SOME POINTERS ON READING CRITICAL ARGUMENTS

At first glance, many arguments, especially (but not only) published articles of criticism or analysis in any given discipline, can seem dense, difficult, even impenetrable. But, as an active reader, you can make certain choices that will assist you in reading and critiquing these arguments. Here are some pointers that may assist you in the task of reading critically.

- First, SKIM the article. At this stage, you're not really reading; instead, you're looking for key features that signal important aspects of the argument. Pay particular attention to the following: kinds of subheadings, number and kinds of illustrations and figures, number and nature of references cited in the bibliography – are they primary sources, review articles, chapters from books? What are their dates, etc.?

- Next, read key sections for GENERAL CONTENT: these include especially the abstract (if there is one), the introductory paragraph or section, and the concluding paragraph or section. Another way to read for general content is to read in reverse: conclusions first, then the introduction. Then read sequentially through the remaining sections.

- Look up TERMS after your first reading, especially unfamiliar words or concepts.

- On your second reading, read THOROUGHLY for content: look for the author's purpose, experimental designs or methodology, results, conclusions, etc. You may find it helpful to highlight or underline the author's MAIN CLAIM during this reading (hint: check the introduction and conclusion!). On the paragraph level, look for topic or point sentences that help you track the argument's progression.

- If necessary, RE-READ until you fully understand the argument. If you're really stumped, try reading confusing sections aloud (strange, but it helps); you might also try verbally summarizing the argument, or the relevant portion of it, to a friend (preferably someone unfamiliar with the article).

- Finally, REVIEW CRITICALLY, answering the following questions: What is the author's purpose or Main Claim? Is the purpose or claim clearly stated? How does this question or problem fit in with the larger body of knowledge? Are the author's assumptions valid? If the article includes experimentation, is the experimental design satisfactory? (To answer this question, consider materials, controls, sample size, means of measurement, etc.) How is evidence presented? Are the conclusions valid? Does the author's evidence support these conclusions? Are there any contradictions in the paper, and if so, how are they handled? Are there different conclusions that might be drawn from the evidence/results?

Keep in mind that, as a reader, you have a unique and valid critical perspective to bring to any piece of writing. One way to think about producing a solid critique of an argument is to imagine entering into a critical conversation with its author. If you had the opportunity to ask one substantive question about the argument, what would it be? Asking and answering such questions can be a useful method for highlighting key debates or points of intellectual engagement in a given field.

(Note: these guidelines were adapted from a handout used by Will Ryan on reading and critiquing a primary research paper, which in turn was adapted from Anne McNeal, Professor Emeritus in NS.)