

## **Developing your critical analysis skills**

Most of the assignments in this course require you to "think critically" about the assigned topic. This means that assignments based on required readings require you to do more than simply summarize or describe the readings. Critical thinking about the course material actually involves two steps:

1. Reading for understanding, and
2. Analyzing what you have read

### **Reading for understanding:**

This is the first part of the critical analysis process, and there are five steps to follow.

1. Identify the thesis statement and the topic sentences.
2. Identify key words and phrases.
3. Learn any new-to-you vocabulary.
4. Examine the order in which points are presented.
5. Identify how the writer supports the thesis by way of examples, illustrations, arguments, and so on.

### **Analyzing what you have read**

In general, it's nearly impossible to critically analyze everything about a piece of writing. Focusing on a single aspect of the work is usually the most time-effective and practical way to proceed. For instance, you could analyze one of the following:

- Thesis statement: Is it clearly stated?  
Logical? Convincing? Do you agree or disagree with it? Why?
- Supporting details:  
Do they support the thesis in a logical and convincing way? Are there enough details (relevant evidence, experience, and/or information) to support the thesis completely? If there aren't, what needs to be added?
- Organization:  
How is the article organized or structured? Does the writing have a logical flow to it? Does the writer make good use of transition devices?
- The issue:  
Is it examined thoroughly? Has anything been left out? If so, why might this be the case?

### **How to develop your group and individual assignments using critical analysis skills:**

- Identify the author's standpoint and assumptions. By standpoint we are referring to the lens through which the author views the topic about which they are writing. This may include social locations, insider/outsider status (epistemic privilege) in relation to the topic, etc. All you can do is to surmise as much about the author as possible from the

information given -- it is not always explicit. In addition, it is useful to identify the author's implicit and explicit assumptions.

- Karen Potts, an instructor at the School of Social Work, notes:

It is also very important that at third/fourth year university level you understand and incorporate the difference between description and analysis. Simplistically, description deals with the “who, what, when, where”. You might also describe another person’s or author’s analysis. Critical analysis, however, is about your insight into the why, how, and “so what” informed by the course authors and materials. In a critical analysis connections are made to the greater social, economic, environmental, and political context. Structures are deconstructed and concepts are unpacked. Dominant and alternative theoretical and ideological bases are identified, discussed and addressed. Critical questions are asked and answered such as: who benefits from the ways things are? What are the power relations present? A critical analysis considers alternatives and does not accept things as “the way things are”. (Karen Potts, SOCW 301 K50 outline, summer 2006)