GUIDE TO CRITICAL ANALYSIS

I. Critical Reading Towards Critical Writing

A. Critical writing depends on critical reading. Most of the papers you write will involve reflection on written texts - the thinking and research that has already been done on your subject. In order to write your own analysis of this subject, you will need to do careful critical reading of sources and to use them critically to make your own argument. The judgments and interpretations you make of the texts you read are the first steps towards formulating your own approach.

B. Critical Reading: What is It?

1. To read critically is to make judgments about how a text is argued. This is a highly reflective skill requiring you to "stand back" and gain some distance from the text you are reading. (You might have to read a text through once to get a basic grasp of content before you launch into an intensive critical reading.) THE KEY IS THIS:

    a) don't read looking only or primarily for information

    b) do read looking for ways of thinking about the subject matter

2. When you are reading, highlighting, or taking notes, avoid extracting and compiling lists of evidence, lists of facts and examples. Avoid approaching a text by asking "What information can I get out of it?" Rather ask "How does this text work? How is it argued? How is the evidence (the facts, examples, etc.) used and interpreted? How does the text reach its conclusions?

3. How Do I Read Looking for Ways of Thinking?

    a) First determine the central claims or purpose of the text (its thesis). A critical reading attempts to assess how these central claims are developed or argued.

    b) Begin to make some judgments about context . What audience is the text written for? Who is it in dialogue with? (This will probably be other scholars or authors with differing viewpoints.) In what historical context is it written? All these matters of context can contribute to your assessment of what is going on in a text.

    c) Distinguish the kinds of reasoning the text employs. What concepts are defined and used? Does the text appeal to a theory or theories? Is any specific methodology laid out? If there is an appeal to a particular concept, theory, or method, how is that concept, theory, or method then used to organize and interpret the data? You might also examine how the text is organized: how has the author analyzed (broken down) the material? Be aware that different disciplines (i.e. history, sociology, philosophy, biology) will have different ways of arguing.

    d) Examine the evidence (the supporting facts, examples, etc) the text

employs. Supporting evidence is indispensable to an argument. Having worked through Steps 1-3, you are now in a position to grasp how the evidence is used to develop the argument and its controlling claims and concepts. Steps 1-3 allow you to see evidence in its context. Consider the kinds of evidence that are used. What counts as evidence in this argument? Is the evidence statistical? literary? historical? etc. From what sources is the evidence taken? Are these sources primary or secondary?

e) Critical reading may involve evaluation. Your reading of a text is already critical if it accounts for and makes a series of judgments about how a text is argued. However, some essays may also require you to assess the strengths and weaknesses of an argument. If the argument is strong, why? Could it be better or differently supported? Are there gaps, leaps, or inconsistencies in the argument? Is the method of analysis problematic? Could the evidence be interpreted differently? Are the conclusions warranted by the evidence presented? What are the unargued assumptions? Are they problematic? What might an opposing argument be?

C. Some Practical Tips

1. Critical reading occurs after some preliminary processes of reading. Begin by skimming the entire text, especially introductions and conclusions, in order to strategically choose where to focus your critical efforts.

2. When highlighting a text or taking notes from it, teach yourself to highlight arguments: those places in a text where an author explains her analytical moves, the concepts she uses, how she uses them, how she arrives at conclusions. Don't let yourself foreground and isolate facts and examples, no matter how interesting they may be. First, look for the large patterns that give purpose, order, and meaning to those examples. The opening sentences of paragraphs can be important to this task.

3. When you begin to think about how you might use a portion of a text in the argument you are forging in your own paper, try to remain aware of how this portion fits into the whole argument from which it is taken. Paying attention to context is a fundamental critical move.

4. When you quote directly from a source, use the quotation critically. This means that you should not substitute the quotation for your own articulation of a point. Rather, introduce the quotation by laying out the judgments you are making about it, and the reasons why you are using it. Often a quotation is followed by some further analysis.

5. Critical reading skills are also critical listening skills. In your lectures, listen not only for information but also for ways of thinking. Your instructor will often explicate and model ways of thinking appropriate to a discipline.

D. Steps:

1. Read carefully. Read the paper several times for comprehension.

2. Summarize the paper. First summarize paragraphs, then sections, then the paper as a whole.

3. Analyze the structure of the argument(s)

4. In analyzing the structure of an argument, you will distinguish: *Premises* (the propositions that the argument requires you accept at the outset), and *conclusions* (the thesis that the author is trying to get you to agree with).

Sometimes (not always), the conclusion will be meant to follow *deductively*. Other times the argument will not be so tight. It will often be useful to ferret out unargued *assumptions*, including especially unexpressed ones, which are needed for the argument to go through. (Note that the premises don't necessarily come first. Often a writer, for reasons of convenience or style, will say not "*A, therefore B*," but "*B, because A.*"

Pick out all and only the main points. Use a *Top-Down* approach: that is to say, first ask yourself what, in a sentence or two, is the point of the whole passage or article. In your summary, you can start with that brief statement. Then go on to each principal part of the argument, and repeat the process until you have got down to a level of detail adequate for the space available in your summary. If the passage is very long, there will obviously have to be less detail. But mastery of a text requires the ability to summarize it to any desired length. When something remains unclear, don't gloss it over, but draw attention to it. Pick out any "crux" or difficulty of interpretation. Don't be afraid of admitting that you don't understand something, but try to say as clearly as possible *what* you find had to understand, and *why*. Sharpen any difficulty found by offering *alternative interpretations*.

5. Look for the author's thesis (what the author is trying to prove in the argument).

   a) Is it specific and detailed?

   b) Are signal words used to identify the claim? : *should, must, have to, etc.*

   c) Are qualifiers used to restrict the claim and make it more defensible? *E.g. on the whole; typically; usually; most of the time*

   d) Are exceptions to the claim stated openly?

6. Evaluate the author's argument.

   a) Is the argument valid (internally consistent, logical)? Do conclusions follow from the premises?

   b) Check LOGIC: Make sure that the premises *support* the conclusion. If the argument is deductive -- i.e., the arguer is claiming the conclusion

must be true if the premises are true -- make sure the arguer is right (i.e., make sure the conclusion really must be true if the premises are true). If the argument is inductive -- i.e., if the arguer is claiming that the conclusion is likely if the premises are true -- then make sure the arguer is correct (make sure the conclusion really is likely if the premises are true).

c) Is the argument supported by evidence? Accumulate and evaluate the evidence used to support the reasons.

d) Is the evidence: sufficient, representative, relevant, accurate, testable ?

e) Identify and evaluate the reasons that support the claim.

f) Are the reasons relevant to the thesis?

g) Is information accurate and fairly interpreted?

h) Does the author leave out important information?

i) Are assumptions made explicit?

j) If not find out which assumptions are implied by the argument.

k) Are opposing views considered?

7. Is the writer credible? Does he/she come across as open, honest, accurate, unbiased etc. or does the reader have reason to doubt him/her?

8. If an argument is clear, omits no significant information, has good logic (no formal or informal fallacies), and all true premises, then the argument is likely most excellent! Reasonable people should accept its conclusion.

II. Writing a Critical Analysis

A. An Analysis is an *evaluation*, and an evaluation contains a judgment.

1. Although you must identify the author's thesis, you must also develop and support your own thesis about the author's work. In your thesis, identify the author's main argument, and state whether or not you think the author achieves this purpose. Here is an example: In "What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew," Daniel Pool constructs a useful social history of eighteenth and nineteenth century England, by providing a brief overview of various facets of daily life.

B. Organize your analysis.

1. Include essential information in the Introduction.

2. First, introduce the text you'll be evaluating and the author. Place the work in context, i.e., provide the reader with some background information, such as the period in which the text was written, or why the topic of the text is of interest to your audience as well as you. For example, "Pool's social history is useful to any student of nineteenth century British literature." You can place the author in context by mentioning similar authors or works. Next, state your thesis.

3. Write the main body of the critique. In writing your critique, it is important to give a short overview and summarize only the main points of the text. The

summary should be brief and can come before your critique, or you can integrate summary of the text with your critique.

4. In your evaluation, consider what the author has proved or not proved, addressing questions that you considered as you read the text. The most common mistake students make is to include too much summary.

C. Some Guidelines

1. Take care to make a clear distinction between the author's views and your own.

2. Do not model the organization of your critique after the organization of the text —

3. that is, DO NOT go through the text in the order it was written.

4. Avoid too much summary. The bulk of the paper should be your own analysis.

D. Steps for writing the critique:

1. If required, research the academic context for the text. How have others responded to the issue?

2. Analyze the argument presented in the text using the critical reading procedures and the Toulmin model for analysis.

3. Develop your thesis: What is my overall evaluation of the main claims in this text?

a) Make very clear when you are no longer *stating* what your author says, but have come to your own critical assessment. At this point, indicate briefly whether and why you think the premises and assumptions you have been asked to accept are true or false, plausible or implausible. If the argument is deductive, indicate whether it is valid; if it is not deductive say whether your find it acceptable, and if not, why. One way is to look for more or less remote *consequences* of the thesis that may turn out to be unacceptable. It is always a useful exercise to try as hard as you can to find good reasons to disagree with what a writer says, especially if you agree. Conversely, if you disagree with the conclusion, try hard to make up an independent defense of it. It is generally a good idea to assume that the authors of philosophical texts are often wrong, but also that they are not idiots.

b) Narrow your assertion to a specific and detailed claim in one sentence.

c) Use qualifiers to restrict your claim and make it more defensible.

d) Openly state exceptions to your claim.

e) Identify and evaluate the reasons that support your thesis.

f) Are the reasons relevant to the thesis?

g) Make your assumptions explicit.

(1) Find out which assumptions are implied by the reasons you use

to support your thesis.

h) Accumulate and evaluate the evidence you use to support your reasons.

i) Define key terms.

j) Consider opposing views.

k) Arrange the material according to a persuasive strategy by anticipating the reaction of your readers to your material.

l) Test your credibility as a writer. Do you come across as open, honest, accurate, unbiased etc. or does the reader have reason to doubt you?

4. If the argument you are evaluating is bad, explain how:

a) Are one or more of the premises false? (This makes the argument *unsound*)

b) Does the conclusion follow? (This makes the argument *invalid*)

c) Does the argument rely on assumptions that are unacceptable, or arbitrary, or debatable?

d) Does the argument contain crucial ambiguities? (An ambiguous word or phrase is one that has more than one possible meaning. This can foul up an argument!)

e) Is rhetoric substituted for argument at some crucial stage?

A TOULMIN MODEL FOR ANALYZING ARGUMENTS

The Case

Claim:_____

Qualifiers? _____ Exceptions? _____

Reason:	**Reason**:	**Reason**:
_____	_____	_____
What makes this reason relevant?	What makes this reason relevant?	What makes this reason relevant?
_____	_____	_____
What evidence supports this reason?	What evidence supports this reason?	What evidence supports this reason?
_____	_____	_____

The Refutation

Objection:	**Objection**:	**Objection**:
_____	_____	_____
Rebuttal:	**Rebuttal**:	**Rebuttal**
_____	_____	_____