

Critical Reading: Directing Children's Judgment

One of the ways in which young adults develop themselves is in powers of critical reading--an intelligent, active, discerning approach to what they read. They form, on purpose, a habit of asking certain questions about written material. Broadly speaking, they are searching for the truth and are querying the mind and motivations and trustworthiness of each author they are engaged with.

Here are some of their critical questions:

- ° Who is this *person* who's speaking (writing) to me?
- ° What does this person want from me? What am I expected to believe, or do, or buy?
- ° Are this person's principles the same as mine? Do we share the same values? Is he or she materialistic? How can I tell?
- ° When a statement is made, what is the factual basis for it? How do we *know* that it is true, or at least a reasonable conclusion? Are we dealing here with facts or with assumptions--and if assumptions, how reasonable are they?
- ° How does the questionable statement square with what I have been taught by my parents and other adults whom I respect?



Hmmm, written in an intriguing investigative style – probing & well argued, a thoughtful & balanced work...

Newspapers & Magazines--Questions to ask

• Why does article appear where it does - front page, inside, on side bar? Is it reasonably "important"? To whom, and why?

People generally assume, but often mistakenly, that the most important articles appear on the front page and less important ones inside; also that less important articles are shorter. But who decides this, and on what basis? Is it possible that really important stories could be tucked away inside? Note that when Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in June 1914 (the trigger for World War I), not one American paper covered the story on its front page.

• Who wrote the article?

Pay attention to "by-line." What is the name of the reporter who wrote this story? (Most people ignore this.) It's a key to establishing a *personal relationship with the written word*, which is the basis for critical reading. Is this person a staff writer or foreign correspondent or area specialist (e.g. "business editor," "religion writer")? Note that specialists and foreign correspondents have more leeway to editorialize, to rely on opinion and generalizations, not just recitation of facts. Often some highly experienced "staff writers" can and will insert opinion, and their stories are often (but not always) labeled "news analysis."

- **Is the article "straight news" or a "feature" story?**

A feature story is a fairly lengthy, and often interesting and valuable, study of some topic. Usually it is not time-sensitive; that is, it could appear almost anytime in a given week or month. By its nature it involves generalizations, opinions, and critical analysis along with supporting facts. Features often appear on Sundays and Mondays because the weekend usually produces fewer news stories to report; this is because most government and other offices, often the sources for many news stories, are closed. Also note that some specialized reporters--business, foreign correspondent, religion, etc.--have some leeway to include opinions and generalizations in stories.

- **Which statements are facts and which are assumptions/opinions/allegations?**

Pay close attention to factual detail. But also note the *sources* for what's said. Who, specifically, is stating or alleging what's purported to be factually true--police or other government officials, participants or lawyers in a court action, eyewitnesses, specialists interviewed for their comments? Who's doing the talking? Is there potential built-in bias? Are sources named or anonymous--and, if anonymous, why don't they want their names used? Pay attention also to important qualifying terms: "alleged," "reported," "supposed," "estimated," "up to...," "as much as..." (That is, *who* is doing the alleging or reporting or supposing? *Who* is making the estimates?)

- **Does the headline accurately match the facts of the article?**

Headlines are usually written by an editor, not the reporter who wrote the story, and under considerable time-pressures. Also, headline writers must fit headlines into restricted space. Consequently, though most headlines are accurate and fit the facts of a story, some are not. They can be misleading to someone who does not read the article carefully.

- **If the subject of the story is controversial, are both sides evenly presented/quoted?**

Professional reporters really do try to balance arguments, presenting quotes from both sides and calling people (sometimes unsuccessfully) to get their statements. But some news stories are cut short by editors for space reasons, and consequently one side's explanations may be curtailed. This can result in an unbalanced treatment.

- **If statistics are used, what are their sources?**

Pay close attention here. Statistics often come from government sources, which are usually fair and reasonably reliable. But some stats and polls are put out by organizations or pressure groups that are trying to advance their position. Treat these with some skepticism. Is there potential bias? Do figures sound right, make sense?

- **If there are follow-up stories later, do they alter initial statement/allegations? Also, look through the "corrections" column.**

The time-pressures for putting out a publication sometimes result in inaccurate or unbalanced reportage. Often, a story published next day will clarify matters, or the paper's corrections column will itemize factual errors. Form a habit of reading this column--which sometimes reveals serious mistakes in the original story. Also look through the letters-to-the-editor section for replies to a story's allegations. People who have a grievance about a story (who complain, for instance, about inaccuracies or what they see as unfair treatment) are commonly invited to write an explanatory letter for publication. So, if you want to follow both sides of a controversial issue, read these letters.

Source: James B. Stenson
parentleadership.com