**Critical Reading**

**Analytical Reading Techniques**

|  |
| --- |
| **AIMS**:   * To introduce students to critical reading for research purposes and provide them with tools to interpret written texts. * To demonstrate to students the necessity to understand the context in which a text is written. |

**Lecture**

Reading is the most important part of your academic career. Learning how to read well will inevitably make you a better writer, speaker and student. The study of the international political economy requires you to understand and write about complex interdisciplinary concepts and themes that may not necessarily be fixed or absolute. That is to say that they may be subject to individual or collective interpretation or ambiguity.

For example there is much debate about the causes of the global financial crisis in 2008. Deregulation of the finance industries under Thatcherism and Reaganism, casino capilatism on Wall Street and in Iceland, unfettered property speculation in the USA and Ireland, or information assymetries between buyers and sellers of insurances, or all of the above? If you research this topic, you will come across myriad sources of information arguing from various positions and potentially providing conflicting conclusions. If you accept each article as the watertight explanation, how would you ever be able to form your own argument?

Therefore, students must always aim to maximise their comprehension of the ideas presented in a text through reading critically.

As you have learnt previously, the international political economy can be viewed from a number of perspectives. Views on the importance and impact of domestic vis-à-vis international institutions vary, as do understandings of the power of states versus social forces. This means that texts on the subject may be prone to bias or support a particular perspective or agenda.

In addition, from week one you will recall that the theories of IPE are contextually based, for example the liberal view has been heavily influenced by events since the late 1970s, including the liberalisation of Chinese economy, privatisation and deregulation in the West and the emergence of global and politically influential firms.

As mentioned previously, one of the main arguments in this course is that theory is based or produced by researchers who look at real world phenomena, try to find patterns in this data, and try to explain why these patterns occur. Stated differently, one defining characteristic of theories is that they explain how the world does work. However, theories often also make assumptions about how the world should work. In this course, we’ll often try and identify the implicit (and sometimes explicit) normative or prescriptive assumptions that are embedded in theories of IPE. This doesn’t mean that theories simply offer us differences of opinion. Theory is not opinion.

Theories are constructed by looking at patterns in the real world, constructing hypotheses about why these patterns exist, testing hypotheses to see if they hold true, and revising hypotheses in light of their ability to hold up to evidence. Theories are often developed by a community of social scientists who work together to explain the same phenomenon. The hope is that this collaborative exercise will allow scientists to come up with a theory that will allow them to make predictions, based on previous instances of the same occurrence (e.g. a revolution in Russia, Cuba, Iran, France or China), how new instances of such occurrences (e.g. a “revolution” in Egypt, Libya, Syria, etc.) will unfold.

Through your reading and writing, you will become part of this community and part of this peer review process and therefore it is incumbent on you to critically assess what you are reading, to test the construction of these hypotheses. And to separate the facts from the opinion.

Opinions are personal or idiosyncratic expressions – they are not constructed collectively by a community of experts, not are the formulated through a systematic process of creating valid and reliable claims. Instead, opinions simply hold “true” for the person expressing the opinion – even if it does not accurately explain real-world events. Moreover, opinions need not be justified. They are simply an individual’s personal perspective on a particular state of affairs. Opinions can mostly be recognized by the language and phraseology used and in some cases by apparent logical fallacies – tips for identifying these will be introduced later.

However, theories often also make assumptions about how the world should work. You must also learn to identify the implicit (and sometimes explicit) normative or prescriptive assumptions that are embedded in theories of IPE. For example, if an author is writing from a particular theoretical stand point, such as a marxist versus a realist perspective, there is likely to be a bias towards various theoretical themes. A marxist may focus on class politics, whilst a realist will presuppose the importance of a self interest of the state. Remember, these assumptions have been tested and peer reviewed and there is a considerable community of political scientists prepared to stand behind these assumptions.

Your ability to write well will be dependent on your interpretation of the evidence you have gained from reading texts on your choosen subject. This can include academic journals, text books, newspaper and magazine articles and a host of other written resources. Therefore your writing is a skill you can only acquire once you have learned how to understand what you read.

**SECTION ONE: Academic Reading [XX minutes]**:

**How is academic reading different from reading fiction?**

Academic reading is a process. It is not the same as reading fiction for pleasure. When reading a book for fun, your goal is not to remember the information or to learn anything new, the only goal is entertainment. Academic reading, on the other hand, requires you to engage with the material and ask questions like:

* How does this scholar relate to others I have read?
* How will this information be useful to my understanding of the topic?

Academic reading requires critical thinking, which requires you to do more than simply remember facts and terms: you are also required to make judgements about how a text is argued. This type of reflective reading requires you to look for more than the information presented, but also to determine ways of thinking about the subject covered. You want to understand what the author is arguing, what evidence is presented and how has this evidence been interpreted and finally is the conclusion sound based on this interpretation of the evidence.

We call this reading for content.

**SECTION TWO: Reading for Content [XX minutes]**:

Reading for content requires you to remember what you are reading and begin building a complete picture of your subject.

**Preparing for Reading**

Before Reading it is important to have an idea about the text you are about to read.

What is the genre?

Who is the author?

Why has the author written this text?, etc.

You should also try to determine the context of what you will be reading. The context is basically the setting within which the piece of work was constructed:

the who,

what,

why,

when,

where,

and how

which helps you anticipate the reading and understand it better.

Academic reading is not like reading a mystery novel, you should not be surprised at the end. Instead, you should go into the reading with an idea of what you hope to get out of it. Your syllabus identifies the key words, questions and topics for the course and should indicate what you might be looking for in a text. Reading the introduction and conclusion first helps you to formulate the questions you will want to ask yourself as you read the text.

Skimming and scanning techniques can also help you gain an understanding of the text, before you read it in depth.

* Focus on headings, bold, *italicized*, and underlined text
* Read introduction and conclusion
* Skimming is glancing through the text to find main ideas
* Scanning is looking for specific information in the text
* Think about what the text is about before you read it

Questions to Ask Before Reading:

What is the genre?

Who is the author?

What is the author’s context? (time, location, setting)

What is the author’s purpose for writing the text?

How does the author position themselves in the text?

Who is the intended audience?

What do I already know about this topic?

What is the structure of the text and how can I use the structure to understand what is written?

What clues can I use to understand what is going on in the text?

What do I expect to learn from this reading?

These questions are essentially trying to help you define the context of the text.

**Context:**

Context is the information surrounding a text that is important in order to understand the full meaning of a text. This information can include:

* the time
* location
* perspective of the author
* historical events,and
* popular theories that influence the writing of the text.

Remember, the main theoretical frameworks used to study IPE – realism, liberalism, and Marxism– were generated in particular historical contexts, by actors located in particular disciplinary and political contexts, with specific ideological and normative commitments.

The context of a piece of writing is important because the time, location, and perspective of the author influence what the author thinks and what they write about. Consider how the time of a writing may be important, what historical events were taking place during the time of the writing? What were the common views of various groups in society? (race, gender, etc.) What major wars or conflicts occurred that could shape the author’s interpretation of the subject? Where is the author located? (a writer’s place of origin can give them a very particular view of the world).

A better understanding of the context can provide you with clues to the author’s purpose and the meaning of the text.

**Purpose:**

Connected with context is purpose.

* Why has the author chosen to write a particular text?
* What does the author hope the reader learns from the text?
* Who is the author’s intended audience?
* How does the author reveal their purpose through the tone of the text and the positioning of the author and the reader in the text?
* Is the author’s tone authoritative like a professor to student, is it conversational like between friends, is it meant to prove a point?
* Does the author refer to other scholars as if to prove or disprove their points?

**Structure**

The structure of an individual text is important and will influence how the reader engages with the material.

* Are there headings and bullet points?
* Is the author writing a letter?
* Is there a clear introduction and conclusion?
* Are the important parts of the writing at the beginning, in the middle, or the end?

These are important questions to answer in order to understand a text. The structure often depends on the genre of a particular text. When reading critically, you are looking for more than these basic elements, you are also seeking out the authors claim, the evidence or reasons (premises) the author uses to substantiate the claim and the conclusion that is draw.

Once you have determined these you can begin to unpack them and assess them for validity.

*On structure:*

* Can you easily indentify the claim[is it clearly defined] (Thesis Statement)?
* Does the argument move clearly from claim to evidence to conclusion?
* Does the structure of sentences and paragraphs and the overall organization guide you and help you follow the author's intent?

*On evidence*

* What kind of evidence does the writer use? [*personal knowledge, reliable expert opinion, common knowledge, reliable testimony, common sense, anecdotes, statistic*s, authority/expert]
* Have you read or heard anything on this subject that confirms or challenges the evidence?
* Are the examples valid?
* Are the sources reliable *[A good idea would be to check the bibliography/references*]?
* Has the author mentioned opposing evidence, and countered it with supporting evidence for their claim. [*Good, ethical arguments are more likely to provide both evidence which supports their views as well as evidence which may contradict them. This is also an important tool in strengthening his or her case by first acknowledging opposing evidence, and then countering it.* ]

*On the conclusion:*

* Has the author made use of the evidence to justify the conclusion?
* Is it clearly linked to the original claim, and done so convincingly?

A weak argument will usually contain one or more logical fallacies. Logical fallacies are errors in logic, where the evidence presented does not prove the claims.

Key question to ask are:

* Does the author make any claims that are not backed up by evidence?
* Do you think that the evidence is sufficient, for an article in an academic text book?
* Are any of the listed logical fallacies evident in the argument ( see attached list)

**Logical Fallacies:**

This is a fairly comprehensive list of logical fallacies often used in arguments. You should be particularily mindful of these when reviewing primary material from governments or politicians or press articles, where the peer review process is much less rigorous than in academic books and papers.

Some particularly common ones include:

The **strawman**, i.e. misrepresenting someone's argument to make it easier to attack.

The **false cause**, i.e. presuming that a real or perceived relationship between things means that one is the cause of the other.

**Appeals to the emotions** of readers, thereby manipulating an emotional response in place of a valid or compelling argument.

Using **anecdotal** experiences or isolated examples instead of valid arguments to dismiss statistics.

And finally the **Texas sharpshooter** approach; cherry-picking data clusters to suit an argument, or finding a pattern to fit a presumption.

**Language:**

Langauge and tone used in texts are purposfully choosen by the author. These can be used to highlight to the reader any potential bias or predetermined position of the author.

Academic texts tend to be written in measured tones. Newspaper journalists may be more prone to hyperbole and exaggeration. The author may underplay evidence that is contradictory to their thesis and may oversell that which supports their argument.

Assessing language and tone can help unearth logical fallacies. The use of hyperbole (“A giant leap forward for …the Goldman Sachs Project.” (Foley, 2011:1) or overly emotional language or the use of colloquialisms should all raise concerns. Where is the evidence in the next statement of fact from Foley?

“This is the Goldman Sachs Project. Put simply, it is to hug governments close.” (Foley, 2011)

What does ‘hug’ mean in this context?

Where is the evidence of this hugging?

How can we interpret this sentence?

Other forms of language can similarily flag assumpitions, opinions and many of the logical fallicies listed.

Exercise:

*Exercise: Reading for Context*

What price the new democracy? Goldman Sachs conquers Europe.

1. What is the text about ?
2. Where was it published/genre (what do you know about this journal/genre)?
3. What is the historical context ( what has happening in this period of history – any significant cultural and political development which relate to the topic of the article)?
4. Have there been any significant changes politically and culturally since the article was written ?
5. Who is the author ( have they written similar kinds or work, what perspectives to they generally hold, are they well known in the area in which they are writing)?
6. Why do you think the author is writing this particular text ?
7. What is the argument and why is the argument significant (culturally/politically/historically)?
8. What other positions/argument does the author mention ( or leave out) and how is this significant?
9. Who is the audience ( would the audience have generally agreed with the argument or have been hostile)?
10. What sources/evidence does the author rely on to support his/her claims?

Foley, S. 2011. “What price the new democracy? Goldman Sachs conquers Europe”. *The Independent. 18.11.11*

**SECTION THREE: Research Sources [XX minutes]**:

**Types of Sources / Genres**

In your study of politics, you will encounter many different types of sources and you will have to approach the reading in unique ways.

***Exercise:*** *What are the different types of information that you have used for assignments?*

* Books
* Political Encyclopaedias/Handbooks
* Single-author volume
* Multi-author (i.e. edited) volumes
* Journal Articles
* Laws, Constitutions & other legal documents
* Academic Research Papers
* Government Publications & Manifestos
* Reports
* Media
* Presentations
* Objective Data

Remember not all new sources are the same!

**News Sources:**

Take a look at these sources of broadcast and online news. We return again to the questions we asked about context.

* Which are considered credible?
* Which have access to the real stories?
* Who are their audiences?
* What is their agenda?

**Theorists:**

Now look at these well-known theorists, who have all written extensively on IPE issues.

* What do we know about their assumptions they base their theories on?
* Who are their audiences?
* What are their biases?
* Within which historical contexts were they writing?

**Evaluating Sources**

Our knowledge of the international political economy is based on ever-evolving debates within and between disciplines. Unlike the natural sciences, it is generally impossible to indisputably corroborate theories within the social sciences due to the complexity of human relationships and behaviour. As a result, sources are generally evaluated based on their perceived merit within the field – i.e. reputation.

What is a good/reputable source?

* Expert: try to find the **leading authors** in your area of interest.
* Peer-review.
* Transparent methodology, if quantitative.

Strategies for evaluating Sources:

* Citations Index – whose work receives the most attention? **[Google Scholar and ISI].**

**Summary:**

In summary it is worth remembering that your understanding of the subject area is enhanced if you read and review material critically.

You can gain a much better understanding of the arguments within the text, if you contextualise it, thinking about the

the who,

what,

why,

when,

where,

and how

and use this knowledge to interpret and critically analyse the thesis statement or premise of the author, their evidence presented (and evidence that is missing) and the validity of the conclusions drawn.

This lesson plan is licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution South Africa License. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/za/>

Or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California 94105, USA.

