

# Critical Thinking... and the Art of Close Reading, Part III

By Richard Paul and Linda Elder

In the previous two columns we introduced the idea of close reading, emphasizing the importance of the following:

- understanding your purpose in reading,
- understanding the author's purpose in writing,
- seeing ideas in a text as being interconnected,
- looking for and understanding systems of meaning,
- engaging a text while reading,
- getting beyond impressionist reading, and
- formulating questions and seeking answers to those questions while reading.

To read well, in addition to having these understandings, students must be able to identify the big picture within a text, to determine the key ideas within the text early on, and to see the scaffolding that connects all the ideas within the text. In other words, they need to develop structural reading abilities. Moreover, students need to see that there are generalizable skills one must develop to read sentences and paragraphs well. In addition, students must develop reading skills specific to reading certain kinds of texts, like textbooks, newspaper articles, and editorials.

This column will focus on the theory of close reading, discussing "structural reading" first. We will then make some basic points about the art of reading sentences and paragraphs. We will conclude with some domain specific theory (Paul, R. & Elder, L., 2003, *The thinker's guide to how to read a paragraph: The art of close reading*. Dillon Beach, CA: The Foundation for Critical Thinking, [www.criticalthinking.org](http://www.criticalthinking.org)). The following guidelines are written directly to the student.

## Structural Reading

Structural reading is a form of close reading applied to the overall structure of an extended text (usually a book). Structural reading focuses on what can be learned about the book from its title, preface, introduction, and table of contents. Structural reading has two main uses. First, it enables one to evaluate a book to determine whether it is worth the time to read it carefully. Second, it provides an overview to use as scaffolding in reading the text. Grasping a basic idea of what a book is driving at before reading it in detail allows readers to make much better sense of the parts of it, paragraph by paragraph.

To read structurally, ask these questions:

- What does the title tell me about this book?
- What is the main idea in the book? (You should be able to figure this out from skimming the introduction, preface, and first chapter.)
- What are the parts of the whole, and how does the book deal with those parts? (Again, this may be found in an overview in the introduction, preface, first chapter, and/or table of contents.)
- In light of my structural reading, what questions would I pursue during close reading?

## How to Read a Sentence

Reading a sentence consists, first of all, of finding a way to state what the sentence says so we can think the thought the sentence expresses. Further ways to make the meaning of a sentence clear are: elaborating the sentence, finding an example, and illustrating its meaning.

Finding key sentences means finding the sentences that are the driving force within a book. Structural reading is one way by which to locate key paragraphs and boil them down to key sentences, and thence to key ideas and key questions.

An important part of reading with discipline is to connect sentences to the broader context within which they are located, to see how they fit within the written piece. For every sentence you read, you might ask:

- How does this sentence connect with the other sentences in the text?
- How does this sentence relate to the organizing idea of this text as a whole?

Good readers read sentences in relationship to other sentences, connecting each sentence with the purpose of the written piece. Taking a sentence out of context can pose problems because sentences read in isolation from the sentences that precede or follow them often overstate a point. The sentences that precede or follow usually clarify the author's true meaning or bring it in line with supporting facts.

## How to Read a Paragraph

Carefully reading a paragraph involves finding the idea or question that is the driving force within the paragraph. Finding key paragraphs consists of finding the ideas or questions that are the main focus within the book. Structural reading, as stated previously, is an important means by which to locate key paragraphs.

All paragraphs within a written piece should connect to every other paragraph in order to see logical connections between ideas. All ideas should form a system of meanings. As readers move from paragraph to paragraph, they should ask:

- What is the most important idea in this paragraph?
- How do the ideas in this paragraph relate to the ideas in previous paragraphs?
- How are the important ideas in the text connected?

Look for paragraphs that focus on significant ideas or questions. Connect those ideas, when possible, to situations and experiences that are meaningful in your life. To actively connect ideas to life situations, ask:

- How can I relate this idea to something I already understand?
- Is there an important idea here that I can use in my thinking?
- Have I ever experienced a situation that sheds light on this idea?

## How to Read a Textbook

The first and most important insight necessary for successfully reading a textbook is that all textbooks focus on "systems" which, when internalized, can help us reason through a specific set of problems. They focus on a special way of thinking about a special set of things. To elaborate, history textbooks teach a special way of thinking about events in the past. Biology textbooks teach a special way of thinking about living things. Mathematics textbooks teach a special way of thinking about the numbers, shapes, and figures. The same is true for all other textbooks.

Thus, there is no way to learn mathematics from a math textbook without learning how to figure out correct answers to mathematical questions and problems. There is no way to learn history from a history textbook without learning how to figure out correct or reasonable answers to historical questions and problems. There is no way to learn biology from a biology textbook without learning how to figure out answers to biological questions and problems. Any subject can therefore be understood as a system of figuring out correct or reasonable answers to a certain set of questions. One studies chemistry to understand chemicals and how they interact (to answer questions about chemicals) and psychology to figure out human behavior (to answer questions about certain human problems). All subjects can be understood in this way. All textbooks can be read in this way.

Most textbooks begin with an introductory chapter or preface designed to introduce the field of study: What is biology? What is physics? What is history? It is important to closely read this opening chapter in order to acquire from the very beginning an insight into the most basic and fundamental concepts in the field.

Once a basic idea of the whole of a subject from the introductory chapter is understood, it facilitates thinking within the system. Thus, with a basic idea of biology, one should be able to do some simple biological thinking, ask some basic biological questions, and identify some relevant biological information. This is crucial to success in reading the remainder of the textbook because without a clear concept of the whole, it is impossible to relate the parts (covered by the other chapters) to that whole.

Good reading strategy should not be whole, part, part, part, part, part...but, rather, whole, part, whole, part, whole, part. Good readers first ground themselves in a basic (though introductory) idea of the whole. They then relate each part (each subsequent chapter) to that whole. They understand the whole through integrating the parts into it and use the whole as a tool of synthesis. Knowledge of the parts is used as a tool of analysis.

## How to Read National and International Newspapers

To become adept at reading the news, one must first understand that every society and culture has a unique worldview. This colors what each sees and how they see it. News media writing in the cultures of the world reflect the worldview of the native culture.

Understanding this concept can then apply to understanding how the news is constructed by every country in the world. Within any country, the news media highlight what is positive about the country; its enemies' news media highlight what is negative about it. Critical readers of the news must make adjustments for both of these biases.

At present, the overwhelming majority of people in the world, untrained in critical reading, are at the mercy of the news media in their own country. A first step toward learning how to read the news critically is the guide entitled *How to Detect Media Bias & Propaganda*. It focuses on how to:

- interpret events from the perspective of multiple views;
- find multiple sources of thought and information, not simply those of the mass media;
- identify the viewpoints embedded in news stories;
- mentally rewrite (reconstruct) news stories through awareness of how stories are told from multiple perspectives;
- assess news stories for their clarity, accuracy, relevance, depth, breadth, and significance;
- identify contradictions and inconsistencies in the news (often in the same story);
- identify the agenda and interests served by a story;
- identify the facts covered and the facts ignored in a news story; and
- identify the points of view systematically presented in a favorable light and those presented in an unfavorable light.

These are some of the skills that critical readers of the news develop. To take command of the way the mass media influence an individual's world view, one must learn how to see through personal biases and appreciate dissenting as well as mainstream points of view. Only by using a balanced approach is it possible to reach well-reasoned conclusions. At present, few people have developed the skills to do this.

## How to Read an Editorial

To become adept at reading editorials, one must first understand that the goal of the editorial writer is to make a brief case for a specific

side of a controversial issue. His or her goal is not to consider all sides or to do what a writer of a research paper or report is expected to do. The fact is that most people are rigid in their thinking and largely closed-minded. There are many points of view into which they cannot enter. There are many ways to look at the world that rigid readers never examine or appreciate. We must learn how to step outside of our own point of view and enter points of view with which we are unfamiliar.

The goal of a newspaper is not to educate readers concerning international and dissenting points of view but rather to make money by catering to the beliefs and preconceptions of its readers. Thus, newspapers rarely present radically dissenting perspectives.

Critical readers read to discover and digest a wide range of points of view, especially points of view that tend to be ignored in the mainstream of the culture, and search out dissenting media sources.

## Conclusion

In this column, we have focused on the theory of close reading, including structural reading, how to read a sentence, how to read a paragraph, how to read a textbook, and how to read a newspaper. In our next column, we will deal with five levels of close reading.

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