

## ***Lecture 2: The Significance of Critical Reading in the Landscape of Educational Research***

### **Introduction**

Before identifying a dissertation topic, students are required to possess research skills that enable them to spot gaps in a specific field of inquiry. To achieve this, students must develop reading skills that empower them to selectively engage with academic material. This involves learning how to critically respond to a text, question information, and propose solutions to problems identified in the sources they consult. A fundamental skill for novice researchers to acquire initially is the ability to approach information with a critical mindset.

### **General Overview of Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking involves the objective analysis and evaluation of information, arguments, or situations through a systematic and logical approach. It requires individuals to engage in reasoning and reflective thinking to make informed decisions and solve problems. This process goes beyond mere acceptance or memorization of information; it necessitates questioning assumptions, exploring alternative perspectives, and assessing the reliability and validity of the information at hand. As expressed by Cottrell (2005, P1), critical thinking is “a cognitive activity associated with using the mind. Learning to think in critically analytical and evaluative ways means using mental processes such as attention, categorization, selection, and judgment”.

Ennis (1987, as cited in Cottrell, 2005) and Wallace and Wray (2011) expounded on critical thinking by underscoring key dispositions and abilities. They placed particular emphasis on the significance of reflective skepticism and reasoned thinking. Within this framework, scepticism is characterized not as outright disbelief but as a polite doubt, encouraging individuals to keep open the possibility that their current knowledge might be incomplete. Enabling a constructive application of scepticism

and doubt, critical thinking provides practical tools for analyzing information and making more informed decisions. It is crucial to note that critical thinking is portrayed as a methodological approach rather than a fixed personality trait, catering to individuals with varying levels of natural scepticism or trust.

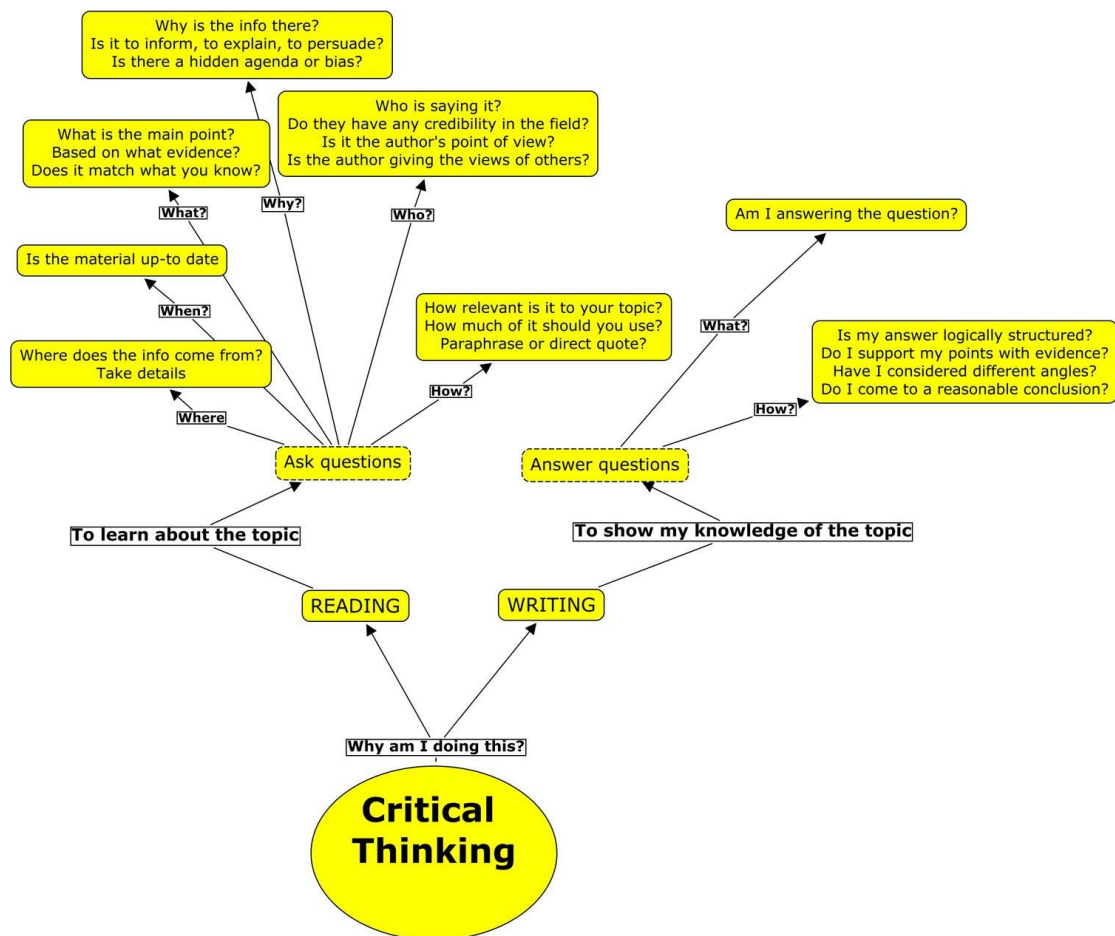
### **What is Critical Reading?**

As an academic writer, you are expected to be critical of the literature you use in your research. This means that you need to question what you read and not necessarily agree with it just because the information has been published by an established name in a certain field. Wallace and Wray (2011, p. 8) state that “the term ‘critical reading’ is often associated with individuals trying to show why their own interpretation of some idea or observation is better than someone else’s”. Added to this, being critical means looking for reasons why we should not just accept what we read as the absolute truth. This means that you are required to identify weaknesses and problems in an author’s arguments or even methods. Of course, highlighting inadequacies in a piece of writing is not enough and you are, hence, expected to suggest alternative ways in which an argument or a claim can be improved. This is referred to as constructive thinking. Constructive thinking means finding problems and indicating ways of bettering a piece of research.

### **What the researcher should look for when reading an academic text:**

1. The researcher should read between the lines and look for the hidden agenda of the author.
2. The researcher should link what they read to what they already know about a given subject.
3. The researcher should see whether the argument of the author is supported by enough evidence.
4. The researcher should see whether the evidence that convinced the author also convinces them in the same manner.
5. The researcher should see whether the author has offered convincing answers or potential solutions to their proposed research problem.

Ensure you employ the map to confirm that you are a critical reader.



*The Critical Reader's Mind map*

The extract below will help you understand how to respond to a piece of academic writing. This passage is fictional and it is taken from a paper published in 2005 by someone we have referred to as Browning. This passage refers to a study where some children were taught to read using the phonics method and others were taught using whole word method (Wallace and Wray, 2011; p. 5).

In the reading test, the five children who were taught to read using phonics performed better overall than the five children taught using the whole word method. This shows that the phonics method is a better choice for schools.

This extract contains some weaknesses that lead the reader to raise certain questions such as:

- is a study that is conducted on such a small number of ten children sufficient to draw such a strong conclusion?
- What does “performed better overall” mean?
- What was the method used in administrating the two teaching programs?
- Were the two groups of children matched for age, intelligence, gender and other factors? (Wallace & Wray, 2011, p. 5).

These are some questions that you as a critical reader should raise when reading an academic text as such. Asking critical questions shows that you can look beyond what it presented on the surface. Your task as a critical reader is to evaluate the information presented to you by an author. Evaluation means weighing up the argument’s credibility, whether there is enough evidence warranting the argument and whether the research findings provide any solutions to the research problem. This means that you should first look for the argument by identifying the issue being discussed. After that you should see whether the author has succeeded in providing you with convincing reasons to believe their claims. If you develop the critical thinking skill, you will be able to liberate yourself from the easy acceptance of other’s arguments without making any efforts at questioning the validity of the reasons given to you.

## **References**

Wallace, M. & Wray, A. (2011). *Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates*.

Los Angeles: Sage.

Cottrell, S. (2005). *Critical thinking Skills: Developing Effective Analysis and Arguments*. N.Y. Palcrave Macmlian.