

Reading critically

Working out where a writer is coming from

Once you have decided on what sources you will use, you need to evaluate the information they present. Of course, not all published authors agree with each other. This is also one of the ways that research builds: people examine and often challenge other people's ideas and methods. So, in your reading, while you will come across a lot of authors who pretty much agree with each other, you are likely to come across articles which have met the RRR (Relevant, Reliable, Recent – see [How to evaluate sources of information Quick Guide](#)) criteria but disagree with each other.

When authors write something they want to put the points they are making in the best possible light. Authors put their own 'spin' on things to varying degrees. A fairly extreme example of this is when some controversial social issue comes under the microscope. It is possible to present two people with exactly the same information and have them reach completely opposite conclusions. This is because the values they bring with them to the issue are so different. As a reader you need to be aware that writers are, sometimes quite subtly, trying to write for their own advantage.

Have a look at the two examples below:

The examples are taken from an email joke which began circulating in January, 2009 (taken from a now-defunct website, [urbanlegends.about.com](#)). They are two accounts of the same (fictitious) event.

Example 1

Remus Reid was a horse thief and train robber. He was sent to Montana Territorial Prison in 1885, escaped in 1887, robbed the Montana Flyer six times. He was caught by Pinkerton detectives, convicted and hanged in 1889.

Example 2

Remus Reid was a famous cowboy in the Montana Territory. His business empire grew to include the acquisition of valuable equestrian assets and intimate dealings with the Montana railroad. Beginning in 1885, he devoted several years of his life to government service, finally taking leave to resume his dealings with the railroad. In 1887, he was a key player in a vital investigation run by the renowned Pinkerton Detective Agency. In 1889, Remus passed away during an important civic function held in his honour when the platform upon which he was standing collapsed.

In one version Remus Reid is depicted as a criminal. In the other he is made out to be a pillar of the community. Think about what strategies the two writers have used to come up with two totally different versions of the same events. Think about the values contained in the words used to describe Remus Reid.

How to be a critical reader

As a critical reader, you should be asking yourself questions like:

- How has the writer referred to other writers?
- What words has the writer chosen when referring to writers who are on the same side?
- What words has the writer chosen when referring to writers who are on the other side?
- How well are the arguments supported by evidence?
- Is there evidence from a variety of sources or just one or two?
- Is there evidence that has been ignored or dismissed?

Remember, reading with a questioning eye and being negative are **not** the same thing.

Applying critical reading skills to the process of doing an assessment

It is important to remember that most university assessments require you to be **critical** in your analysis and discussion and to carefully consider both sides of an issue.

So, how do you apply a critical approach throughout the whole process of putting an assessment together? Remember that almost all university assessments require *analysis* and many require *persuasion* (see [Writing analytically and persuasively Quick Guide](#)) The tips below are things you don't do one after the other. You practise them all at once throughout the process of putting an assessment together.

- Always aim to understand how individual pieces of information connect together.
- Try to organise the pieces of information that fit together into groups or categories and give these categories an abstract heading (see [Writing analytically and persuasively Quick Guide](#)).
- Work out an overall picture of how these groups of information fit together in relation to each other and how they contribute to the big picture.
- As you research, be flexible. As you order and classify information the overall picture might start to change. For example, some information in one category might contradict something else in the same category. This is something you need to resolve by applying critical thinking skills. Ask yourself questions like 'does the conclusion follow logically from the evidence?'; 'which article put forward the strongest case?' (Remember the strongest case is the one based on a sound interpretation of solid evidence.)
- As you proceed you will be constantly weighing up different points of view as you discover new ideas and new evidence.

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