Basics of Critical Reading

Why Critical Reading?

Critical reading skills are frequently needed because an author’s intentions often go beyond merely INFORMING his/her readers. For instance, if an author’s purpose is to EVALUATE his/her subject, the reader should be able to determine how valid the evaluation is. Also, the reader should be able to determine how valid the evaluation is. Also, the reader should be able to detect any attempts by the author to use subtle (or not so subtle) techniques of PERSUASION. As you read any piece of material, keep in mind the following points.

Facts and Ideas versus Attitudes

- **Facts** (as the term is used here) are any bits of knowledge received through and verified by the senses.

- **Ideas** (as defined here) are generalizations arrived at on the basis of facts. Thus ideas, like facts, are subject to verification although for very complex ideas the process of verification may be extremely difficult.

- **Attitudes**, on the other hand, are personal feelings that cannot be verified objectively the way the facts and ideas can.

For example, “This horse has four legs” is a statement of fact based on information received through the senses. “Horses have four legs” is an idea based on numerous observations of individual horses. “Horses are beautiful,” by contrast, is a statement of attitude which cannot be verified in the way that statements of fact and of ideas can.

As you read a piece of writing, try to distinguish between facts, ideas, and attitudes. If the author has included some facts or ideas, ask yourself how well he/she has verified them. If he/she presents attitudes, ask what they are based upon.

Some Methods of Persuasion

1. **Selection of Facts.** The “truth” is not always the “whole truth.” Sometimes an author will appear to be supporting his/her conclusions with FACTS, but has selected only those facts that support his/her view while omitting the fact that might be incompatible with his/her view.

2. **Charged Words.** Consider the following five words, all of which refer to the same thing: PROTECTOR, POLICEMAN, COP, FUZZ, PIG. Each of these words has a different “charge” intended to elicit a certain emotional response from the reader. “Protector”, because it has a favorable connotation, is POSITIVELY CHARGED. “Policeman,” on the other hand, is fairly NEUTRAL, while “cop”, “fuzz”, and “pig” have, for most people, progressively NEGATIVE CHARGES. The word that a writer or speaker would select from this list for his/her use would depend on his/her ATTITUDE and INTENTIONS.

3. **When “Facts” are not Facts.** Authors sometimes express attitudes (which cannot be verified) in a form that makes them seem like facts or ideas. For example, “without a doubt, that is the most beautiful building in the city.”