

A Conscious Reading Strategy: the IRAC Technique

This reading strategy works very well for articles, chapters, and books in the social sciences. In fact, many of you already read articles in this way because academic articles in the social sciences and humanities are often written in this structure. Once you have practiced applying it to articles and chapters, you will find that it will guide your understanding of a book-length text as well.

The IRAC Technique

ISSUE:

What is the problem or question addressed by the author? What is the author's main argument about the problem or question?

- Is the author (1) illuminating a question with new information, (2) making an intervention in some debate, or (3) making a contribution to theory?

A strategy for identifying the issue:

Look for comparisons and citations.

M. says 'something', but N. says 'something else'."

The topic FAMILY includes several readings, each with an alternative perspective. Bourke (1993) examines family as a social institution within the context of Australian national identity, but another contributor, Goldstein, sees family as an outcome of economic practices

How does the author frame the problem or question she or he is taking up? Bourke, for example, situates his material in a political agenda whereby the Australian government is attempting to produce common citizenry. Goldstein searches for a historical explanation of polyandry, the uncommon practice of a woman having more than one husband at a single time.

RULE:

What is the author's position on the problem or question? What is her or his contribution to the debate about the problem?

- *A strategy for identifying the rule:*

Look for the verb.

"I argue that _____."

"In order to understand 'something', we need to analyze 'something else'."

Bourke observes, "Europeans have based Aboriginal identity mainly on race, whereas Aboriginal people speak of 'my people' representing the notion of peoplehood, Aboriginal culture is based on a distinctive cultural heritage which incorporates special meanings given to the land and its custodians. This heritage has been modified and has adapted in response to new knowledge and experiences brought by the Europeans" (7).

Goldstein writes, “If neither a shortage of females nor the fear of starvation perpetuates fraternal polyandry, what motivates brothers, particularly younger brothers, to opt for this system of marriage?” and follows this with a possible explanation. (3).

ANALYSIS:

How did the author(s) get from the issue to the rule?

➤ *Some strategies for locating the analysis:*

Find the description of the specific case.

What evidence does the author use to tell her or his story?

What facts, accounts, stories, descriptions?

How did the author collect that evidence?

Find the interpretation of the evidence.

How did the author show that the evidence is part of a pattern that tells a story?

How did the author attempt to persuade the reader that he or she has correctly revealed the pattern through the evidence?

Find the comparison of the evidence.

How does the author argue that this case, and the pattern it reveals, explains something about human social/ political/ economic life in general?

How does the author use his or her evidence to convince you that the issue is better understood by her or his rule?

CONCLUSION:

How does the story end?

➤ *Some strategies for locating the conclusion:*

Find the restatement of the issue through the ‘new’ rule (the author’s).

Find the subtitle ‘(if present) *Conclusion*

A Critical Reading Guide for Scholarly Articles and Books ***The Practice of Reading*** [adapted from Dr. Cabeiri Robinson]

Reading is an important intellectual activity. In a course in Social Sciences like this one, it is a central academic practice. Texts written for different purposes, in different professions, and in different disciplines are, well, different. When you take a course in an English literature department, you learn to read and interpret novels, poems, and plays from different time-periods. If you take a course in international policy, you learn to read policy recommendations. If you go to law school, you will learn to read cases and write briefs.

Most writing in the social sciences is layered and involves reporting and describing information, interpreting that information, and offering a critical, analytic perspective. You can understand such a text through sheer hard work—by working hard. You can also understand it by working smart. Conscious reading practices can help you ‘work smart’.

Why conscious reading is ‘smart work’:

- Using a conscious reading technique such as the one offered here can help you understand how what you are reading at any given moment (sentence/ paragraph) fits into the whole (article, book).
 - Since you understand it better while you are reading, you remember it better afterwards.
 - You therefore get better results from the time and work you invest in a text.

 - Using a technique such as the one offered here can help you identify the different layers.
 - Once you have identified the levels, you can prioritize those layers that you want to understand and remember in detail, and those that you want to recognize but do not need to note in detail for your purposes at this time.
 - It can also help you deal with ambiguity. You may recognize that you have not understood one concept, or perhaps even a layer of commentary, but you can still identify and understand other concepts and layers.

 - Using a technique such as the one offered here can help you take effective notes.
 - Note-taking is a writing practice and another kind of intellectual activity. Pages of highlighted text are useless to you because they neither help you organize your reading or your own thinking about the materials.
 - Thinking explicitly about how you read can help you decide what you need to note in writing.
 - Taking notes as you read consciously integrates reading and writing. You build your command of facts and the author’s claims and your ability to state the conclusions you draw about them as you read.

 - Conscious reading practices can help you write more effective arguments in the genre of your field.
 - Arguments and expositions of the points that support them are the underlying structure of academic writing.
 - Most good writers read a great deal in the genre in which they write to clarify the arguments made by others in the field and to develop his or her ability to apply, correct or extend them.
 - Most good writers read a great deal in the genre in which they write because they are conscious of the form of a good argument in that genre.
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