4

Getting Started on Critical Reading

Keywords

arguments; claims; conclusions; critical reading; Critical Synopsis; Critical Synopsis Questions; warranting

Critical reading is a dynamic process. You cannot avoid being affected by your own expectations, prejudices and previous knowledge, which will shape your understanding of the literature you read. It is vital to realize that authors also have prejudices, assumptions and beliefs. These too will tend to influence your understanding of a text. Therefore, a key critical reading skill is identifying authors' underlying aims and agendas, so that you can take them into account in your evaluation of the text. Sometimes you will have to think carefully and 'read between the lines' to establish authors' values and aims. More often, you will easily be able to establish their purpose, provided you realize the importance of doing so.

We have already noted that critical reading for postgraduate study is task-driven: usually the task culminates in a written product for assessment. In Chapter 2, we discussed the first step in taking charge of your response to a task: making your own critical choice about what you read. Once you have done that, you need to make the texts work for you. Far from having to absorb slavishly everything the authors have written, you can *focus* your reading by asking questions of a text and looking for answers that will help you to achieve your goals. In Chapter 3 a technique for generating questions about the abstract was introduced.

In this chapter, we look at how you can identify authors' arguments and judge the adequacy of the backing they offer for their claims. We harness the skills of focusing and evaluating through five generic questions that you can ask of any text. This approach paves the way for a more detailed analysis of texts in Part Two. Finally, we show how the five questions relate to the questions generated by the abstract, as presented in Chapter 3.

Focusing through a central question and review questions

In Chapters 1 and 3 we saw that asking questions as you study a text enables you to focus your reading. The first step is to formulate a broad *central question* to underlie your entire piece of work or a substantial thematic section. A central question is expressed in general terms. It is a question about something in the social world that will almost certainly need to be answered by asking more specific questions. An essay title is often framed as a central question (e.g., 'Does perceived social status affect how pharmacists address their customers?'). An essay title that is not framed as a question (e.g., 'Discuss the impact of perceived social status on the ways in which pharmacists address their customers') can usually be reframed as a question. Doing so is a very effective tactic for finding and keeping focus in your work.

A *review question* is a more specific question that you ask of the literature. Review questions that are derived from a broader central question will ask something that directly contributes to answering the central question (e.g., 'What does research suggest are key factors determining how pharmacists would be likely to address their customers?'). However, review questions can also help with theoretical questions (e.g., 'Whose model is most relevant for investigating style shift in speakers?'). Similarly, review questions may arise in justifying the methodology of your own developing research for, say, a dissertation (e.g., 'What can I learn from published studies about how to observe interaction in shops?'). The review question, or questions, you ask of the literature will therefore vary according to your purposes and the type of text you are engaging with.

Evaluating the usefulness of what you read

Working on the assumption that not all texts will prove equally useful, how can you establish the relative merits of each one? Obviously, you want to take most notice of the works that contribute something reliable and plausible to your quest for an answer to your central question.

To determine how reliable the material in a text is, you need to identify and evaluate its *arguments*. An argument consists of a *conclusion* (comprising one or more claims that something is, or should be, the case) and its *warranting* (the justification for why the claim or claims in the conclusion should be accepted). The warranting is likely to be based on evidence from the authors' research or professional experience, or else it will draw on others' evidence, as reported in the literature.

OPINION = UNWARRANTED CONCLUSION

ARGUMENT = CONCLUSION + WARRANTING

The *conclusion* is only half of an argument. You can legitimately ask of any set of claims: 'Why should I believe this?' The other half of the argument is the *warranting*. The warranting is the reason for accepting the conclusion, including evidence for it. Demand a convincing warranting for every conclusion that you read about. Also, demand of yourself that every conclusion you draw is adequately warranted.

This conception of 'argument' is very simple, but is effective for our current purpose. In philosophy and rhetoric, 'argument' is more precisely defined, with more components. You can see how a more sophisticated approach to argument structure relates to critical reading by looking at the relevant chapters in Booth, W.C., Colomb, G.C., Williams, J.M., Bizup, J. and Fitzgerald, W.T. (2016) *The Craft of Research* (4th edition), Chicago: University of Chicago Press. The 'argument' definition can be applied to single sentences, paragraphs, chapters, even entire dissertations or books. It can be used to identify and evaluate what is said in the texts you read, and also to ensure your own scholarly writing is well constructed.

It is the authors' job to provide you with the best available warranting for their conclusion. Your job is to judge whether the warranting is enough to make the conclusion convincing, and so whether to accept or reject that conclusion.

Example of argument construction

The following passage comes from a report of research into the quality and extent of training experienced by researchers employed on academic projects.

> For example, one practitioner researcher commented that 'I think that my TLRP [Teaching and Learning Research Programme] experience was very, very positive.

> It caused me to reflect back on where I was and to accept that I am really happy in FE [further education], that I don't want to be a lecturer in HE [higher education].' Building research capacity is not just about building the next cohort of professors and senior academics, it can also relate to the building of one's own personal capacity to engage with research and practice.

Source: Fowler, Z., Proctor, R. and Stevens, M. (2008) 'Mapping the ripples: an evaluation of TLRP's research capacity building strategy', *Teaching and Learning Research Briefing no. 62*. London: Teaching and Learning Research Programme. www.tlrp.org/pub/documents/fowlerRB62final.pdf

This passage constitutes one of many arguments in the report. The *claim* is in the final sentence: there is more to building research capacity than just making everyone a top expert; it is also about helping individuals to gauge their own potential and ambitions. The *warranting* is the quote in the first sentence, where a researcher reveals that the research experience resulted in a recognition of what sort of future work would be most comfortable for them. Quoting from a respondent is one kind of *evidence* that can be used in warranting. Since this study entailed online surveys with researchers and their project managers, quoting in this way is an appropriate form of evidence.

What makes an argument convincing?

In the example from Fowler and colleagues in the box, note how the claim is based on one quote from one respondent. Part of the job of the critical reader is to evaluate whether the warranting provided for a claim is adequate to make the claim convincing. The reader might feel that a single voice does not carry much weight and so look for other, supporting evidence, such as a statistic: 38% of the respondents felt that their experience as researchers had helped them decide what sort of future career they did and did not want. However, the reader might equally decide that the point of the claim is not that it is necessarily a majority view, but that it exists at all. In such a case, the reader might be satisfied that even if this view is restricted to one person, it is sufficient for warranting the claim. Such decisions cannot be taken in the abstract. They will take into account the nature and purpose of the study and also the reader's other knowledge and experience, and interests in reading the text.

To explore further the quality of an argument, let us return to our example from Chapter 1. Here is the (fictional) extract from Browning again:

> In the reading test, the five children who were taught to read using phonics performed better overall than the five children taught using the whole word method. This shows that the phonics method is a better choice for schools.

The conclusion is a single claim: 'the phonics method is a better choice for schools'. Browning offers research evidence as the warranting for his conclusion: 'the five children who were taught to read using phonics performed better overall than the five children taught using the whole word method'. But we saw that Browning's claim was vulnerable, at least as depicted in the extract. It was unclear how he could justify his claim that the phonics method was best for all schools on the basis of this small amount of evidence. What Browning's claim illustrates is the drawing of a conclusion with *inadequate* warranting. Here is the example reader's commentary from Chapter 1:

> Browning (2005) found that children taught to read using phonics did better in a reading test than children taught using the whole word method. However, the study was small, the test rather limited, and the subjects were not tightly matched either for age or gender. An examination of Browning's test scores reveals that, although the mean score of the phonics group was higher, two of the highest scorers in the test were whole word learners. Since this indicates that the whole word method is effective for some learners at least, Browning is perhaps too quick to propose that 'the phonics method is a better choice for schools' (p. 89).

The commentator is evaluating Browning's claim by critically assessing whether the warranting is strong enough to make the conclusion convincing. First, the limitations of the empirical investigation are noted: 'the study was small, the test rather limited, and the subjects were not tightly matched either for age or gender'. Second, a notable degree of overlap is highlighted between the range of findings for the two groups of subjects, something that was evidently reported by Browning but was ignored by him in warranting his conclusion: 'An examination of Browning's test scores reveals that, although the mean score of the phonics group was higher, two of the highest scorers in the test were whole word learners'.

Note that these two evaluatory comments comprise the *commentator's own warranting.* That warranting is used to *back the commentator's own conclusion:* 'Browning is perhaps too quick to propose that "the phonics method is a better choice for schools"'. The commentator is claiming that Browning's warranting is inadequate to make his sweeping conclusion convincing. As the reader of this commentary, you must decide whether you find the *commentator's* warranting adequate, or whether you think Browning did enough.

In all cases, a claim is as convincing as the adequacy of the warranting that justifies it. Whether you are writing about your own research or commenting on someone else's, you need to warrant your claims. So, when you are commenting on what others have claimed about their work, you must be careful that your own counter-claims are warranted. It is rather easy to criticize the

shortcomings of others' conclusions, and then to draw similarly flawed conclusions oneself!

Meanwhile, in the same way, you need not accept at face value the conclusions that a commentator draws about someone else's work. Has the commentator supplied sufficient warranting to justify the conclusion that Browning's claim should be rejected? In order to decide, you might need to go and read Browning's work for yourself and see whether you feel that the commentator has been fair.

Tracking down and reading the original work is of great importance for evaluating the arguments in a text that reports the work second-hand. Retelling a story tends to simplify it and second- or third-hand accounts can end up appearing much more definitive than the original. Thus, even though Browning offers too little warranting for his conclusion about phonics being the best choice for any school, this does not necessarily mean that phonics is the worst choice, or that the whole word method is the best choice. A range of possibilities opens up regarding alternative claims. One is that Browning is right, but just has not been able to provide satisfactory evidence from his own study. Another is that Browning has failed to see certain patterns, or to relate his findings to others that might have supported his conclusions. Our commentator has not chosen to provide the kind of information that you would need in order to see what options there are. So only by reading the original study for yourself, rather than relying on an intermediary, could you ensure that you were fully informed in making your own evaluation.

CONVINCING ARGUMENT =	CONCLUSION +	ADEQUATE WARRANTING
	(containing claims)	(based on sufficient appropriate evidence)

The claims in the *conclusion* need *adequate warranting* for an *argument* to be convincing. Warranting is adequate when you, as the reader, are satisfied both that there is *sufficient* evidence and that this evidence is of an *appropriate* kind. Note that people may differ in their views about what counts as adequate evidence. This is because the strength of the warranting depends only indirectly on the evidence itself. The relationship is mediated by our *interpretation*. The reason why critical readers in the social sciences might question the adequacy of the warranting of claims forming the conclusion of a research paper is usually because they differ from the author in their judgement about the amount and quality of evidence necessary for warranting the acceptance of that conclusion.

Identifying the conclusion and warranting of arguments

Academic discourse offers us several ways of relating ideas to each other, and there is more than one formulation that can connect a conclusion and its warranting. Key indicators are words or phrases like: *therefore*, *because*, *since*, *so*, *it follows that*, *it can be concluded that*. Note how the following formulations all say essentially the same thing:

- *Since* research shows that girls mature faster than boys, studies should take age and gender into account when exploring child development.
- Child development studies should take age and gender into account *because* research shows that girls mature faster than boys.
- Research shows that girls mature faster than boys. *Therefore,* studies of child development should take age and gender into account.

Other variations may weight the warranting, implying that it is reliable in its own terms but it may not be universally the case:

- *In so far as* girls are believed to mature faster than boys, studies of child development should take age and gender into account.
- *In conditions where* girls mature faster than boys, studies of child development should take age and gender into account.
- *Where it is relevant to the investigation that* girls mature faster than boys, studies should take age and gender into account.

Incomplete or flawed arguments

In your reading (and your own writing) look out for incomplete arguments. Table 4.1 shows some common flaws and the ways in which you can ask questions to identify where the problem lies.

As these illustrations suggest, when you adopt the role of critical reader you are, in a sense, interrogating the author to answer the questions that your reading has raised in your mind.

Thinking your way into the mind of the author

How can you focus on *your* questions when the author's agenda may be different? Imagine that you have the opportunity to talk to the author face-to-face. What questions would you ask to pursue your own agenda? Use the author's text to try to work out how the author would answer your questions.

Table 4.1 Identifying flaws in arguments

Type of flaw in an argument	Example (at the level of a few sentences)	Critical questions as a reader, suggesting there may be a flaw	Example resolution
Conclusion without warranting	The best musicians make the worst teachers	Why do you think that? How do you know?	The eye for fine detail possessed by the best musicians tends to make them over-critical and discouraging with pupils (Goodman, 2009)
Potential warranting without a conclusion	Johnson's research shows that people often sign legal agreements without reading them. Legal documents can be difficult to read	So what? What do these different pieces of evidence, together, imply?	People may fail to read legal documents because they are too difficult
Warranting leading to an illogical conclusion	People in English-speaking countries tend not to know another language. This indicates that they are poor language learners	Does this reasoning add up? Aren't there other more plausible conclusions?	This may suggest that English speakers do not see the need to know other languages
Conclusion not explicitly linked to warranting	Statistics show that teenagers are drinking far too much to be good for their health. Alcoholic drinks should be increased in price	What causal relationship between the factors are you meaning to suggest?	Since teenagers have only limited money, raising the price of alcohol might result in their drinking less
Conclusion with inadequate warranting	Trainee managers learn more effectively when they are praised than when their efforts are criticized. In a survey of female trainee managers in a retail company, 77% said they liked to be praised	Is the evidence adequate to justify the extent of the claim? Is the evidence appropriately interpreted? What is the link between 'liking to be praised' and learning more effectively?	However, males and females may respond differently to praise

Five Critical Synopsis Questions

The five questions introduced below map onto the more detailed approach to critical reading to be explored in Part Two. As will become clearer then, the extent to which you apply the in-depth level of engagement will vary, depending on how central a given text is to what you are trying to achieve. In many cases, the five basic Critical Synopsis Questions are all you will need and, even where you undertake a more detailed analysis, they may well have been your starting point:

A. Why am I reading this?
B. What are the authors trying to achieve in writing this?
C. What are the authors claiming that is relevant to my work?
D. How convincing are these claims, and why?
E. In conclusion, what use can I make of this?

Critical Synopsis Question A: Why am I reading this?

In Chapter 2, we reviewed some of the most likely answers to this question. In the early stages of your study of a new area you may be reading something because you were advised to or because you want to gather some background information. However, the more you work in an area, the more you will be choosing what to read with attention to your own agenda in relation to your study task. This is where a review question, as discussed above, could valuably come in. It would offer you a focusing device that ensures you take charge of your critical reading and are not distracted into following the authors' agendas at the expense of your own.

Critical Synopsis Question B: What are the authors trying to achieve in writing this?

If you are to assess the value of authors' findings or ideas for your own interests and priorities, you need to have a clear understanding of what the authors were trying to do. It should be fairly clear what their purpose is, often from the abstract or introduction and, failing that, the conclusion. These are the places where authors tend to make most effort to convey to the reader why their piece of work should be taken seriously. Authors may be trying to do any of the following:

- Report the findings of their own research.
- Review others' work.
- Develop theory.
- Express particular values or opinions.
- Criticize what is currently done.
- Advise on what should be done in the future.

It is also useful to consider who their target readers might be. The primary readership for academic journal articles and research monographs is academics. Sometimes the student will feel rather like an onlooker as an academic debate rages. Edited books vary in their target readership, according to what they cover. Some offer an up-to-date overview of a field. Others are based on conference presentations and can be so eclectic as to be quite misleading to the student entering the field for the first time. Besides the level of knowledge, the target readership is also defined by the *scope* of knowledge. Students from a non-psychology background will find a book written for psychologists difficult to understand because it will assume a breadth of knowledge they do not have.

Critical Synopsis Question C: What are the authors claiming that is relevant to my work?

This simple question covers several aspects of any text that may be important to you:

- What the text is actually *about* – what it reports, how any empirical work was carried out, what was discovered and what the authors conclude about it.
- Where any overlap lies between the authors' concerns and your own interests – the authors are unlikely to have been asking exactly the same questions as you are.

Critical Synopsis Question D: How convincing are these claims, and why?

We have already touched on this crucial question for the critical reader. It invites you to evaluate the quality of the authors' data and arguments, particularly with regard to the strength and relevance of the warranting for claims that are made. Other things that you might keep an eye on are any underlying assumptions made by the authors that you do not share, and whether the claims are consistent with other things that you have read or that you know about from your own research or professional experience.

Critical Synopsis Question E: In conclusion, what use can I make of this?

For the purposes of fulfilling your study task, does this text count amongst the many that you will refer to quite briefly, or the few that you will want to discuss in depth? Do you expect to write about this work positively or negatively, and

would you want to imply that, overall, you agree or disagree with the claims the authors make? If your reading is guided by a review question, how (if at all) does the text contribute to answering it?

Applying the Critical Synopsis Questions to an abstract

We saw in Chapter 3 that one can generate a lot of free-ranging questions from reading the abstract. How does that exercise relate to employing the five Critical Synopsis Questions? Asking questions of the abstract is a way to practise identifying what you need to know. Now you can adopt a more focused approach to the questioning of an abstract by applying the five questions to it before tackling the article itself. The five questions will help you identify, from the abstract, what specific things you need to know when you read the article. As a result, when you go to the main text to answer the five Critical Synopsis Questions, you will have prepared lots of insightful ideas about exactly what you need to look for in that paper. The example in Table 4.2 is based on the first abstract used in Chapter 3 (see Table 3.1), reporting research on the representation of children from racial-ethnic minorities in early childhood educational interventions and/or special education.

As column 1 in Table 4.2 shows, the abstract is least helpful in giving direct answers to Critical Synopsis Question D and, consequently, E. But column 2 shows how one can still identify from the abstract what to look for in the main text. Many students find that answering question D is by far the most difficult part of a Critical Synopsis, because the information is least likely to be given directly by the authors. Rather, it entails drawing together what the authors say with your own judgement about the significance of what they say, as well as your observations about what they did not say, could have said, and so on. Having questions inspired by the abstract gives you specific things to look for.

Of course, by the time you have generated questions from the abstract in this way, you may realize that the paper is not relevant. If so, you have saved yourself some time. Conversely, it may be that you can immediately see how very important this paper is to your research. As a result, you may recognize that a short Critical Synopsis will not be sufficient, and that the full Critical Analysis that we introduce in Part Two is appropriate. For now, though, we will assume that you have established, by the techniques just laid out, that the paper is relevant and it can be written about fairly succinctly. So, you need to generate a short, informative evaluation of it for your literature review. Later in this chapter we show you how to use the answers to your questions to do that. But first, you need to find the answers to the Critical Synopsis Questions.

Table 4.2 Targeting your reading using the Critical Synopsis Questions and the abstract

My initial answers to the Critical Synopsis Questions, from the abstract	What I need to find out from the paper itself in order to answer the Critical Synopsis Questions adequately
A. Why am I reading this?	
My research is into the effectiveness of early years educational support	• Is this paper relevant? Do the authors, who don't appear to be educationalists, align with my understanding of what 'early years educational support' is? Do they define that term?
B. What are the authors trying to achieve in writing this?	
Reporting patterns in data from a large survey – it is secondary data and their main message is about how they analysed it	• Do they say what they are trying to achieve? • Are they primarily looking at this general data set, and happen to be looking at education in this paper? Or do they have something particular to say about early years support? • Do they have an implicit position on the desirability of ethnic minority representation in early intervention education? • As it's not their data, how have they ensured they understand what it does and doesn't represent, why it was collected, etc., so that it does enable them to achieve what they want to?
C. What are the authors claiming that is relevant to my work?	
The following characteristics are associated with high representation in EI/ECSE: male gender, low birth weight, congenital abnormalities, behavioural problems. The following characteristics are associated with low representation: low socioeconomic status, high language and numeracy, ethnic minority group. Of these, it's the last that remains after factoring out interfering variables	• Do they make any important claims that are not mentioned in the abstract? • Do their definitions of key terms (e.g., 'ethnic minority group', 'early intervention', 'special education', 'other than English') align sufficiently with mine for their claims to inform my study? • What were the 'additional factors' they mention? • Are any reasons given for the disproportionate under-representation they find?

(Continued)

Table 4.2 (Continued)

My initial answers to the Critical Synopsis Questions, from the abstract	What I need to find out from the paper itself in order to answer the Critical Synopsis Questions adequately
D. How convincing are these claims, and why?	
	• Is this sample size big enough for the kind of questions they want to answer? Do they make clear how they know their sample was big enough to get reliable results? For example, how much variation might there be across different states and/or different minority groups? • Who says that the ECLS–B is nationally representative? Has anyone challenged that? • How have they done the calculation showing that ethnic minority grouping is the only real effect on representation level? • Do they make any claims about how their findings generalize beyond the United States, and if so, do they explain why they think this? • Do they take into account the difference between large minority communities (e.g., Spanish) versus being the only kid with that language in the neighbourhood?
E. In conclusion, what use can I make of this?	
	• Do the claims convince me? Am I convinced that a study done in the United States is relevant to the country I am researching? If so, then I can cite this study as evidence that before you can make early years support effective you have to make sure that all children have access to it • Would the statistical test they used work with a smaller study like mine? If so, I could replicate their method and cite the paper as part of the justification • Were they able in this study to separate out factors that I think are important, such as the social and educational aspirations of different ethnic minority groups? If not, then I may cite it as an example of research that has not been able to capture that important variable

A Critical Synopsis of a text

The sequence of five Critical Synopsis Questions provides a structure for ordering your thoughts in response to any text you read. It is important, especially to begin with, that you write down your answer to each Critical Synopsis Question rather than just thinking about it. Critical Synopsis Question A can be written down before you start reading, Critical Synopsis Questions B, C and D as you go along, and E once you have finished reading. Taken together, your answers comprise your Critical Synopsis of the text, available for you to refer to when moving from preparatory reading to writing your account for assessment.

We strongly recommend that you download the Critical Synopsis Template from the SAGE website (https://study.sagepub.com/wallaceandwray4e). The template enables you to write as much as you like in answering each Critical Synopsis Question. We suggest that you fill in a copy for each text that you read. If you use the electronic template, you can file each completed Critical Synopsis form electronically, where appropriate with the same file name as the PDF version of the downloaded article to which it refers. You can also print out any completed form and attach it to the original text or a photocopy, so you can quickly remind yourself of the key points. The accumulated set of completed forms will provide you with a summary of what you have read and how it relates to your developing interests. The evaluative code at the end of the form is useful for sorting the forms later – a rapid means of generating a short-list of texts that you want to return to for a more in-depth consideration.

Trying out a Critical Synopsis of a text

We invite you now to familiarize yourself with this structured approach to developing a Critical Synopsis by completing one for yourself. The text for you to read is in Appendix 1. It is an abridged version of a paper by Wray and Staczek (2005), exploring possible reasons why a mismatch in two people's knowledge of a dialect expression led to an expensive court case. In order for you to focus your reading, and to complete Critical Synopsis Question A, let us imagine that you have been given the task of writing an essay entitled: 'Discuss the ways in which language can be the focus of a court dispute'. Following our earlier advice, you have turned the essay title into a review question to help you focus your reading: 'In what ways can language be the focus of a court dispute?' You have made the critical choice to read the paper by Wray and Staczek because it looks like a piece of research literature about a court dispute where language is the focus. Turn now to Appendix 1 and, as you read, *first* interrogate the abstract, either generating your own questions, as explained in Chapter 3, or using the Critical Synopsis Template, as described above. Then read the paper

as a whole, referring, as necessary, to the questions you generated, to help you answer the five Critical Synopsis Questions more fully.

When you have finished, reflect on how well you have got to know the paper as a result of having to answer the Critical Synopsis Questions. The more Critical Synopses of texts you complete, the more naturally you will ask these questions. As critical reading in this way becomes automatic, you will eventually find that you no longer need the prop of the Critical Synopsis questions. But since this is your first attempt, you may not yet feel sure how to answer each Critical Synopsis Question. So, for comparison, you may wish to look at the Critical Synopsis answers we generated for this paper. For convenience, we have included an indication of the questions that the abstract might generate.

Items in the template for a Critical Synopsis of a text

Author, date, title, publication details, library code (or location of copy in my filing system):

A. Why am I reading this?
B. What are the authors trying to achieve in writing this?
C. What are the authors claiming that is relevant to my work?
D. How convincing are these claims, and why?
E. In conclusion, what use can I make of this?

Code:

(1) = Return to this for detailed analysis; (2) = An important general text;
(3) = Of minor importance; (4) = Not relevant.

Example completed Critical Synopsis of a text

Author, date, title, publication details, library code (or location of copy in my filing system):

Wray, A. and Staczek, J. (2005) 'One word or two? Psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic interpretations of meaning in a civil court case', International Journal of Speech, Language and the Law, 12(1): 1–18 [abridged as Appendix 1 in Wallace, M. and Wray, A. (2021) Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates (4th edn). London: Sage].

A. Why am I reading this?

Part of reading to answer the review question 'In what ways can language be the focus of a court dispute?'

B. What are the authors trying to achieve in writing this?

***Abstract**: They're questioning the relative weight of psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic explanations. (But what are those two explanations and how convincing are they?) They seem to be defending the person who gave offence. (How do they justify that position?)*

***Full reading**: They provide an explanation, from psycholinguistic theory (Wray's) for why two people had different understandings of the same word or phrase. They show that sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics play a role in how we understand language. But they do not propose that court cases should always take these things into account.*

C. What are the authors claiming that is relevant to my work?

***Abstract**: If you encounter an unknown word/phrase, you break it down to understand it. But if you do know it, then you do not need to break it down to understand it. So you can miss seeing that it may be offensive for some people. (What sort of psycholinguistic theory is used to make that case?)*

***Full reading**: An African-American woman sued her employer after she was sent a certificate calling her a 'Temporary Coon Ass'. 'Coonass' (usually one word) is a dialect word that does not relate historically to 'coon' or 'ass', and refers to white people from Louisiana. The case revolved around whether the sender should have realized that the woman would find 'coonass' offensive because it contains 'coon'. The authors' 'Needs Only Analysis' model shows how the sender could fail to notice 'coon' inside 'coonass', because he had never had to break the term down into its components. Meanwhile the recipient, not knowing the dialect word, would automatically break it down to reveal two offensive words.*

D. How convincing are these claims, and why?

***Abstract**: The authors claim a 'psycholinguistic rationale'. (But how plausible is it that someone could fail to see an offensive word inside a longer word or phrase? What other explanations could there be, and are they considered? Is their claim generalizable to other court cases?)*

***Full reading**: Their argument is convincing in itself, but draws only on one theory. They do not mention any other court cases, so it is not clear how common this sort of dispute is. There is no mention of other kinds of disputes in the courtroom either. There is good*

(Continued)

quality evidence about what happened and what the individuals believed 'coonass' to mean: original court transcripts, other court documentation. Other supporting evidence from dictionaries and a survey is offered.

E. In conclusion, what use can I make of this?

***Abstract**: It's about language, but so far I can't tell if it is convincing enough to use.*

***Full reading*:**

(a) It will be useful for demonstrating that one way in which language can be the focus of dispute is when two people fundamentally disagree on what a word or phrase means – but is this case representative? I need to find other cases that are similar and also cases that illustrate different kinds of dispute.

(b) It could inform a discussion of what causes disputes, bringing in psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics – but I may need to look at alternative theories too.

Code: *(2) or (1)*

(1) = Return to this for detailed analysis; (2) = An important general text;
(3) = Of minor importance; (4) = Not relevant.

Our reading was driven by the review question posed above. Bear in mind that our answers may differ from yours, since they reflect our perceptions and evaluatory judgements. But what we have written can help you to gauge which aspects of the Critical Synopsis process you are most confident about, and which aspects you may need to concentrate on when undertaking your own Critical Synopses.

From Critical Synopsis to Critical Summary

In Chapter 5, we will take this Critical Synopsis of Wray and Staczek's paper as a starting point for developing a Critical Summary of a text, thus moving seamlessly from critical reading into the art of self-critical writing. You may, understandably, be more concerned with writing than with reading, since it is what you write that will be assessed. But your capacity to develop a convincing argument in your account is heavily dependent on the quality of your preparatory critical reading. It is important that you feel confident about the ideas presented in this chapter before moving on, since they are the foundation of your self-critical writing.