

From critical reading to analysis

Building the academic skills

Critical reading skills

- **When** was the text written? **Who** wrote it? What school/tradition/discipline is s/he affiliated to?
- **What problem** did s/he study and why?
How did s/he approach it? Consider 1) **the disciplinary background** (sociology, philosophy, journalism etc.), 2) **the method** (How was the research executed, how was data collected etc.), and 3) **the style** of the text (How is it written? How is information distributed in the text and communicated to the reader?)

Critical analysis I.

- Find **the main claim** (or a set of main claims); in other words, ask ‘what is the author arguing in this text, what is his point, what does he want to achieve or show to his/her readers, what main thing I learn’?
- Most probably, the main claim is not clearly stated in the introduction as tends to be the case with academic papers you may find in journals – ‘In this paper, I argue that.../The aim of this paper is to show...’ – so you may need to summarize the article first, sort out secondary arguments and decide which points are crucial and lead to the conclusion. The main argument may be a point of discussion and it may be stated differently.
- Let’s try it with Willis’ article!

Critical analysis II.

- The next step: we focus on the claims which could lead to further problematization. In other words, we look for the gaps in argumentation or points of controversy.
- **A claim – a presupposition – links to literature – new claim(s)**
- This is only a tentative schema, there is no clear method how to proceed with critical analysis but a set of suggestions.

An example I.

- “The main cultural materials and resources used in the symbolic work of leisure are cultural commodities. They are supplied to the market overwhelmingly by the commercial cultural industries and media for profit.”

(Willis, 1991, p.17)

There is a set of **implicit assumptions** which we may probe/question closely. Doing this, we are **examining the presuppositions** of author’s argumentation.

An example II.

- First, we try to rephrase the quote taking into consideration other information from the text and elaborate on the quote:
- ‘Ready-made commodities can be accessed at the market. They are fabricated mainly by specialized industries (film or music studios, design studios and clothing factories etc.) and by related media (music channels, TV programs, radio charts etc.). Young people acquire them to subsequently invest them with meanings. (They use these items creatively – often in unexpected ways, set them into new contexts, transform them entirely and thus craft their personal or group identity with the help of these items.)’

An example III.

- Let's list some of the presuppositions:
 - 1) Young people do not directly participate on the process of commodity production. The items are supplied to youth and only after they acquire them, they may transform them. **But is this really so? When is it not true?** How about punk which is based on the idea of distinction from the 'cultural industries' monopoly on cultural production? How about DiY method of production? Etc. Young people are not only creative consumers but may participate on the actual production of (sub)cultural items (music, fashion...).