CRITICAL READING TOWARDS CRITICAL WRITING

One major skill our students will need in all their college courses is critical reading. In an advanced writing course or a technical course, our students will be expected to read a text critically. They will analyze it in terms of the author’s main argument, sufficiency of the evidence provided to support this argument, tone and style employed by the author in the text, the overall plausibility of the subject matter, etc. Most term papers, as well as essay exams, are based on critical reading and writing.

Most of the time we complain that our students do little to analyze a text or transfer these analyses to their writing. However, there are some straightforward methods that can be used in class to combine critical reading with critical writing. Texts analyzed as such can lead into writing in two ways: arguments and evidence can be analyzed and integrated into an essay, a response essay or report can be written on the texts analyzed. Another way critical reading may serve writing is that critically analyzed texts may serve as models for the students to work on. Through critical reading, students see that the way an author organizes the presentation of his ideas actually reflects his way of thinking. Also through submitting a text to careful analysis, the students develop a rigorous logical way of reasoning. Such rigorous analytical thinking, then, is carried into their writing.

When reading critically, the students should realize that
- They should not read for information only
- They should look for ways of thinking

The questions to be asked while reading should be:
- How does this text work?
- How is it argued?
- How is the evidence used and interpreted?
- How does the text reach its conclusion?

Such reading is an active process during which the reader interacts with the text and maintains an inner dialogue with the author. Therefore, it requires the reader to produce questions while following the author’s line of reasoning. The method used for maintaining such a dialogue is annotating the text, i.e. highlighting, underlining, writing in the margins. However, an inexperienced reader may be tempted to highlight too extensively and later have difficulty in extracting the main ideas out of the highlighted areas.
Some strategies of annotating are (adapted from occawonline.pearsoned.com):

1. Double underline the author’s expression/statement of the main point and write MP in the margin.
2. Underline each new claim the writer makes, and write claim 1, claim 2, etc. in the margin.
3. Circle major point of transition from the obvious to less obvious.
4. Asterisk major pieces of evidence or statistics and write "illustrates claim x”
5. Write conclusion in the margin at points where the writer draws major conclusions.
6. Put a question mark next to points that are unclear, unreasonable, or out of place; write your comments in the margin.
7. Put an exclamation mark next to passages you react to in agreement, disagreement, or interest; write your comments in the margin.
8. Attach a post-it note next to trigger passages and write a brief reaction as you read on.
9. Write N.B. (Nota Bene=good point) besides points you think well-made, you like, you agree or when you think the author raises a good argument.

Critical reading and writing activities in class

Some activities –to be done in or outside the classroom- to combine critical reading with critical writing could involve reviewing a text.

• Use the main points and claims to make an outline of the text. Put the transitions where the writer indicates his line of reasoning.
• Use this outline to write a summary of the text.
• Give a name to each subsection and explain what the author expounds on in the section. How does each subsection contribute or relate to the flow of logic?
• Write a paragraph that explores the attitude of the author. Does the author adopt a serious, scientific, humorous, ironic, argumentative style? Analyze the text and find evidence to support your conviction.
• In your journal/response paragraph/essay/review write what you know or learned about the author. Is it a trustworthy source? Does the author have a bias?
• Review the claims. Is each claim adequately supported with evidence? What kind of evidence is provided, e.g. statistics, facts, or observations?
• Review the text. Are the claims consistent and coherent? Are there logical flaws in the argument? What could opposing arguments be?
• List the points that trigger a reaction in you. Free write a brief response to each point or as a whole. Why did you react in the way you did? What did you find interesting?

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