

APPROACHING A TEXT CRITICALLY: *SOME* ISSUES TO CONSIDER¹

Note #1: *The questions listed below are not exhaustive (and each and every question will not apply to each and every text). Consequently, **you are encouraged to raise additional questions** in reference to each text, as well as use your judgment in determining which of the following questions are applicable to a given text.*

Note #2: *When you approach a text do not interpret it as the final statement or ultimate authority on a topic, but one perspective on or addition to a continuing debate or dialogue.*

I. Establishing the Basis for the Critique – Internal Considerations (i.e., internal to the text)

- A. Which theories, bodies of research, schools of thought etc. is the author in conversation with? Is she challenging or extending the works or findings to which she speaks?
- B. What is the author's question or problem?
- C. What are the key concepts?
- D. What are the explicit and implicit assumptions of the text?
- E. What is the level/unit of analysis (e.g., individual, group, community, state etc.)?
- F. What are the critical characteristics of the unit of study (e.g., black versus white individual; a democratic versus a socialist state; a heterogeneous versus a homogenous community; a peer group versus a familial network; social class group vs. racial group vs. gender group).
- G. What is the context (e.g., historical, geographical)?
- H. What is the process of investigation? Upon what sources or methods does the author rely?
- I. What is the central argument? What are the significant findings?

¹ Adopted from O'Connor (ED 643/2005)

II. Moving to the first level of abstraction – Still working within the text

- A. What is the significance of this text? How would you assess its contribution?
- B. Are there contradictions or inconsistencies in the logic of the argument? If any, to what might we attribute these contradictions or inconsistencies?
- C. Does the evidence provide adequate support for the argument?
- D. Was the method well suited to the question(s) or problem(s) raised by the author? If not, what is the flaw? Would another method have been more appropriate? If so, what method and why?
- E. What question did the author fail to ask? Why is this a critical question?

III. Moving to the second level of abstraction – Going beyond the text

- A. What would be
 - 1. a different context?
 - 2. a different unit analysis and its commensurate characteristics?
- B. Do other bodies of literature contradict the argument?
- C. Do other bodies of literature support or supplement the argument?
- D. Do other bodies of literature promise to extend or complicate the argument?
- E. What are the policy or political implications of the work?
- F. Does the work suggest future directions for research?

Final Note: *Trust your instincts. If your instincts tell you something is wrong, interrogate those feelings.*