The Close Reading Interpretive Tool (CRIT)

The Close Reading Interpretive Tool (CRIT) offers a systematic approach to literary interpretation, allowing students to practice the detailed, sustained, and careful analysis of text.

Step 1-Paraphrase

Read the passage carefully. In your own words, give a summary of the factual content of the passage—what the text directly states—as it proceeds from beginning to end. What situation is being described here and by whom? What happens in that situation? Respond to this prompt in no more than three complete sentences.

Step 2-Observe

Read the passage again, this time thinking about what it seeks to accomplish. Then, identify and list any potentially significant features of the passage's language or form—that is, those textual elements that contribute to the passage's overall meaning, purpose, or effect. Your list of observations should include specific examples of various kinds of textual elements, such as: descriptive details; word choice; repetition of phrases, sounds, or ideas; imagery or figurative language; syntactical structure; changes in vocabulary, rhythm, or tone; characteristics of the narrative voice or perspective. Note that these observations will have to provide the building blocks for your analysis in Step 4. Respond to this prompt with a list of features.

Step 3-Contextualize

Think about contexts for the passage. (Contexts are facts or broader circumstances external to a literary work that are important to its production, reception, or understanding; for instance: literary, biographical, political, or historical information.) From your own knowledge of any relevant contextual facts or circumstances, or from information provided by your instructor, identify and list any potentially significant contexts for the passage—that is, those contextual frames that contribute to the passage's overall meaning, purpose, or effect. Note that these contextualizations may provide additional building blocks for your analysis in Step 4. Respond to this prompt with a list of contexts.

Step 4-Analyze

Review the features and contexts that you identified in Steps 2 and 3 as making potentially significant contributions to the passage's meaning, purpose, or effect. Then, select <u>at least four</u> of these textual elements and/or contextual frames and explain how each is in fact significant. These analyses should state clearly and forcefully what each item contributes to your understanding of the passage. Note that these analyses will have to be connected in Step 5, where you will argue for a unified interpretation of the passage as a whole. Respond to this prompt in one to two sentences per feature or context. Each analysis should include the phrase: "…is significant because…"

Step 5-Argue

Re-read the work you have produced thus far. Using your observations and analyses in the preceding steps, write one paragraph (at least five sentences) that conveys your interpretation of the passage. State the main thesis of your interpretation—that is, the central claim you are arguing for—and then support that thesis by presenting the evidence you gathered in Steps 1 through 4. Note that your paragraph should integrate and build upon your responses to the Step 4 prompt; your observations and analyses should also add up to an interpretive conclusion about the passage as a whole.

Step 6-Reflect

Now that you have advanced an argument, re-read the passage again. Then, answer the following questions: What aspects of the passage do you still find confusing? What elements of the passage does your interpretation neglect or set aside? What parts of your argument now appear to you debatable or dubious—that is, what objections could a reasonable person raise to your interpretation of the passage? Keep in mind: no interpretation is perfect or can account for every element of a text. Nonetheless, if these reflections have led you to think that your interpretation is less than compelling, you are free to revise your CRIT exercise.

Note to instructors: Please feel free to adapt these prompts for your own pedagogical needs. We only ask that you reproduce the credit above. Please direct all questions to CRIT@utexas.edu.