

Critical Reading

What is critical reading?

Critical reading means engaging the writer in a dialogue rather than reading *with* the writer. When we read critically, we not only understand the writer's ideas, but we also question and evaluate those ideas and form our own opinion. In this process, we look for limitations, biases, faulty reasoning, unanswered questions etc. and come to own conclusions.

Critical reading checklist

- What is the writer's main argument?
- What are the reasons provided for the argument?
- What kind of evidence is given in support of the argument? What is the source of the information?
- Is the author objective or is s/he trying to convince the reader to have a certain opinion?
- What are the major underlying assumptions the author is making? Do you think they are reasonable and acceptable to most people?
- Does the writer makes inferences based on her/his evidence and is the reasoning logical?
- What are your own thoughts and opinions on the issues raised in the article?

Reading for important points

Underline what you think are the most important points in the text *Too many mouths*.

One of the most important problems facing developing countries today is the rapid increase in population. In the last 25 years, the population of the world has doubled. As the developing world has a population growth rate which is twice that of the developed world, most of that population increase has taken place in the poorer countries of the world. The main point to be made here is that more and more people are concentrated in those countries which are least able to provide a living for them.

What is responsible for this population rise is not an increase in fertility, but a sharp decline in the death rate in developing countries. In the absence of birth control, the maximum birth rate is around 4%. For a population to remain static in these circumstances, the death rate would have to be the same. Improving food supplies can reduce the death rate by a further 2%. The resultant population growth of 3% will double the population every 25 years.

The main reason for the reduction in the death rate in the developing world has been improved public health measures. For example, in Sri Lanka the death rate was halted over 10 years by spraying the mosquitoes which carry malaria. Why is it so easy to cut the death rate in this way and yet so hard to reduce the birth-rate? One answer is that public health measures can be very cheap. Anti-malarial spraying is inexpensive. But this is not the important point. For birth control programs to be successful, a change in attitude is required, whereas death control can

be achieved autonomously. In other words, the death rate can be cut without anything else changing.

Reading critically

1. What makes a persuasive argument?

2. Study the following argument. Does it persuade you to agree with the writer? If so, why? If not, why not?

It should be obvious that even with schools of equal quality a poor child can seldom catch up with a rich one. Even if they attend equal schools and begin at the same age, poor children lack most of the educational opportunities which are usually available to the middle-class child. These advantages range from conversation and books in the home to vacation travel and a different sense of oneself, and apply, for the child who enjoys them, both in and out of school. So the poorer student will generally fall behind so long as he depends on school for advancement and learning.

3. A first step in critical reading is to break down the argument into points.

- E.g.
- a. Even with equal schools, poor child cannot catch up with rich
 - Lack M/C educational opportunities
 - E.g. conversation & books at home, vacation travel, different sense of self
 - b. Therefore, poor child falls behind
 - c. Then, ask yourself these questions:
 - Are all the points supported (or are some just assertions)?
 - Are unsupported points either known facts or generally accepted opinions?
 - If a point is supported by examples, are they well-chosen?
 - Does the conclusion follow logically from the points?

Using the above example, analyse the argument in the following passage.

One reason why retrenchment often turns business failure into success is that it provides a much clearer sense of strategic direction. Over time, firms can suffer from strategic drift, by choosing strategies that are not appropriate for a changing external environment, perhaps assuming that past successes are inevitable if they keep doing what they have always been doing. However, poor strategic decisions may result in previously successful ventures ending in failure. A poorly executed diversification, perhaps through the wrong takeover target, can result in significant losses. An over-ambitious market development strategy that results in losses due to much stronger than expected competition can also leave a business in trouble. Before too long, a firm can find itself with a diverse portfolio of businesses, or over-stretched in terms of using its resources to invest in the best opportunities. Retrenchment can help fix these problems. For instance, when Satya Nadella took over as CEO of Microsoft in early 2014, he inherited a global business that had clearly lost its strategic direction, including the failed \$7bn takeover of Nokia's mobile phone business. Decisive action was required, so Nadella instigated a retrenchment strategy of closing down much of the Nokia business (resulting in 18,000 job losses) so Microsoft could focus on the remaining profitable elements.

Another example is, the action taken by Dave Lewis, when he joined Tesco as CEO in Autumn 2014. He recognised that over many years Tesco had lost its strategic focus on grocery retailing through related diversifications and international expansion. As part of his significant retrenchment at Tesco, Lewis sold the Giraffe and Dobbie's Garden Centre businesses and Tesco's operations in Turkey in order to rationalise the business portfolio and release finance to reinvest in the core, profitable UK supermarket business. These actions were consistent with giving Tesco a much clearer sense of strategic direction.

Comparing viewpoints

Here are the conclusions from two articles on the topic **Is leadership a skill that can be taught, or is it an innate ability?** Compare the viewpoints expressed in each extract.

Conclusion 1

While it is impossible to define or even describe leadership as a concept, many people know leadership when they see it. Most, if not all the skills necessary for effective leadership identified in this paper can be acquired or encouraged in people (Drucker, 2011; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Connelly & Rudnick, 2001). It is undeniable that there are leaders who are born, but such leaders are too few and undependable, given the huge demand for leadership. In addition, it is clear that leadership not only requires continuous learning and adaptation, but is also a function of interactions between the leader and the followers. Leaders at any level, with or without power, must engage followers in confronting challenges, changing perspectives, adjusting values and adopting new habits. As against the perception that leadership is innate, the fact that leadership can be taught and further that it is a process of leader-follower interaction reduces the burden on leaders, because they never have to know all the answers (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

Conclusion 2

It is hard to conclude a debate which has such strong arguments and research to support both sides. There is no denying the fact that nature plays a vital role in leadership. Many traits are seen commonly in great leaders. These traits have helped us identify what leadership is. These traits have also helped organisations recruit the right people. However nature may not be the only answer to effective leadership. Looking around and going back in history it can be seen that leaders come from different places, different background and a leader's children will not always turn out to be leaders. On the other hand it is noted that certain cultures instill confidence in children at a very early age, they develop opinion and often go on to make better choices as compared to children who come from a culture where choices are imposed and respect is so embedded that it stops them from asking questions and they end up making poor and limited choices in life. There is no denying that some people are born leaders, but there are no universally accepted traits which define the born leadership. On the other hand training and development focus on producing leaders without the assumption of born traits and produce better results. So it can be concluded that nature and nurture both play a role in leadership, however nurture has a more important role as compared to nature.