

# How to Critically Engage

## Critical Reading, Critical Thinking, Critical Writing

- In order to write critically, you must first engage in critical reading and critical thinking.
- Critical Engagement begins with using Active Reading Strategies so you get the most out of your reading (see the Div School's Reading for Comprehension Guide). Active reading strategies help you to engage and understand the text as you read, as well as record your reactions to and questions about the text's claims.
- Pay attention and take notes in class. What are the instructor's views on a topic? How does the instructor interpret a work? Do you agree or disagree?

## Ways to Generate Ideas

**Discuss** the reading with a classmate. Trade notes/questions/reactions.

**Relate** the text to other class assignments—both the one it is assigned in and other courses. How does it fit in/differ from the conversation at hand?

**Make** a concept map or drawing while you read to show connections between points. What's missing? How are things related?

**Think** about the reading regarding the main subject areas at the Divinity School. How is it related to these? How could it contribute to these disciplines? (i.e., history, theology, biblical studies, ethics, pastoral care, practical ministry, etc.)

## Reading Response Outline

A critical response should be structured like any other essay with an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

1. Offer a brief overview of the author's overall arguments.
2. Summarize and focus on one specific claim (these first two parts should typically take up no more than a third of your essay).
3. Craft your response to this claim. Your response could build on or extend the author's claim, or diverge from and challenge it.
4. Focus your response on a few specific reactions to the text. You might state the significance of the author's claim for your paper or a certain discipline. You might discuss the author's methods, practical implications of the text's claims, etc. See the list on the next page for ideas of how to engage.

## Questions to Ponder

What is the main argument of the text? What are the issues and the conclusion?  
Why/How does it matter?  
Do you agree or disagree about the claims? Why?  
What are the strengths and weaknesses of the argument?  
Does this argument create more problems than it solves?  
What are the practical implications of these arguments?  
What is the genre? How does this affect the claims?  
When was it published? Would the argument be different today?  
Why did the author write this text? Who is the intended audience?  
What methods did the author use?  
How is the text guiding the reader to come to certain conclusions?  
What evidence does the author use? How good is this evidence?  
What are the author's assumptions? Are there fallacies in these?  
What is missing from the reading? Issues, ideas, topics, studies, etc. Why would the author leave these out?  
Are there voices left out (consciously or unconsciously)?  
Who might be affected by the author's claims?  
How would \_\_\_\_ group see this?  
What does this work say about God, humanity, the world?  
What differences exist between ideas in the text/s?  
What is the most important feature of \_\_\_\_?  
What might critics say about this text? What would counterarguments be?  
How would you solve the problem presented by the author?  
What's another way to look at this issue?  
What else is important on this topic?  
What in your lived experience coheres with or diverges from the author's claims?  
Do you have a real-life example/scenario that supports or counters the author's claim/s?

## Other Tips

Don't forget that you are now a scholar! It is okay to make your own claims based on the materials you have read or to completely disagree with a reading (as long as you back up your arguments).

Visit your instructor during office hours to discuss the reading/topic if you can't understand it or don't have any clue how to respond to it.

Before you write and review materials, reread the assignment prompt. Think about the instructor's feedback on other assignments.

Get feedback from someone before you turn your paper in—take it to the Academic Skills Coordinator, the Writing Center, let a friend read it, etc. specifically looking for critical engagement/analysis.

Proofread your assignment before you hand it in; sometimes the instructor cannot engage with your analysis if they cannot clearly read what you have written.

## Sources and Useful Resources

<https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/reading-comprehension-tips/>

<https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/reading-to-write/>