Critical reading

What is critical reading?

Critical reading involves understanding the content of a text as well as how the subject matter is developed. Critical reading takes in the facts, but goes further. Does the text offer examples, ask for our sympathy, argue the point or use a contrast to clarify the point? Is the text successful in achieving its purpose?

You can read a text in at least three different ways.

Comprehension
1. Read to find out what the text says.
   Ask yourself: What are the main ideas of the text?

Analysis
2. Read to see what the text does.
   Ask yourself: how is the information presented?

Interpretation
3. Read to find out what the text means in a broader context.
   Ask yourself: What is the text saying?

In her discussion on the development and use of antibiotics, *Antibiotics on trial*, McKenzie (2004) states that the discovery of antibiotics was contributed to by two scientists: Alexander Fleming and Howard Florey. Prior to 1942 patients in hospitals were dying from sepsis after amputations or from other invasive procedures. Women died in large numbers from infections caused by childbirth, there was no great effort being made to find some form of antibacterial agent. In 1930, the microbiologist Fleming, who was studying micro-organisms and their growth patterns, wrote up his observations of the effect of bacteria on an organism for a small medical journal in London commenting that this might be worth further investigation; however, it wasn't followed up for 10 years. During the Second World War, men injured in battle were dying from sepsis in wounds. An Australian, Florey, who was working at Oxford University, was given the job as part of a PhD to try and find some bacterial agent. He came across the article written by Fleming and decided to follow it up. He managed to isolate enough penicillium from the penicillium fungus to treat one patient. America put money into this research and Florey and his assistant started to produce penicillium on a mass scale. There was enough produced in 1942 and 1943 to treat most of the allied soldiers, sailors and airmen that were being injured. (This text was devised for teaching purposes only. The content is regarded as general knowledge.)

If you were asked to summarise this text, you might write one of the following:
1. Florey managed to isolate penicillin during the Second World War. (This discusses the same topic as the original. It restates the original information.)
2. The passage compares the contributions made by two scientists, to the development of a life saving anti-bacterial agent. (This describes the way the material is presented, showing how ideas were developed.)
3. The high numbers of soldiers dying of wound infection in the second world war was the possible catalyst for the invention of penicillin. (This attempts to find a deeper meaning, interpreting the overall meaning of the passage.)

(The idea for this handout was taken from Dan Kurland’s www.criticalreading.com.)
Critical evaluation

Read to examine the logic behind the writer’s argument. Ask yourself: how successful is this text?

Steps for making a critical evaluation of what you have read:

1. What is the writer’s argument?

2. What are the main points/ideas that support that argument?

3. Does the writer attempt to address their stated point of view? What point of view? Is it successful?

4. Are the main points directly and logically linked to the argument and therefore, the question? If so, give examples and explain how they are linked. If not, give examples and explain why they are not linked.

5. What kinds of evidence does the author present to support these points? (Quality and quantity) Consider—is the evidence provided relevant, reliable and believable? Where does it come from?