



# IS 101: Asking Questions, Making Choices

## A GUIDE TO CRITICAL READING

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### PERCEPTION

Effective critical reading really depends upon how we view the world around us. Each of us makes sense of what we see using information that we gather from previous experiences. We construct the beliefs and knowledge we hold from these experiences. We organize, interpret and file the sensations we experience and thereby form lenses through which we perceive future information. For example, if a person develops a skin rash, irritated eyes, and a headache on repeated occasions after swimming, this experience may well affect how he or she views swimming as an activity. Moreover, this experience contributes to how that individual constructs his or her beliefs about this activity, which may be expressed in statements such as, “Swimming makes people sick” or “Those who choose to swim are foolishly taking part in a waste of time.” If these beliefs remain unchallenged by new experiences or unexamined by the individual, then they become fixed as a part of the individual’s constructed knowledge, a “fact” about the world: “Swimming is a harmful activity.” So, as you begin to critically read, think about how the lenses of your beliefs and knowledge affect how you interpret the ideas on the page. Now let’s take a close look at the process itself.

## WHAT IS CRITICAL READING?

“Critical reading” is a term used to describe the kind of deeply engaged reading expected of students in college. It depends upon our being intellectually wide awake while we read, reading on the lines, between the lines, and beyond the lines as you make sense of the text. Reading on the lines means that you decode what the actual text says to find the meaning. Reading between the lines involves looking for the meaning implied by the language of the text, how the actual meaning can have alternate or deeper meanings within a larger context. This kind of reading may relate to the period or culture in which the text takes place or to the occasion for its being written, and it certainly relates to our own experiences—the context in which we are reading the text and the experiences we have had that relate to the text. Reading beyond the lines prompts us to think about how the text can have a deeper meaning applied to the world at large. As we do so, we should think carefully about what words and sentences mean, how ideas connect, and how the larger concepts contained in the text fit into various contexts both in the world of the text and in our own worlds as readers.

While each one of us shares human experiences in common with other people, we also have accumulated a specific personal combination of experiences, beliefs, and knowledge. Each of us uses both of these sets of information to create a unique web of meaning as he or she reads any text. It is important, therefore, for any critical reader to take notes in the text and on separate sheets of paper as he or she reads in order to record personal reactions, questions, and interpretations. By doing so, each of us as a reader constructs a record of his or her own web of meaning as it is made.

This kind of reading is very different from the surface reading we do when we skim a magazine article or glance over a cereal box. It may even differ from the reading process that you used to read textbooks and other materials in high school. Critical reading requires close, sustained attention, thorough reading and re-reading of the text,

and jotting down reactions, ideas, and questions as they occur. It also involves stopping to look up new words rather than reading over them.

Since this process is somewhat intense, it is wise to read chunks of the text, focusing your attention completely on what's there. Read for a short period of time—about 20 minutes works well for many readers. Then, stop and allow yourself to absorb the meaning of what you have read. Make notes about the thread of the narrative (who are the characters and what are they doing that seems significant); the motivations, flaws, and misunderstandings that drive the action; the patterns of images, actions, themes, and ideas that you identify from one chunk to the next; the questions or responses raised by that critical voice in your head that reads along with you. It is a good idea to use a system of symbols to mark what kind of note you are making. For example, a question mark for questions, an exclamation point for responses, an asterisk for important ideas, etc.

After you have finished every three or four chunks, stop for a moment to think about the larger issues and questions raised by the text. What key ideas or questions does the author urge us to consider? What patterns of ideas, images, or actions reinforce these key ideas? Make notes of what you discern here. Some large questions are included at the end of this document to help you get inside a few of the key issues that Marjane Satrapi explores in *Persepolis*. Use these questions as a comparative guide against which to check your own notes AFTER you have finished reading this novel.

### **Textual Evidence**

Critical reading, thinking, and writing processes don't stop here. Once you as a reader have determined what you believe to be the text's total meaning and reflected a bit on its implications, you are then ready to respond to the text in a variety of ways. Whatever the form of your response—whether in class discussion, formal argument, or

written reflection—you will need to use evidence drawn from the text to support WHY you hold a certain point of view. **Note here that your marginal notes in the text as well as the other longer reading notes you have made about ideas that seem significant will provide crucial information to help you explain and support your viewpoint.** For example, consider the following exchange between Marji’s parents

“We Iranians are the Olympic Champions when it comes to gossip.”

“She’s right. We love to exaggerate.”

“You seem to have the opposite symptom.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Even when you see something with your own eyes, you need confirmation from the BBC.”

“My natural optimism just leads me to be skeptical”

Your own response may take a form like the following:

The people in Iran don’t know what is true or not. Some people believe anything they hear but some of them won’t believe anything, even what they see. This is confusing for Marji and her family. (135)

In your own mind, you believe this statement is valid, even obvious, but remember that others do not share your particular reading lenses, so you will need to provide textual evidence along with a supporting explanation for your assertion.

Since you want to focus on the central idea of what people know and how they know it, you will want to look in the text for evidence that support your assertions about this central idea, evidence that you cite in support of your assertions. Thus, the passage of the book quoted above offers us an opportunity to ask a number of questions, and the above response becomes incomplete without posing such questions.

After asking critical questions about how Marji and her family get information, you discover a number of textual passages in the book that you can use to support your assertion. You decide to focus your assertion more specifically. Below is a revised version of your assertion:

Before Tehran comes under attack by the Iraqis, the people of Iran don't know if it is possible or not, only having rumors that "they're going to use ballistic missiles against us" (135). Marji expands upon this, saying that "Iranians are Olympic champions when it comes to gossip" (135). Believing the gossip or doubting everything they hear, as Marji's father does (he claims that his "natural optimism just leads me to be skeptical" (135)), the people in the book don't know what to believe. This confusion has tragic consequences later in the chapter when Marji discovers that her street has in fact been bombed, narrowly sparing her family (139).

Note that the above example contains three parts, sometimes called **The 1-2-3 Rule**: 1) the assertion itself, 2) textual evidence and explanation in support of the assertion, and 3) a direct statement of how the evidence reveals the significance of the assertion. All three parts of this equation must be present for the critical response to be complete. Putting forward a connected, supported series of assertions coherently—whether in discussion or in writing—is one of the essential skills we will work on in IS 101.

### **A FINAL NOTE ABOUT TEXTUAL AUTHORITY**

For various reasons—lack of confidence, laziness, lack of knowledge—high school students often first look to outside sources such as *Cliff's Notes*, *Spark Notes*, *Monarch Notes*, or other sources which provide interpretive readings of texts when these texts are assigned to be read. Sometimes students even use these sources as substitutes or short-cuts for reading the actual primary text itself. While this approach may achieve some successful results in high school, it is inadequate and unacceptable in college-level work, particularly in a liberal arts college which focuses on the use of critical process in learning.

These outside sources are tempting to use in part because they contain an authoritative view and voice, a confident textual authority. The voices in these texts

proclaim, “This work means THIS and here’s why.” Instead of simply accepting the prescriptive authority of these sources, which present the meaning of the text rather than a meaning (yes, texts can have more than one valid meaning), our focus in IS 101 and in other Wartburg courses will be placed on developing our own authoritative readings of the texts we read. If we read each text carefully, using the reading and annotation processes detailed above, think carefully about how and why we respond to the text as we do, and use the 1-2-3 Rule in expressing our viewpoints, each of our responses can contain just as much authority as any outside published interpretation. More importantly, our responses possess the distinctive strength of being authentic, of being “ours,” rather than someone else’s belief. In short, the point is not reaching the destination of getting the assignment done by whatever means, but rather the journey itself—HOW we go about making sense of the texts we read.

As each of you begin to engage in critical reading and thinking, don’t worry if you feel unsure of your abilities. As with any process, these also require practice. During your college experience in this first year, we will work together in this class and in others to sharpen your critical skills and abilities.

### **Some LARGE Questions about *Persepolis***

1. In what ways does the presentation of this book - a story that is told in black/white and graphic novel format - affect the reader? How do the drawings add to the narrative of the story?
2. *Persepolis* both tells a story and comments on the importance of stories in our lives. What is the importance of stories in our own lives and how do stories shape our lives?
3. What are the benefits of developing a compassionate and critical understanding of historical events? What are the challenges?

4. Satrapi explores the different kinds of captivities and freedoms people face in their lives. What stifles or prevents people from being completely free? How do they circumvent and defy the rules imposed on them? How do people attempt to live ordinary lives despite revolution and war?