Critical Reading Strategies

Why use critical reading strategies?

In daily life people read for many reasons. We may read instructions for information on assembling a bookcase, or we may read magazines for entertainment. In college, however, your motivation for reading is not simply to get information or to be entertained. You will need to become a critical reader, which means you need to analyze and then interrogate a text. But before you can analyze a text, you need to understand it, which can become difficult when you're reading complicated material. For this reason, you should develop a personal reading strategy to help you comprehend and remember the information. The reading strategies below are some helpful suggestions to help in your reading process.

Reading Strategies

1. **Set a purpose for reading**. Before you start reading a text, you should decide *why* you are reading it. There is a difference between reading an article to analyze the author's argument and reading an article to memorize its key terms. For the first reading, you will focus on the article's argument and support; for the second, you will focus on the terms and their definitions. Once you decide why you're reading a text, you can decide what information you need to pay attention to.

2. **Preview the text before reading**. Before you read, you should look through the entire thing. Look at the title, author, headings, illustrations, bolded words, lists, etc. This will help you become familiar with the text's structure and tone. Knowing what you're about to read will help you understand it while you read.

3. **Pay attention to print features and text structures**. Writers use print features like bold print, italicized words, headings, and illustrations to help you understand the text. These features should guide your reading. For example, if a heading is "Active Verbs vs. Passive Verbs," then you know you're about to learn the differences between active and passive verbs when you read that section. Paying attention to text structures will also help your reading process. Every text is organized differently; a menu is organized to give you information about food and prices, while an essay is organized to explore ideas. If you're having trouble understanding a text, stop and think about how it's organized. Finding a pattern in the organization will help your reading.

4. **Mark the text while you read**. Underline or highlight passages while you read. You might mark information to help you remember what's important. (Don't get too carried away, though. If you highlight whole paragraphs, you probably won't remember what the most important information is. Try to limit yourself to key words and important sentences.) Also, mark information you don't understand and try explaining it in your own words in the margins.

5. **Make connections between the text and your personal experience and knowledge**. If you're having trouble getting into the material, try making a connection between the text and your personal experience or knowledge. For example, if you're reading an academic article about the flight patterns of fruit flies and you can't quite understand it, try thinking about what you already know about fruit flies. (That's a connection to your personal knowledge about the topic.) If you're reading a speech by a well-known leader and you find yourself feeling bored, try making a connection to your personal experience. For example, if the speech is about the leader's experiences growing up in a working class household, you can think about how your class influenced your childhood experiences. Making these kind of connections will help engage you in the reading.

6. **Monitor your comprehension of the text.** When readers are having trouble understanding a text, they often try to keep reading. This just leads to more confusion. Pay attention to your understanding of a text. If you're feeling confused, stop. You can do several things to fix your confusion. Try re-reading what you've just read to see if you understand it better the second time. Try visualizing what you're confused about; if you can create an image in your mind, you might better understand the ideas. You can also try to adjust your reading rate. If you're reading too quickly, you might be confused because you're skipping over important information. Try slowing down. If you're reading too slowly, you might be confused because you're becoming bored. Try reading faster to keep your mind engaged.

7. **Summarize the key points when you're finished reading**. One way to help you remember what you've just read is to summarize the most important information. You can summarize the information in your mind or, better yet, write the key points down on paper. If you write a summary, it will force you to focus on the most important information.

Sources
Tovani, Cris. *I Read It, But I Don't Get It*. Portland: Stenhouse, 2000.