

## *The Critical Reader*

Critical reading involves evaluation and application of what is read; it requires vigorous, critical judgment

EDGAR DALE

NEARLY EVERYBODY sees that the future is unpredictable, that blindly following the habits and routines of the past will court disaster. But not everyone sees that providing alternatives to stereotyped habits requires creative, critical thinking—requires critical reading.

Reading can be roughly divided into three levels. The first level is simple, uncritical reproduction, a duplication of what has been read. It is *reading the lines*—literal comprehension. The reader knows what the author “said,” no small accomplishment. But what did he mean?

The second and higher level of reading involves drawing inferences from what is read—discovering the implications. It is *reading between the lines*. It requires critical thinking, an analysis of what the writer really meant. Did he write ironically with tongue in cheek? Was his tone hopeful? cynical? an exaggeration for effect?

A third level of reading involves evaluation and application of what is read and requires vigorous, critical judgment. It is *reading beyond the lines*. One asks—what relevance does this reading have to my ongoing work? How can I put these ideas to work?

Here are some characteristics of critical reading and comments about the role of the teacher in developing the critical reader.

1. *Critical reading is independent reading.* It is independent in the sense that thinking—like loving or appreciating—is an individual, personal affair, not a group process. The critical reader is on

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his own—self-directed, not teacher-directed. Obviously there can be some group teaching of critical reading as a preparatory measure, but finally the student is on his own with no teacher, no parent to help him. He is becoming an independent learner, one who has learned how to learn, and loves learning.

2. *Critical reading is problem-centered.* One of the key tasks of critical reading is to find and state the problem, the key issues. Poverty or unemployment or automation are umbrella terms which indicate a problem area, but to discover and clearly state what is at issue requires disciplined study. Without critical analysis we are likely to treat symptoms, not causes.

Further, the critical reader knows that great issues cannot be adequately stated on an either/or basis. He knows that this world is a complicated one—the *London Economist* says it is “untidy, ungrateful, and unjust.” The critical reader knows that in dealing with great issues you can’t really divide people into the good guys and the bad guys, the cops and the robbers, the saints and the sinners. You must learn to face both ambiguity and complexity.

The trouble with the good guy/bad guy approach is that in time these roles may be reversed. A few years ago the Japanese and the Germans were the bad guys and the Russians and the Chinese were the good guys. Now apparently the situation is reversed. Is de Gaulle a good guy or a bad guy? Perhaps he is blazing a new trail to a needed arrangement of world affairs.

The critical reader knows that there are no simple, easily-arrived-at solutions either to great global problems or indeed to some of our classroom problems. For example, if you know exactly how reading should be taught, you should get in touch with the experts. They need your help.

3. *Critical reading is analytical and judgmental.* A literary critic analyzes a book and then passes judgment on it, notes its strengths and weaknesses. He indicates either directly or inferentially whether this book is worth reading. He probes hidden assumptions, evaluates the logic or illogic of the writer. He must present his best judgments and demonstrate his awareness of critical standards.

A good critic can’t say with a shrug of the shoulder, “There’s a lot to be said on both sides.” He can’t be like the young woman who went to the psychiatrist for advice. When the psychiatrist asked, “Are you indecisive?” her answer was, “Yes and no.” The judgments that students make on a book or a magazine article will not usually be profound, although occasionally they may be. Students will either recommend the book to others or they won’t. And they may tell why they liked it (they don’t always know) and why

parts pleased them most. They may also compare the book with others by the same author, giving judgments as to similarities and differences.

4. *Critical reading is based on a stubborn effort to get at the truth.* The critical reader must be aware of all the barriers to the truth, many of them in his own mind. He must learn that we see the world through the lenses of our own experience. Perceptions are personal. "The eye sees what it knows."

Here is where common sense may lead us into error. Common sense tells us (and every fool can see it) that the sun rises in the morning. But it doesn't rise, and it took Copernicus to show that common sense and the great astronomer Ptolemy were wrong. Common sense says that two balls of different weight will fall at different speeds—the heavier faster than the lighter. This application of common sense is wrong, as Galileo proved. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead has written:

Nothing is more curious than the self-satisfied dogmatism with which mankind at each period of its history cherishes the delusion of the finality of its existing modes of knowledge. . . . At this moment scientists and sceptics are the leading dogmatists. Advance in detail is admitted; fundamental novelty is barred. This dogmatic common sense is the death of philosophic adventure. The Universe is vast.<sup>1</sup>

5. *Critical reading is creative, imaginative, non-conformist.* Here we can contrast training and education. Reading can be taught as training—with fixed limits and predictable responses. Genuinely educational experiences, however, have no ceiling, no fixed boundaries, no neat terminal points. They are creative, not routine.

The critical, creative reader is willing to modify previous beliefs, is flexibly open to change. He thoughtfully examines his stereotyped notions about Protestants, Catholics, Jews, the Republican or Democratic Party, fluoridation, Cuba, China. He has learned to live with uncertainty, to tolerate ambiguity. He believes with Socrates that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

6. *The critical reader associates with the best minds of all generations.* The best way to do this is to read thoughtfully, analytically, judgmentally, critically. Ezra Pound once said: "Literature is news that stays news." Certainly the wisdom of Shakespeare has remained news for four hundred years. The insights of Cervantes or Boswell or Thoreau have present-day applications. To be ahead of the times, not 25 years behind, we must read critically what the

<sup>1</sup> *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* as recorded by Lucien Price (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954), p. 7.

great minds are saying or have said. Note this illuminating comment:

There are at the present time two great nations in the world, which started from different points, but seem to tend towards the same end. I allude to the Russians and the Americans. . . . All other nations seem to have nearly reached their natural limits, and they have only to maintain their power; but these are still in the act of growth. . . . The principal instrument of . . . (America) is freedom; of . . . (Russia), servitude. Their starting-point is different and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe.<sup>2</sup>

This is what the thoughtful reader of Alexis de Tocqueville learned more than one hundred years ago. The critical reader tries to discover the prescient minds of today.

7. *Critical reading is an involving, participatory experience.* Walt Whitman once said: "Books are to be called for and supplied on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half sleep, but in the highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself."

The word "dialog" is overused today but it does have rich meaning. In critical reading you have a dialog with the author. You ask him tough questions, and sometimes you feel that he answers them well and sometimes he may answer them badly. The critical reader may ask the age-old questions that everyone faces and tries to answer: Who am I? What am I here for? What is worth doing? How responsible am I for my neighbor, and who is my neighbor? What really makes a difference?

8. *The critical reader is sensitive to words and has acquired an excellent vocabulary.* To read critically we must savor the flavor of words, make subtle discriminations between meanings of words—e.g., irony, sarcasm, and satire; or burlesque and farce. The critical reader is sensitive to metaphor, a way of making words do extra work. Think of how most fruits can be metaphorized: peach, banana, apple, lemon, prune. Or animals: cat, tiger, lion, weasel, badger, bull. Or vegetables: tomato, string bean, corn, cabbage head.

The critical reader also enjoys figures of speech such as the oxymoron—the use of two apparently incongruous words to produce an epigrammatic effect. Examples are: broadly ignorant, wise foolishness, troubled joy, sweet sorrow, concise misinformation, trained incapacity, educated ignorance, successful failure.

<sup>2</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, Vol. I* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), p. 434.

Meager vocabularies betray our failure to read widely and critically. For example, a young woman approached a noted speaker after a lecture and said, "You were simply superfluous. I've never heard such an enervating speech." "Thank you," the speaker replied. "I'm thinking of having it published posthumously." "Wonderful," replied the young woman, "and the sooner the better."

9. *The critical reader reads to remember, not to forget.* What the critical reader selects to read is not only worth remembering; it is worth talking about. Knowledge unshared is knowledge forgotten. We won't do much critical reading unless we engage in lively conversation about what we have read—not the stereotyped, unevocative reporting of thin experiences, but telling what hits us hard and makes us think, noting our doubts and possible disagreements with the author.

The uncritical reader often reads to erase experience. The critical reader tries to make a mentally indelible record of what he has read. The uncritical reader wants to get from suppertime to bedtime with the least amount of thinking—to kill time. The critical reader wants to fill time, not only with rich memories but also with fruitful, forward-looking experiences. Critical reading is disciplined reading by persons who have convictions about something.

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THE PROPER FUNCTION OF BOOKS is associated with intellectual culture in which you steer clear of generalities and indefinite views. You enlarge your critical sense regarding events and personalities and trends, so that you are no longer at the mercy of theorists and demagogues. It is perfectly possible for a man, one who only gives to reading the leisure hours of a business life, to acquire such a general knowledge of the laws of nature and the facts of history that every great advance made in science and government and business shall be to him intelligible and interesting.

—*The Royal Bank of Canada.*

READING GOOD BOOKS is not something to be indulged in as a luxury. It is a necessity for anyone who intends to give his life and work a touch of quality. The most real wealth is not what we put into our piggy banks but what we develop in our heads. Books instruct us without anger, threats and harsh discipline. They do not sneer at our ignorance or grumble at our mistakes. They ask only that we spend some time in the company of greatness so that we may absorb some of its attributes.

—*The Royal Bank of Canada.*