Critical Thinking …
and the Art of Close Reading, Part IV

By Linda Elder and Richard Paul

The typical college student is unable to deeply comprehend what he or she reads. Most students have few, if any, intellectual tools that would enable them to read deeply, and then apply what they have read. In the "Critical Thinking and the Art of Close Reading" series (which includes this column and the past three columns) we focus on some of the most basic understandings necessary for close reading (Paul & Elder, 2003).

The most fundamental idea underlying this four-part series is that the work of close reading consists in mindfully extracting and internalizing the important meanings implicit in a text. It is a highly constructive activity. The reflective mind works its way into the mind of an author through intellectual discipline. This requires understanding what it means to read closely and developing, through routine practice, the intellectual skills to do so. In the previous three columns we emphasized the importance of the following:

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

We also focused on specific understandings necessary for reading differing types of material, targeting how to **read structurally**, as well as how to read: (a) a sentence, (b) a paragraph, (c) a textbook, (d) a newspaper, and (e) an editorial.

In this, the final column of the series, we focus on some of the skills required to read at different levels. We highlight five levels, beginning with the most basic and moving to the more complex. The reflective reader does not always use all of them but chooses from among them given the purpose for reading. We recommend introducing students to each level and giving them routine practice in applying the strategies included at each level. Through consistent practice, students will eventually develop their abilities to construct ideas into their thinking, to accurately assess what they are reading, and to think within the viewpoint of authors (even those with whom they disagree).

We introduce the five levels of close reading in this column in the form of directions for students. At each level, imagine yourself applying the strategies in reading an article, excerpt, or other text. For practice exercise at each level, see *The Thinker's Guide to How to Read a Paragraph* (Paul & Elder, 2003).

First Level: Paraphrasing the Text Sentence by Sentence

To paraphrase, which is the first step to understanding, is to translate an author's wording into your own alternative wording. In other words, you put the words and thoughts of the author into your words. Your paraphrase is successful only if your words capture the essential meaning of the original. A first reading is successful if the reformulation of the text it represents opens up, or at least begins to open up, the meaning of the original.

Hence, after reading the phrase: "Democracy is rule by the people," a paraphrase might read, "A country is democratic only insofar as all the people in the country have an equal amount of power and potential influence in the political process." The paraphrase opens up the text because it points us to possible problems in assessing a country for the degree to which it is democratic. For example, "Does it restrict the influence of the wealthy so they cannot use their wealth to exercise a disproportionate influence in the decision-making of the government?"

Second Level: Explicating the Thesis of a Paragraph

To explicate the thesis of a paragraph or larger text, use the following clarification strategies:

1. **State the thesis clearly in a sentence**. If readers cannot accurately state the author's key idea in a sentence using their own words, they don't really know what the author is saying.
2. **Explain a thesis sentence in greater detail**. If readers cannot elaborate an author's key idea, then they have not yet connected its meaning to other concepts that they understand.
3. **Give examples of what the author is saying**. If readers cannot connect what the author is saying with concrete situations in the real world, their knowledge of the meanings is still abstract and, to some extent, vague.
4. **Illustrate what the author is saying** with a metaphor, analogy, picture, diagram, or drawing. If readers cannot generate metaphors, analogies, pictures, or diagrams of what the author is saying, they have not yet connected his or her key ideas with other domains of knowledge and experience.

Use this format for explicating the thesis of a paragraph:

1. State the main point of the paragraph in one or two sentences.
2. Then elaborate on the paraphrased sentences ("In other words,…").
3. Give examples of the meaning by tying it to concrete situations in the real world ("For example,…").
4. Generate metaphors, analogies, pictures, or diagrams of the basic thesis to connect it to other meanings you already understand.

Third Level: Analyzing the Logic of What We Are Reading

Anytime individuals read, they are reading the product of an author's reasoning. One can use the elements of reasoning to bring reading to a higher level. Asking the following questions in any order provides a method for analyzing.

1. The main **purpose** of this article is _____. (Try to state, as accurately as possible, the author's intent in writing the article. What is the author trying to accomplish?)
2. The key **question** that the author is addressing is _____. (Figure out the key question that was in the mind of the author when he or she wrote the article. What was the key question addressed in the article?)
3. The most important **information** in this article is _____. (Identify the key information the author used, or presupposed, in the article to support his or her main arguments. Look for facts, experiences, and/or data the author is using to support conclusions.)
4. The main **inferences** in this article are _____. (Identify the most important conclusions the author comes to and presents in the article.)
5. The key **concept(s)** the reader needs to understand in this article is

(are)_____; by these concepts the author means _____. (To identify these ideas, ask: What ideas are the most important to know in order to understand the author's line of reasoning? Then briefly elaborate what the author means by these ideas.)

6. The main **assumption(s)** underlying the author's thinking is (are)_____. (Ask: What is the author taking for granted [that might be questioned]? The assumptions are generalizations that the author does not think he or she has to defend in the context of writing the article, and they are usually unstated. This is where the author's thinking logically begins.)
7. (a) If one takes this line of reasoning seriously, the **implications** are _____. (What consequences are likely to follow if people take the author's line of reasoning seriously? Pursue the logical implications of the author's position. Include implications that the author states, and also those that the author does not state.)
   (b) If one fails to take this line of reasoning seriously, the **implications** are _____. (What consequences are likely to follow if people ignore the author's reasoning?)
8. The main **point(s) of view** presented in this article is (are) _____. (Try to answer the question: What is the author looking at, and how is he or she seeing it? For example, this mini-guide looks at "analysis" and sees it "as requiring one to understand" and routinely apply the elements of reasoning when thinking through problems, issues, subjects, etc.)

Fourth Level: Evaluating or Assessing the Logic of a Reading

Every written piece is not of the same quality. Readers assess what they read by applying intellectual standards to it, standards such as clarity, precision, accuracy, relevance, significance, depth, breadth, logic, and fairness. Some authors adhere to some standards while violating others. For example, an author might be clear in stating his or her position while, at the same time, using information that is not accurate. An author might use relevant information but fail to think through the complexities of the issue (that is, fail to achieve depth). An author's argument might be logical but not significant. Readers, then, need to become adept at assessing the quality of an author's reasoning. Only after accurately stating in our own words an author's meaning is this possible.

To assess an author's work, answer the following questions:

- Does the author clearly state his or her meaning, or is the text vague, confused, or muddled in some way?
- Is the author accurate in what he or she claims?
- Is the author sufficiently precise in providing details and specifics when specifics are relevant?
- Does the author introduce irrelevant material, thereby wandering from his or her purpose?
- Does the author take us into the important complexities inherent in the subject, or is the writing superficial?
- Does the author consider other relevant points of view, or is the writing overly narrow in its perspective?
- Is the text internally consistent, or does the text contain unexplained contradictions?
- Is the text significant, or is the subject dealt with in a trivial manner?
- Does the author display fairness, or does the author take a one-sided, narrow approach?

Conclusion

To learn well, one must read well. It is far more important to read a few things well than to read many things poorly. Among the things one should read well are substantive texts: texts that contain important ideas and ground thinking in powerful ideas. It is quite possible to educate oneself entirely through reading. This can be done if one has the intellectual skills to work through complex written material, enter conflicting viewpoints, internalize important ideas, and apply those ideas to one's life.

Alternatively, one cannot be an educated person without consistently learning through reading. Unfortunately, at present, most students lack the skills of mind necessary for reading at a deep and substantive level. They cannot hope to educate themselves through reading because, frankly, they haven't learned to read (which involves both accurately deciphering, *as well as* logically interpreting). It is impossible to say that students are educated if they cannot clearly and accurately paraphrase what they have read, they cannot explicate a thesis clearly and accurately, they cannot figure out the logic of an author's reasoning, and/or they cannot logically assess an author's reasoning. But by using the tools that have been the focus of this series, along with practice exercises like those found in the *Thinker's Guide to How to Read a Paragraph* (Paul & Elder, 2003), students can gradually develop the intellectual skills requisite to close reading.

Reference

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.

Linda Elder is executive director and Richard Paul is director of research & professional development of the Center for Critical Thinking at Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA 94928.