...

Answer

To criticise the students of today.

Question 2b

Reasons:

Provide your answer...

Answer

All of his comments are negative.

Question 3a

What type of text is it?

Provide your answer...

.....
Answer

An article based on opinion.

Question 3b

Reasons:

Provide your answer...

.....
Answer

It is well organised and has a clear argument.

Question 4a

Where would you find this text?

Provide your answer...

.....
Answer

In a printed or online newspaper, or on an online education and training website.

Question 4b

Reasons:

Provide your answer...

Answer

It is about education and is written by an academic, but it is an opinion piece so would not be published in an academic journal.

Question 5a

How reliable do you think the information in this text is?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Not very reliable.

Question 5b

Reasons:

Provide your answer...

.....
Answer

It is opinion-based.

1.9.2 Author and type of text (2)

Activity 9 Part 2

Task 2

How would you describe the author's attitude to his students? Choose one answer from the list below.

- (a) sad
 - (b) amused
 - (c) critical
-

Answer

The author is clearly (c) critical.

Task 3

At the end of the original text there is a statement which reads:

This essay reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the opinion of The Pennsylvania State University.

Why do you think this statement was written? Write some ideas in the box below.

Provide your answer...

.....

Answer

The writer's views are controversial and could upset people. A university wanting to attract students would distance itself from such reactionary views.

.....

Comment

By answering many of the questions in this session you have probably been able to develop a clear understanding of Text 3 and to make decisions about its reliability and appropriateness.

2 Being a critical reader

In this section you will practise reading two texts in a critical way. The texts covered are from different disciplines but are similar in the subject they discuss.



(a)



(b)

Reading critically

2.1 Introducing the two texts

In the next activity you will prepare to read two texts on the subjects of human nature and evolution by thinking about your own views and attitudes.

Activity 10

Task: Think about the following questions and write down your ideas about them.

1. Which things are good and bad about human beings?
2. What do you think causes human beings to do bad things? For example, do you think people are naturally programmed to do bad things because they are human or do you think that people turn bad because of their family backgrounds or the influences of the societies in which we live?
3. Do you feel positive or negative about the future of the human race? Why? What do you think are the biggest challenges that humans face in the 21st century?

Comment

Thinking about your own views and attitudes is an important aspect of being a critical reader as you need to be aware of them when you read and engage with texts.

2.2 Preparing to read the two texts

The two texts you are going to read contain some theories and ideas that you might want to understand more about before you read them.

Activity 11

Task 1

The first text is on the subject of anthropathology. This is a new, made-up word from two words originating from Greek: *anthro*, meaning 'to do with human beings', and *pathology*, meaning 'to do with sickness or disease'. What do you think the word *anthropathology* means? Type your answer in the text box.

Provide your answer...

Answer

You probably worked out that it means 'the sickness of human beings'. When you read the first text you will understand more about this.

Task 2

The texts contain the following words and ideas:

- genes
- survival instinct
- natural selection
- evolution
- survival of the fittest
- creationists.

How many of them do you know about? Do an internet search to find out about the unfamiliar ones. Also do an internet search to find out more about those you already know something about.

Answer

Did you manage to do some research on the words and ideas you will find in the text? If so, you probably found a lot of information on the internet. Today, people talk about genes and evolution across many subject areas. Perhaps you have already encountered these ideas in your area of interest or from your reading.

Task 3

Below are some simple definitions of these words and ideas. Match each definition with the correct word or idea, to check your understanding.

The fittest beings survive and evolve and the weakest don't.

A strong instinct that living creatures must survive whatever the circumstances.

A process in which the characteristics of living creatures that make them more likely to survive are inherited. It was originally Charles Darwin's idea.

The process through which all living creatures develop over time from earlier versions of themselves.

People who believe that God created human beings. They do not believe in evolution.

These are part of the biology of all living creatures. They programme human beings to inherit characteristics from their parents, grandparents and ancestors.

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Survival of the fittest

Survival instinct

Natural selection

Evolution

Creationists

Genes

Comment

We hope that your research and/or your previous knowledge helped you to do this activity.

If the subject of a text is unfamiliar to you, quickly scan reading other texts on the subject before you start can give you an indication of the key ideas and is a good way of preparing to read.

2.3 What is the text 'Anthropathology' saying and doing?

In the next activity you will explore what the first text says and does.

Activity 12

Task 1

Read Text 4 twice. Use any reading strategies you think are appropriate. In the box below, record any unknown words which you think are important for the meaning of

parts of the text or the whole text. Try to understand their meaning from the context or use a dictionary if this doesn't work. Don't forget to note down important words.

Anthropathology

1. Anthropathology is the sickness of humankind and the exploration and study of that condition. It is something like universal neurosis or original sin, or simply 'the human condition'. It is evidenced in greed, deception, violence, patriarchal domination, and other aspects of our existence. Anthropathology can be witnessed at both individual and collective levels, for example in everyday personal problems and mental health problems; and in racism, international conflict and war. Anthropathology is the dysfunctional aspect of humanity's undoubted resourcefulness and impressive technological achievements.
2. For those who consider this to be an appropriate area of study, the question naturally arises as to the origins of this phenomenon. One possibility might be entropy. According to Rifkin (1985), all things, including ourselves, our institutions and the solar system itself are subject to degeneration. Another view held by Taylor (2005) is that there are specific reasons for the degeneration of human nature to be found in history. Taylor (2005) suggests that around 6000 years ago peaceful hunter gatherers were forced to evolve due to harsh living conditions. This led to human beings being alienated from nature and from their true selves.
3. Anthropathology might be regarded as inevitably pessimistic or as drawing attention to the worst facing us (and within us). The Anthropathology thesis has undeniably unpopular elements. Anthropathology challenges religious tradition but also challenges belief in individual rational autonomy – the ability of human beings to be in control of their own destiny. Many may want to play up the positive aspects of human beings and deny that we are so destructive, or wish to underline the idea that only some individuals, groups or eras are evil.
4. However, Anthropathology as a potential academic discipline (or interdisciplinary arena) raises urgent questions about climate change, religious and political conflict, resource depletion and over-population. Our collective unwillingness as human beings to address these challenges may prove our final downfall. But Anthropathology also challenges many assumptions about individual problems, for example, the view of mental health problems as caused primarily within families or by our own irrational thinking. Instead, a complex interplay of genetic forces are seen as powerful causes and reinforcers of individual problems.

Feltham, C. (2007) *What's Wrong With Us? The Anthropathology Thesis*, Chichester, Wiley

Provide your answer..

Task 2

Identify the central idea and other key ideas in each paragraph of Text 4. Make notes (as a mind map or in linear form).

.....

Answer

The notes you made might contain some or all of the following elements.

Paragraph 1

Anthropathology: Study of sickness of human beings

Examples: greed, deception, violence, patriarchal domination

- (a) Individual level: personal problems, mental health issues
- (b) Collective level: war, racism

Paragraph 2

Origins:

- (a) Entropy
- (b) 'The Fall': evolution from hunter-gatherers (6000 years ago) – divorce from true nature

Paragraph 3

Anthropathology – pessimistic view – challenges:

- religious beliefs
- belief in individual autonomy
- belief in positive aspects of human beings

Paragraph 4

Anthropathology – important academic discipline – addresses:

- Global issues – failure to address could lead to downfall of human race
- Individual issues – genetic causes

Task 3

The list below shows the organisation of ideas in Text 4 but in the wrong order. Use drag and drop to match the function of each paragraph with the paragraph number in the table.

Think about what each paragraph is **doing**.

Explains the existence of anthropathology

Presents opposing views

Argues for the importance of anthropathology

Defines anthropathology

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Paragraph 2

Paragraph 3

Paragraph 4

Paragraph 1

Task 4

Now think about the following questions and write down some ideas.

- (a) Do the ideas in the paragraphs of Text 4 link together logically? Does the text present a solid, well-supported argument?
- (b) Does the text provide convincing examples or references to other writers to support the claims it makes?
- (c) Does the text contain any sweeping generalisations?

Answer

- (a) The argument is organised logically, moving from definitions to explanations and then to arguments against and for anthropopathy. This is a common pattern in argument texts.
- (b) The text provides factual support for the claims it makes and refers to writers. However, it does not provide evidence for the statement *Many may want to play up the positive aspects of human beings and deny that we are so destructive, or wish to underline the idea that only some individuals, groups or eras are evil*. This needed supporting through examples and references.
- (c) *Our collective unwillingness as human beings to address these challenges* is rather a sweeping generalisation and could be disputed.

Task 5

Did you enjoy reading this text? Did you find the subject interesting? If yes, why? If no, why not?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Your answers to these questions will depend on your views. Maybe you agree that human beings are sick by nature or maybe you see this as a negative view and would rather read something more positive.

Comment

We hope that the work you have done in this section helped you to use appropriate reading skills and strategies to read and understand the text. You are now going to read another text on a similar subject.

2.4 What is the text 'The science of evolution' saying and doing?

In the next activity you will analyse the second text in the same way as you did the first text.

Activity 13

Task 1

Read Text 5, 'The science of evolution', twice. Use any reading strategies you think are appropriate. In the box below, record any unknown words which you think are important for the meaning of parts of the text or the whole text. Try to understand their meaning from the context or use a dictionary if this doesn't work. Don't forget to record important words.

The science of evolution

The science of evolution is fundamental to understanding how our world works. Disease-causing and disease-spreading organisms can proliferate in several, sometimes many, different species, and take opportunities to colonise new ones, including people. As a result they can spread rapidly and cause severe disease in populations that have never, or not recently, encountered them.

History and natural selection are relevant in the sphere of the mind as well as the body. We tend to think of ourselves as autonomous beings in full control of our behaviour and we do, of course, have freedom of action, but how we make choices is influenced by how our minds have evolved. For example, why are we more scared of snakes than of fatal vehicle accidents that are so much the greater danger for most of us?

Evolution by natural selection can also help us understand moral codes that were once the exclusive province of religion. A philosophy of 'survival of the fittest' sounds amoral or even immoral, but evolution is much more sophisticated than this misleading phrase implies. Humans are social animals and our individual survival depends upon successful relationships with our neighbours.

Once again, evolution history shows the profound consequences of natural selection. If evolution trespasses on realms like morality and creation that

were once the exclusive province of religion, is religious belief compatible with the science of evolution? Many people believe that it is, even though creationists (and some Darwinists) would have us believe otherwise.

And finally, what of our evolutionary future? There is little reason to doubt that humans are still evolving, perhaps faster than ever because of our burgeoning numbers, but the biggest influence on our future is undoubtedly the damage we are doing to our own environment. Life has continuously transformed our planet since photosynthesis evolved, long before humans appeared, but we are the first species to be able to understand the consequences of our actions and, potentially, to alter our fate.

The Open University (2008) S170 *Darwin and evolution*, Milton Keynes, The Open University

Provide your answer..

Task 2

Identify the central idea and other key ideas in each paragraph. Make notes.

Answer

Your notes might contain some or all of the following elements.

Paragraph 1

Importance of evolution for understanding of world: example = diseases and threat to populations

Paragraph 2

Relevance of natural selection to the mind: evolution controls our choices

Paragraph 3

Natural selection explains society: survival depends on social relationships

Paragraph 4

Evolution questions religious beliefs

Paragraph 5

- Evolution continues to transform planet
- Biggest threat = environment
- Humans = first species to understand our actions (damage to environment) and possibly alter future

Task 3

The list below shows the organisation of ideas in Text 5, but in the wrong order. Match the function of each paragraph with the paragraph number.

Makes a central claim about evolution (main idea) and supports with one example

Makes a claim about the importance of evolution for understanding our moral rules in society

Argues that we are still evolving but that we are sufficiently evolved to fight against our fate (created by ourselves)

Makes a claim about the importance of evolution for understanding the mind and supports it

Makes a claim about the importance of evolution history and its possible consequences for religion

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Paragraph 1

Paragraph 3

Paragraph 5

Paragraph 2

Paragraph 4

Task 4

Now think about the following questions and write down some ideas.

- (a) Do the ideas in the paragraphs of the text link together logically? Does the text present a solid, well-supported argument?
- (b) Does the text provide convincing examples or references to other writers to support the claims it makes?
- (c) Does the text contain any sweeping generalisations?

Answer

- (a) Did you think the paragraphs linked together well? The argument is organised logically, moving from a central claim to support to additional claims plus support, ending in a final argument. It does not use counterarguments (except in the paragraph on religious belief) but this is because the text is based on scientific fact.
- (b) The text is convincing because it draws on scientific fact.
- (c) The text does not contain any sweeping generalisations.

Task 5

Make a list of the ideas in Text 5 which are similar to those in Text 4, 'Anthropathology'.

Provide your answer...

Answer

Some similarities between Texts 4 and 5 are:

- both texts talk about the importance of evolution
- anthropathology, like evolution, challenges religious belief
- both texts suggest that human beings may not have autonomy
- both texts talk about environmental issues and the threat to the human race.

Task 6

Decide whether you enjoyed reading Text 5.

Answer

Whether you enjoyed reading this text depends on your interest in the subject and whether the text makes connections with your previous experience or thinking on this subject.

Comment

How was reading this text for you? We hope that the work you have done in this block helped you to use appropriate reading skills and strategies to read and understand it.

One of the most useful ways of reading critically is to compare how different authors write about the same subject. You will do that shortly, but first there is an activity on preparing for an assignment.

2.5 Comparing the two texts

2.5.1 What are the similarities and differences? (1)

In the next activity you ask questions about Texts 4 and 5 to get a critical overview of their similarities and differences.

Activity 14 Part 1

Task 1

Critically read Texts 4 and 5 again (using skim reading, scan reading or close reading). Then consider the statements below. Decide if the statement applies to the text and write down some examples to support your decision.

[Text 4](#)

[Text 5](#)

Question 1

Uses factual supporting evidence.

- Text 4
 - Text 5
 - Both texts
-

Answer

Both texts refer to facts. However, some of them are more 'factual' than others. You cannot argue about there being *greed* and *violence* in the world (Text 4). Many people might say *patriarchal domination* is also a fact, but not everyone agrees. In the same way, many people regard evolution as a fact (Text 5). However, there are also people who do not accept some aspects of evolution. This does show that even some facts can be questioned.

Question 2

Uses the opinions of other writers to support ideas.

- Text 4
 - Text 5
 - Both texts
-

Answer

Text 4 refers to the opinions of other writers: for example, Taylor (2005).

Question 3

Shows whether there are other arguments which contradict their arguments.

- Text 4
 - Text 5
 - Both texts
-

Answer

Text 4, for example, refers to the opinions of those who *may want to play up the positive aspects of human beings and deny that we are so destructive, or wish to underline the idea that only some individuals, groups or eras are evil.*

Question 4

Provides more arguments that cannot be challenged.

- Text 4
- Text 5
- Both texts

Answer

It is difficult to answer this question. Many people would think that Text 5 provides more arguments that cannot be challenged because it is all about the *science of evolution*. However, some people do challenge the 'science of evolution'.

Question 5

Contains more opinions.

- Text 4
- Text 5
- Both texts

Answer

Text 4 contains more opinions: for example, *Anthropology might be regarded as inevitably pessimistic*.

Question 6

Is 'academic' in style.

- Text 4
- Text 5
- Both texts

Answer

Both texts are academic in style in that they are well organised and contain academic language. Noun groups such as *humanity's undoubted resourcefulness* (Text 4) and *impressive technological achievement* (Text 5) are examples of formal language. However, Text 4 contains more references to other writers and is more formal than Text 5 (for example, see the use of questions and the use of 'and' to start a paragraph in Text 5).

Question 7

Contains more examples of hedging.

- Text 4
- Text 5
- Both texts

Answer

Text 4 contains more examples of hedging. For example: *One possibility might be entropy; Many may want to play up the positive aspects of human beings*. This is because anthropology is not yet an accepted subject like evolution and the text is presenting opinions about it. Evolution, on the other hand, is regarded as a fact by many people so the author does not think they need to hedge what they are writing.

2.5.2 What are the similarities and differences? (2)

Activity 14 Part 2

Task 2

Complete the text boxes below by typing in your answers for both Text 4 and Text 5.

Question 1a

Who is the author?

Text 4

Provide your answer...

Answer

An academic.

Question 1b

Text 5

Provide your answer...

Answer

An academic.

Comment

Both texts are university texts and academic in nature, so they could be written by academics or teachers.

Question 2a

What is their purpose in writing?

Text 4

Provide your answer...

Answer

To promote anthropathology.

Question 2b

Text 5

Provide your answer...

.....
Answer

To introduce some important aspects of evolution.

.....

Comment

The writer of Text 4 seems to promote anthropathology as a possible new discipline and the writer of Text 5 seems to introduce some important aspects of the science of evolution.

Question 3a

What type of text is it?

Text 4

Provide your answer...

.....

Answer

An academic article.

Question 3b

Text 5

Provide your answer...

.....

Answer

A textbook or an extract from course material.

Question 4a

Where would you find it?

Text 4

Provide your answer...

.....

Answer

In an academic journal or review.

Question 4b

Text 5

Provide your answer...

Answer

In a textbook or course material.

Comment

Both texts are in the style of short articles. Text 4 could be from an academic online journal or printed journal but Text 5 introduces basic ideas about evolution and so is more likely to be from a textbook or course material.

Question 5a

What subject area is the text from?

Text 4

Provide your answer...

Answer

Anthropology.

Question 5b

Text 5

Provide your answer...

Answer

Science.

Comment

You would probably recognise Text 5 as coming from the subject area of science if you already know that the subject of evolution is studied in science. The text also refers to *the science of evolution* in the opening line. Text 4 is, as it claims, from the new discipline of anthropology. This probably connects with other subject areas such as anthropology, biology and social sciences.

Task 3

Think about the following questions and write down some ideas.

Question 1

Which of the two texts is more pessimistic? Why?

Answer

Text 4 is more pessimistic in that it is very gloomy about the human race. Text 5 ends with an optimistic view of the possible future of humankind.

Question 2

Which of the two texts is based on accepted fact and which is based on beliefs you might challenge?

.....

Answer

Text 5 is probably based on a more widely accepted fact – the science of evolution – than Text 4. Perhaps many more people would challenge the view of human nature in Text 4.

.....

Comment

Establishing what is 'fact' is not as easy as it might seem. Even well accepted facts can turn out to be opinions. It was once thought that the Earth is flat; Galileo was imprisoned for suggesting this was not a fact. Once you start questioning texts, more 'facts' may turn out to be opinions. However, it is usually possible to tell that some texts are more fact-based than others.

Conclusion

In this course you developed your critical reading skills by asking questions about texts. You thought about your own attitudes and how these might influence your reading before analysing texts from different disciplines. You considered the importance of distinguishing between fact and opinion and of using reliable sources of evidence to support opinions. In your analysis of the texts you also considered a variety of factors relating to the author, the type of text and the context. Finally, you compared two texts from different subject areas written about similar themes.

Key learning points

In this course you have:

- considered the importance of examining your own attitudes to texts
- studied the organisation of argument texts
- distinguished between facts and opinions in texts
- examined hedging as a technique used by writers to express opinions and avoid making unsupported generalisations
- considered the importance of reliable evidence to support claims
- practised asking questions about the author, type and context of texts.

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Glossary

function of a text

The function of a text, section of text, sentence or clause is what it does. For example, a text, section of text or sentence in a text may describe, explain, recount, compare, give a result, and so on.

hedging

Using language to signal that you are not absolutely certain about what you say or write. You do not present what you are saying as a fact. This may be because you do not know everything about the topic so are not sure or you are aware that other people have different views, so you are respecting their viewpoint, or because you are speaking/writing to someone who may take offence if you are too direct in what you say. Examples: (1) Anthropology **might be regarded** as drawing attention to the worst facing us; (2) It **seems** that today's students cannot read critically; (3) Past students **probably** thought of education as a privilege; current students **undoubtedly** view it as an entitlement.

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Text 5: The Open University (2008) S170 *Darwin and evolution*, Milton Keynes, The Open University.

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