

Critical-literacy

English Language Arts



What is “literacy”?

*Literacy is “the ability to use language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, and think critically about ideas. It enables us to share information, to interact with others, and to make meaning. Literacy is a complex process that involves building on prior knowledge, culture, and experiences in order to develop new knowledge and deeper understanding. It connects individuals and communities, and is an essential tool for personal growth and active participation in a democratic society.”***

What is “critical-literacy”?

*Critical-literacy is “a process of looking beyond the literal meaning of texts to observe what is present and what is missing, in order to analyse and evaluate the meaning and the author’s intent. Critical literacy goes beyond conventional critical thinking because it focuses on issues related to fairness, equity, and social justice. Students take a critical attitude by asking what view of the world the text advances and whether they find this view acceptable.”***

What will critical-literacy skills allow you to do?

Critical-literacy skills give you the tools you need to *think more deeply* about the texts you read and create. Specifically, critical-literacy skills will challenge you to *look beyond the literal message* by reading between the lines, to *observe* what is present and what is missing, and to *reflect* on the context and the way the author constructed the text to influence the reader.

“Critical literacy goes beyond conventional critical thinking, because it *focuses on questions about fairness, equity, and social justice*. Students in the junior grades typically think that texts are true simply because they are in print or online.”** Just because something is written in a book or on-line, it doesn’t mean it is true or accurate. You need to learn how to approach texts and Internet content with an inquiring and analytical way of thinking.

While reading, try to *question* the authority of texts and to *address issues of bias and perspective*. The content of texts is often not neutral in that they reflect the authors’ personal beliefs, opinions, and choices. Analyze the content and use your prior knowledge to *judge the truth and value of what you are reading*. While reading, think and make meaning of the content.

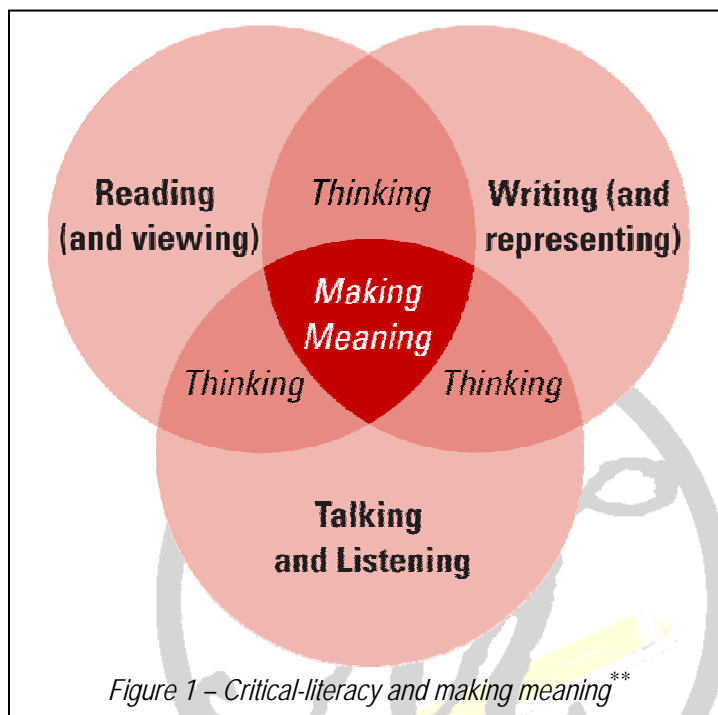


Figure 1 – Critical-literacy and making meaning**

Critical-literacy principles

As illustrated in figure 1, critical-literacy involves thinking deeply about the content that you read, write, view, hear, and represent. Reading, viewing, or listening critically involves four (4) principles.

Principle #1: Recognizing, transforming, and taking action

This critical-literacy principle states that you should try to recognize:

- *main ideas*;
- *viewpoints* (author's personal perspective on the subject matter);
- *voices*;
- *bias*;
- *stereotypes* (an oversimplified idea or image held by one or more people);
- *historical errors*;
- *biographical errors*; and
- *fact versus opinion*.

Viewpoint and bias: Since personal experiences influence our perspective, be critical by identifying the author's viewpoint or bias.

Voices: Reflect on whether or not you think some voices have been reduced, silenced, or are missing. For example, when reading about the European Explorers' impact on the North American Aboriginals, consider which voices are missing. Have the Aboriginal women and children been fairly represented?

Historical and biographical errors: While reading about people or historical events, question the exactness of the data being presented. Perhaps your suspicions of inaccurate information are correct. Do a little research and verify the facts.

Facts versus opinion: Consider this text – “There were many women that fought in the war. More women should be soldiers.” The first sentence is a fact since it could be verified by viewing documentaries or by reading about wars. The second sentence however is the author's personal opinion which not everyone will agree on.

Transforming: If you disagree with the author's viewpoint, if you feel that not all voices are being heard, if you feel the content is bias or inaccurate, then transform what you can into something that is acceptable for you.

Taking action: If you disagree with what is being presented, you may want to take action by speaking out or by writing to the author.

Principle #2: Analyzing, raising questions, and seeking explanations

This critical-literacy principle states that you should try to:

- *analyze the logic of statements*;
- *predict outcomes*;
- *analyze the causes & effects*; and
- *make inferences* – a conclusion based solely on what you already know. For example, suppose you see rain on your window, then you can infer that the sky is grey.

Logic of statements: When you read or hear a sentence which argues a point or expresses an opinion, notice the sentences that proceed and follow. Do these sentences make sense and do they support the main idea?

Logic of the causes and effects: When you are presented a cause & effect, test the logic of the relationship. For example, if the text says, “Every time it snows I slip and fall”, then you could say that this statement is faulty since we know that it isn’t the snow falling that will make you slip and fall.

Principle #3: Evaluating

This critical-literacy principle states that you should try to:

- *evaluate the content*; and
- *form your own opinions*.



Principle #4: Making experiences more meaningful

This critical-literacy principle states that you should try to become a critic by questioning:

- the *language being used*;
- the *people and the lifestyles*; and
- the *advantaged and disadvantaged people*.

Being a critic: How would the story change if the main character was of the opposite sex? How would the story change if the physical or personal traits of one character were different? How would the story change if it took place in another setting?

Techniques to enhance critical-literacy skills

Begin by acquainting yourself with the above aforementioned principles. Then, use one of the following techniques to further enhance your critical-literacy skills.

Alternative texts: creating alternative texts

- **Character perspective:** Examine the motives of the different characters and then rewrite the text so that the setting and plot fit the wishes of one or more characters.
- **Character substitution:** Replace one or more characters with new characters having different physical and personal traits.
- **Juxtapositioning:** Examine two texts or types of media on the same subject. Determine whether or not the content is bias, whether some of the information is opinion rather than facts, or whether personal viewpoint overshadows appropriate content. Write a new text using information from both texts which you feel is accurate and non-bias.
- **Mind & alternative mind portraits:** Sketch the silhouettes of two (2) heads. Then write words describing two viewpoints being represented or one viewpoint being represented and the other missing or silenced.
- **Theme-based focus groups:** Read, view, or listen to different texts about the same subject. Then, recognize the authors’ bias, viewpoint, opinion, and so on. Write down these discrepancies and then share them with the class or discuss them in small groups.

Connection stems: make connections while reading, viewing or listening

- I felt the same emotions as the character when ...
- I think the author is trying to tell us that ...
- I think the author wants us to feel like ...
- If I were the character, I would ...
- The atmosphere and setting should have been ...
- The author should have mentioned ...
- The content reminds me of another book (or alternate media) where ...
- The problem should have been handled differently by ...

Problem posing: to ask questions and to reflect

- **Intentions:** What are the intents of the author?
- **Missing elements:** Who is missing from the story? What is missing from the story?
- **Using the information:** How would you use this story to influence others? How could you use the information to teach others?
- **Voices:** Are any voices being suppressed or omitted? How would the story change if another character did most of the talking?

Switching: respond to some of the following “switching” questions

- **Body style:** How would the story change if the characters’ body style were different? For example, what if the poor frail boy that always got picked-on at school were strong and muscular?
- **Clothing:** How would the story change if the characters wore different clothing?
- **Emotion:** How would the story change if the characters’ emotions were different?
- **Ethnic/Race:** How would the story change if some of the characters were of a different ethnic background?
- **Gender:** How would the story change if some of the characters were of the opposite sex?
- **Language:** How would the story change if the characters used colloquialisms, a different dialect, or even if they spoke with a foreign accent?
- **Relationship:** How would the story change if the characters had different relationships with one another? For example, how would things be different if a married couple were only friends?
- **Setting:** How would the story change if the setting and atmosphere were different?
- **Theme:** How would the story change if the theme were opposite? For example, the protagonist survives the shipwreck instead of dying at sea.



Sources

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