Taking a Critical Perspective

Throughout college and beyond, you will be expected to think, read, and write critically. Critical here means "skeptical," "exact-ing," "creative." When you operate critically, you question, test, and build on what others say and what you yourself think. The word critical does not mean "negative" in this context: you can think critically about something you like, don't like, or just view neutrally.

You already operate critically every day of your life, as when you probe a friendship ("What did she mean by that?") or when you discuss a movie you just saw ("Don't you think the bad guy was too obvious?"). Such questioning helps you figure out why things happen to you or what your experiences mean.

This chapter introduces more formal methods for thinking and reading critically (opposite), viewing images critically (p. 133), and writing critically (p. 137). Learning and applying these methods will both engage you in and prepare you for school courses, career, and life in a democratic society:

- Teachers and employers in every field, from the arts to social work to zoology, will expect you to assess what you read, see, and hear and to make a good case for your own ideas.
- In daily life, critical thinking helps you understand your own actions and ideas, weigh them against opposing views, and persuasively articulate your reasoning and motivations.
- Your very independence and freedom depend on your ability to think, read, and write critically. An open democracy allows as much play for stupid and false claims as for sound ones, and the claims that seem sound often conflict with each other. Criti-cal thinking empowers you to decide for yourself what's useful, fair, and wise—and what's not.

There's no denying that critical thinking, reading, and writing require discipline and hard work. Besides channeling your curiosity, paying attention, and proling, you will often need to consult experts, interpreting and evaluating their ideas. Such an approach also requires a healthy tolerance for doubt or uncertainty—that feeling you may have when the old rules don't seem to apply or when a change is frightening but still attractive. Out of uncertainty, though, comes creativity—the capacity to organize and generate knowledge, to explain, resolve, illuminate, play. Compared to passive, rote learning, creative work is more involving, more productive, and more enjoyable.

Techniques of critical reading

For reading a work of literature, which requires a somewhat different approach, see pp. 133–134.

- Writing: making notes on your reading throughout the process (next page)
- Previewing: getting background, skimming (p. 117)
- Reading: interacting with and absorbing the text (p. 118)
- Summarizing: distilling and understanding content (p. 123)
- Forming your critical response (p. 124)
- Analyzing: separating into parts
- Interpreting: inferring meaning and assumptions
- Synthesizing: reassembling parts, making connections
- Evaluating: judging quality and value
Many readers keep a reading journal, a notebook or computer file in which they regularly work out questions and thoughts about what they read. One technique for keeping such a journal is to divide a page or computer screen into two vertical columns, the left side for the work itself, such as summary and questions, and the right side for what the work makes you think, such as agreements or doubts based on your own experiences, comparisons with other works, and ideas for writing. A two-column journal can encourage you to go beyond summarizing what you read to interacting critically with it because the blank right column will beckon you to respond. See page 120 for an example of this technique.

If you don’t keep a regular reading journal, you can still benefit from writing while reading in other ways:

- If you’re reading a printed work that you own, you may opt to write directly on the pages as you read them (see pp. 119–20).
- If you don’t own the material, make your notes on a separate sheet or a photocopy or in a computer file.
- If you’re reading a Web page or another online source, you have several options: print out a copy of the material and annotate that; open your word processor at the same time and make notes in the word-processing document; copy and paste the material into a word-processing document and insert your own comments in color or with the Comment function (see p. 190); or compose electronic mail while you’re reading and then send it to yourself.

Note
Whenever you download a document or take notes separately from the text you’re reading, be sure to record all necessary information about the text’s location so that you can find it again and cite it fully if you use it. (See p. 119 for a list of information to record.) Online sources sometimes restrict downloading, so check the source’s copyright notice to see whether any restrictions apply. See pages 119–122 for more on copying and acknowledging online sources.

1. Writing while reading

There are two good reasons to write while you read: to record information and ideas for future use, and to get more out of the work. The first is discussed as part of research writing (see pp. 119–120). The second has more to do with critical reading.

Critical reading is active reading. You interact with the work, getting involved with it, bringing to it your experiences, knowledge, and questions. When you use a pen or pencil or keyboard while reading, you create writing in response to writing. In this way you “translate” the work into your own words and reconstruct it for yourself.

For added help with keeping a reading journal, click on

- Critical thinking and argument
- Web links
- Critical thinking and reading
Focused, concentrated activity in which you seek information. Use the questions below as a guide. In your journal write down any impressions that you may want to return to later.

Questions for previewing

- **Length**: Is the material brief enough to read in one sitting, or will you need more time? To gauge the length of an online source such as a Web site, study any menus for an indication of the site’s complexity. Then scroll through a couple of pages and follow a couple of links to estimate the overall length.

- **Facts of publication**: Does the date of publication suggest currency or datedness? Does the publisher or publication specialize in a particular kind of material—scholarly articles, say, or popular books? For a Web source, who or what sponsors the site: an individual? a nonprofit organization? an academic institution? a corporation? a government body? (See pp. 130–131 on locating the authors of online sources.)

- **Content cues**: What do the title, summary or abstract, headings, illustrations, and other features tell you? What questions do they raise in your mind?

- **Author**: What does the biographical information tell you about the author’s publications, interests, biases, and reputation in the field? For an online message, which may be posted by an unfamiliar or anonymous author, what can you gather about the author from his or her words? If possible, trace unfamiliar authors to learn more about them.

- **Yourself**: Do you anticipate particular difficulties with the content? What biases of your own may influence your response to the text—for instance, anxiety, curiosity, boredom, or an outlook similar or opposed to that of the author?

3 Reading

Reading is itself more than a one-step process. Your primary goal is to understand the first level on which the text operates—what the author actually says.

**First reading**

The first time through new material, read as steadily and smoothly as possible, trying to get the gist of what the author is saying and a sense of his or her tone.

- To help your concentration, read in a quiet place away from distractions such as music or talking.

- Give yourself time. Rushing yourself or worrying about something else you have to do will prevent you from grasping what you read.

- Try to enjoy the work. Seek connections between it and what you already know. Appreciate new information, interesting relationships, forceful writing, humor, good examples.

- Make notes sparingly during this reading. Mark major stumbling blocks—such as a paragraph you don’t understand—so that you can try to resolve them before rereading.

- If you’re browsing a Web site with multiple pages and links to other sites, use the Bookmarks or Favorites function of your Web browser to mark interesting pages and links so that you can return to them. Then, when reading pages, proceed steadily without taking frequent or extensive notes, reserving that work for the next reading.

- If English is not your first language and you come across unfamiliar words, don’t stop and look up every one. You will lose more in concentration than you will gain in understanding. Instead, try to guess the meanings of unfamiliar words from their contexts (see p. 131), circle them, and look them up later.

**Rereadings**

After the first reading, plan on at least one other. This time read slowly. Your main concern should be to grasp the content and how it is constructed. That means rereading a paragraph if you didn’t get the point, looking up key words in a dictionary, or following more links at a Web site.

- Use your pen, pencil, or keyboard freely to question and comment on the text.

- If you can’t write directly on the material (because you don’t own it or it’s online), make separate notes as suggested on page 117.

- If you can write directly on the material, use any system of annotations that works for you—perhaps “?” in the margin next to passages you don’t understand, circles around unfamiliar words, underlining or brackets for main points, “*” for passages you agree with, “!” for those you find startling, “So what?” for those you can’t see the point of.

- If you’re reading an online source that you can download onto your word processor, use the Highlight function to mark text you have questions or comments on. Then insert your annotations in color (so they’re distinct from the original) or with your word processor’s Comment function.

Following are examples of active reading from a student, Charlene Robinson. She was responding to Thomas Sowell’s “Student Loans,” an essay beginning on page 121. First Robinson annotated a photocopy of the essay (the first four paragraphs appear on the next page):
Taking a critical perspective

The first lesson of economics is scarcity: There is never enough of anything to fully satisfy all those who want it.

The first lesson of politics is to disregard the first lesson of economics. When politicians discover some group that is being vocal about not having as much as they want, the "solution" is to give them more. Where do politicians get this "more"? They rob Peter to pay Paul.

After a while, of course, they discover that Peter doesn't have enough. Bursting with compassion, politicians rush to the rescue. Needless to say, they do not admit that robbing Peter to pay Paul was a dumb idea in the first place. On the contrary, they now rob Tom, Dick, and Harry to help Peter.

The latest chapter in this long-running saga is that politicians have now suddenly discovered that many college students graduate heavily in debt. To politicians it follows, as the night follows the day, that the government should come to their rescue with the taxpayers' money.

After reading the text, Robinson wrote about it in the journal she kept on her computer. She divided the journal into two columns, one each for the text and her responses. Here is the portion pertaining to the paragraphs above:

**Text**

Economics teaches lessons (1), and politics (politicians) and economics are at odds

Politicians don't accept econ. limits--always trying to satisfy "vocal" voters by giving them what they want (2)

"Robbing Peter to pay Paul" (2)-from the Bible (the Apostles)?

Politicians support student loan programs with taxpayer funds: be of "vocal" voters (3-4) another ex. of not accepting econ. limits

You should try to answer the questions about meaning that you raise in your annotations and your journal, and that may take another reading or some digging in other sources, such as dictionaries and encyclopedias. Recording in your journal what you think the author means will help you build an understanding of the text, and a focused attempt to summarize will help even more (see p. 123). Such efforts will resolve any confusion you feel, or they will give you the confidence to say that your confusion is the fault of the author, not the reader.

**EXERCISE 1**

Reading

Reprinted below is an essay by Thomas Sowell on the federal government's student-loan program. A respected conservative economist, Sowell is also a newspaper columnist and the author of many books on economics, politics, and education. This essay appeared in Sowell's collection*Is Reality Optional?*

Read this essay at least twice, until you think you understand what the author is saying. Either on these pages or separately, note your questions and reactions in writing. Look up any words you don't know, and try to arrive at answers to your questions. (It may help to discuss the selection with classmates.)

**Student Loans**

Student Loans

The first lesson of economics is scarcity: There is never enough of anything to fully satisfy all those who want it.

The first lesson of politics is to disregard the first lesson of economics. When politicians discover some group that is being vocal about not having as much as they want, the "solution" is to give them more. Where do politicians get this "more"? They rob Peter to pay Paul.

After a while, of course, they discover that Peter doesn't have enough. Bursting with compassion, politicians rush to the rescue. Needless to say, they do not admit that robbing Peter to pay Paul was a dumb idea in the first place. On the contrary, they now rob Tom, Dick, and Harry to help Peter.

The latest chapter in this long-running saga is that politicians have now suddenly discovered that many college students graduate heavily in debt. To politicians it follows, as the night follows the day, that the government should come to their rescue with the taxpayers' money.

How big is this crushing burden of college students' debt that we hear so much about from politicians and media deep thinkers? For those students who graduate from public colleges owing money, the debt averages a little under $7,000. For those who graduate from private colleges owing money, the average debt is a little under $9,000.

Buying a very modestly priced automobile involves more debt than that. And a car loan has to be paid off faster than the ten years that college graduates get to repay their student loans. Moreover, you have to keep buying cars every several years, while one college education lasts a lifetime.

College graduates of course earn higher incomes than other people. Why, then, should we panic at the thought that they have...
Summarizing

Before you can see what is beneath the surface of a text and figure out what you think of it, you need to understand exactly what the author is actually saying. A good way to master the content of a text and see its strengths and weaknesses is to summarize it: distill it to its main points, in your own words.

Some assignments call for brief summaries, as when you summarize the plot in a critical essay about a novel (p. ❚❚❚). Summary is also an essential tool in research papers and other writing that draws on sources (p. ❚❚❚). Here, though, we’re concerned with summarizing for yourself—for your own enlightenment.

A summary should state in as few words as possible the main ideas of a passage. When you need to summarize a few paragraphs or a brief article, your summary should not exceed ... appears in the box on the next page. (You’ve seen the beginning of this process in Charlene Robinson’s journal on p. 120.)

Summarizing even a single paragraph can be tricky. Here is one attempt to summarize paragraphs 1–4 of Thomas Sowell’s “Student Loans” (p. 121):

**Draft**

As much as politicians would like to satisfy voters by giving them everything they ask for, the government cannot afford a student loan program. This sentence “misreads” the four paragraphs because it asserts that the government cannot afford student loans. Sowell’s point is more complicated than that. This accurate summary captures it:

**Revised**

As their support of the government’s student loan program illustrates, politicians ignore the economic reality that using resources to benefit one group (students in debt) involves taking the resources from another group (taxpayers).

Using your own words when writing a summary not only helps you understand the meaning but also constitutes the first step in avoiding plagiarism. The second step is to cite the source when you use it in something written for others. See Chapter 47.
look at them one by one, these operations interrelate and overlap. Indeed, the first three are often combined under the general label analysis, and evaluation is sometimes taken for granted as a result of the process.

In the following pages, we use three quite different examples to show how critical reading can work: People magazine, Sowell’s “Student Loans,” and a Web site.

Analyzing

Analysis is the separation of something into its parts or elements, the better to understand it. To see these elements in what you are reading, begin with a question that reflects what you’re trying to make out of it. This question will serve as a kind of lens that highlights some features and not others.

Here are some questions you might ask about People magazine, listed along with the elements of the magazine that each question highlights:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions for analysis</th>
<th>Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does People challenge or perpetuate stereotypes?</td>
<td>Stereotypes: explicit and implicit stereotypes or challenges in the magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the magazine offer positive role models for its readers?</td>
<td>Role models: text and photographs presenting positive or negative role models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the magazine’s editorial material (articles and accompanying photographs) encourage readers to consume goods and entertainment?</td>
<td>Encouragement of consumption: references to goods and entertainment, focus on consumers, equation of consumption with happiness or success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As these examples show, a question for analysis concentrates your attention on relevant features and eliminates irrelevant features. To answer the question about People’s encouragement of consump-

EXERCISE 2 Summarizing

Start where the preceding summary of Thomas Sowell’s essay ends (at paragraph 5) to summarize the entire essay. Your summary, in your own words, should not exceed one paragraph. (For additional exercises in summarizing, see pp. 118–119.)

5 Forming your critical response

Once you’ve grasped the content of what you’re reading—what the author says—then you can turn to understanding what the author does not say outright but suggests or implies or even lets slip. At this stage you are concerned with the purpose or intention of the author and with how he or she carries it out. Depending on what you are reading and why, you may examine evidence, organization, attitude, use of language, and other elements of the text.

Critical thinking and reading consist of four operations: analyzing, interpreting, synthesizing, and (often) evaluating. Although we’ll

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For added help with the operations of critical thinking and reading, click on

- Critical reading and argument
- Video tutorials
- Investigating assumptions
- Exercises
- Exer. 1
- Downloads
- Guidelines for analysis, interpretation, and synthesis
- Guidelines for evaluation
- Web links
- Critical thinking and argument
A difference in the kinds of questions asked is a key distinction among academic disciplines. A sociologist neatly outlined three disciplines’ approaches to poverty:

Political science does a wonderful job looking at poverty as a policy issue. Economics does an equally wonderful job looking at it from an income-distribution perspective. But sociology asks how people in poverty live and what they aspire to.

Even within disciplines, approaches may differ. The sociologist quoted above may focus on how people in poverty live, but another may be more interested in the effects of poverty on cities or the changes in the poor population over the last fifty years. (See Chapters 51–55 for more on the disciplines’ analytical questions.)

Interpreting

Identifying the elements of something is of course only the beginning: you also need to interpret the meaning or significance of the elements and of the whole. Interpretation usually requires you to infer the author’s assumptions, opinions or beliefs about what is or what could or should be. (Infer means to draw a conclusion based on evidence.)

The word assumption here has a more specific meaning than it does in everyday usage, where it may stand for expectation (“I assume you’ll pay”), speculation (“It was a mere assumption”), or error (“The report was riddled with assumptions”). Defined more strictly as what a person supposes to be true, assumptions are unavoidable. We all adhere to certain values and beliefs; we all form opinions. We live our lives by such assumptions.

Though pervasive, assumptions are not always stated outright. Speakers and writers may judge that their audience already understands and accepts their assumptions; they may not even fear that the audience will disagree. That is why your job as a critical thinker is to interpret what the assumptions are.

Reasonable Inferences

Like an author deciding what to say in an article, the publishers of People magazine make assumptions that guide their selection of content for the magazine. One set of assumptions, perhaps the most important, concerns what readers want to see: as a for-profit enterprise, the magazine naturally aims to maintain and even expand its readership (currently about 3.4 million each week). If your analysis of the magazine’s editorial material reveals that much of it features consumer products, you might infer the following:

Reasonable The publishers of People assume that the magazine’s readers are consumers who want to see and hear about goods and entertainment.
corporating more images, color, and boxes, among other elements. Instead, the site’s look is rather plain—the sort of design you might expect from a government site. The prominent Federated in the organization’s name and complements government efforts in the text reinforce the appearance of a government connection. These findings might lead you to infer the following:

Reasonable

The Federated Loan Consolidation Corporation assumes that its readers (potential customers) will be more willing to explore its refinancing options if they believe that it is a reliable organization somehow affiliated with the government.

Unreasonable inferences

Interpreting assumptions gives you greater insight into an author’s intentions. But it’s crucial that inferences fit the evidence of the text, as those above about People, Sowell’s essay, and the Web site do. Sometimes it’s tempting to read too much into the text, as in the next examples:

Faulty

People’s publishers deliberately skew the magazine’s editorial material to promote products on which they receive kickbacks. [The inference is far-fetched, even absurd. It would be reasonable only if there were hard evidence of kickbacks.]

Faulty

Sowell thinks that politicians should not be entrusted with running the country. [The inference misreads Sowell. Although he does not outline a solution for politicians’ irresponsibility, there’s no evidence that he would overhaul our democratic political system.]

Faulty

The Federated Loan Consolidation Corporation claims that it is a government-sponsored agency in order to exploit graduates with heavy student-loan debt. [The inference takes an unwarranted leap. The site does not claim government affiliation or sanction, and it contains no evidence of exploitation.]

Faulty inferences like those above are often based on the reader’s own assumptions about the text or its subject. When thinking and reading critically, you need to look hard at your ideas, too.

Synthesizing

If you stopped at analysis and interpretation, critical thinking and reading might leave you with a pile of elements and possible meanings but no vision of the whole. With synthesis you make connections among parts or among wholes. You create a new whole by drawing conclusions about relationships and implications.
The following conclusion pulls together the earlier analysis of *People* magazine’s editorial content and the interpretation of the publisher’s assumptions about readers:

**Conclusion**  
*People* magazine appeals to its readers’ urge to consume by displaying, discussing, and glamorizing consumer goods.

The statement below about Thomas Sowell’s essay “Student Loans” connects his assumptions about politicians to a larger idea also implied by the essay:

**Conclusion**  
Sowell’s view that politicians are irresponsible with taxpayers’ money reflects his overall opinion that the laws of economics, not politics, should drive government.

The next statement draws on elements of the Federated Loan Consolidation Corporation Web site and the inference about the company’s understanding of its readers:

**Conclusion**  
The Federated Loan Consolidation Corporation uses its name, a mention of the government, and a restrained design to appeal to potential customers who may be wary of commercial lending operations.

You can also synthesize your critical readings of a number of sources, again drawing your own conclusions:

**Conclusion**  
In *People*, *Lifestyles*, *Vanity Fair*, and other magazines aimed at consumers, the line between advertising and editorial material is sometimes almost invisible.

($Synthesizing several sources is important in research writing. See pp. [114-141].$)

To create your own links between experiences, ideas, and entire sources, it helps (again) to write while reading and thinking. The active reading recommended earlier (pp. 119-21) is the place to start, as you note your questions and opinions about the text. You can also create connections with a combination of writing and drawing: start with your notes, or write your ideas out fresh, and draw connections between related thoughts with lines and arrows. (On a word processor you can use the Highlight function or different colors to link related ideas, or use the Comment function to annotate connections.) You want to open up your thinking, so experiment freely.

With synthesis, you create something different from what you started with. To the supermarket shopper reading *People* while standing in line, the magazine may be entertaining and inconsequential. To you—after a critical reading in which you analyze, interpret, and synthesize—the magazine is (at least in part) a significant vehicle of our consumer culture. The difference depends entirely on the critical reading.

**Evaluating**

Many critical reading and writing assignments end at analysis, interpretation, and synthesis: you explain your understanding of what the author says and doesn’t say. Only if you are expected to evaluate the work will you state and defend the judgments you’ve made about its quality and its significance.

You’ll inevitably form judgments while reading the work: What a striking series of images or That just isn’t enough evidence. In evaluating, you collect your judgments, determine that they are generally applicable and are themselves not trivial, and turn them into assertions: The poet creates fresh, intensely vivid images. The author does not summon the evidence to support his case. And you support these statements with citations from the text.

Evaluation takes a certain amount of confidence. You may think that you lack the expertise to cast judgment on another’s writing, especially if the text is difficult or the author well known. True, the more informed you are, the better a critical reader you are. But conscientious reading and analysis will give you the internal authority to judge a work as it stands and as it seems to you, against your own unique bundle of experiences, observations, and attitudes.

The box below gives questions that can help you evaluate many kinds of works. There’s more on evaluation (including evaluation of online sources) on pages [141-142].

For arguments and in academic papers, write your own evaluation. You can download these guidelines from this book’s Web site: see the box on p. 125. Create a copy each time you’re evaluating a work, and use the questions to prompt your written responses.

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**Guidelines for evaluation**

- What are your reactions to the work? What in the work are you responding to?
- How sound are the work’s central idea and evidence?
- How well does the author achieve his or her purpose? How worthwhile is the purpose?
- How authoritative, trustworthy, and sincere is the author?
- How unified and coherent is the work? Do its parts all support a central idea and clearly relate to one another?
- What do color, graphics, or (online) sound or video contribute to the work? Do such elements add meaning or merely decoration?
- What is the overall quality and significance of the work?
- Do you agree or disagree with the work? Can you support, refute, or extend it?

You can download these guidelines from this book’s Web site: see the box on p. 125. Create a copy each time you’re evaluating a work, and use the questions to prompt your written responses.
EXERCISE 3
Thinking critically
Following are some statements about the communications media. Use systematic critical thinking to understand not only what the statement says but also why its author might have said it. As in the example, do your thinking in writing: the act of writing will help you think, and your notes will help you discuss your ideas with your classmates. (Additional exercises in critical reading appear on pp. 111–115.)

Example:

Statement: Every year sees the disappearance of more book publishers because the larger companies gobble up the smaller ones.

Analysis: Why did the author make this statement? Certain words reveal the author’s purpose: disappearance of more book publishers; because; larger companies gobble up smaller ones.

Interpretation: More book publishers means others have disappeared. Because specifies cause. Gobble up implies consumption, predator to prey. Author’s assumptions: Large publishers behave like predators. The predatory behavior of large companies causes the disappearance of small companies. The more publishing companies there are, the better.

Synthesis: The author objects to the predatory behavior of large publishing companies, which he or she holds responsible for eliminating small companies and reducing the total number of companies.

Evaluation: This biased statement against large publishers holds them responsible for the shrinking numbers of book publishers. But are the large companies solely responsible? And why is the shrinking necessarily bad?

1. Newspapers and newsmagazines are better news sources than television because they demand reading, not just viewing.

2. Radio call-in shows are the true democratic forum, giving voice to people of all persuasions.

3. Online communication threatens to undermine our ability to interact face to face.

EXERCISE 4
Reading an essay critically
Reread Thomas Sowell’s “Student Loans” (pp. 121–22) in order to form your own critical response to it. Follow the guidelines for analysis, interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation in the boxes on pages 128 and 131. Focus on any elements suggested by your question about the text: possibilities are assumptions, evidence, organization, use of language, tone, authority, vision of education or students. Be sure to write while reading and thinking; your notes will help your analysis and enhance your creativity, and they will be essential for writing about the selection (Exercise 16, p. 140).

EXERCISE 5
Reading a magazine critically
Do your own critical reading of People or another magazine. What do you see beyond the obvious? What questions does your reading raise? Let the guidelines on pages 128 and 131 direct your response, and do your work in writing. (A writing suggestion based on this exercise appears on p. 11.)

EXERCISE 6
Reading a Web site critically
Use your Web browser to find the Web site of a corporation or other commercial organization with which you are familiar, such as the manufacturer of a car, television, computer, or other product you own; the bank where you have your account; or the online store where you buy books or music. Examine the site’s layout, color, images, sound, video, and interactive features as well as the content of the text. What do the elements tell you about the site’s purpose or purposes—for instance, does the site aim to sell something, to give advice, to provide services? What assumptions does it make about readers? How well do the elements achieve the site’s purposes? Refer to the boxes on pages 128 and 131 for additional questions to consider, and do your thinking in writing. (A writing suggestion based on this exercise appears on p. 141.)

Every day we are bombarded with images—pictures on billboards, commercials on television, graphs and charts in newspapers and textbooks, to name just a few examples. Most images slide by without our noticing them, or so we think. But images, sometimes even more than text, can influence us covertly. Their creators have purposes, some worthy, some not, and understanding those purposes requires that we think critically.

The methods of viewing images critically parallel those for reading text critically: preview, analyze, interpret, synthesize, and (often) evaluate. In the next few pages, we’ll apply these methods to the illustration on page 135, an advertisement for Time magazine that appeared in the magazine itself.
Viewing images critically

1. **Previewing**
   - Look at the work as a whole:
     - What can you tell about the source of the work? Who created it?
     - What does the work show?
     - What is the work’s overall effect?
     - What questions do you have about the work?

   The *Time* advertisement, like most ads, has two significant sources: the site where the ad appeared and the company promoting its product. In this case, the sources are the same: the magazine is advertising itself.

   The ad consists of three parts: a photograph depicting a boy being scanned by an airport security person, a *Time* cover superimposed on the photograph, and text asking a question and issuing an invitation. Overall, the ad pinpoints the significant controversy over US national security in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, using this controversy to promote the magazine. The ad also raises at least two questions besides the one it poses directly: Does *Time* take any position on the controversy? And why is the magazine promoting itself to people who are already reading the magazine?

2. **Analyzing**
   - Study the work closely to begin answering your questions about it. Look not just at the obvious content but at the features that may seem unimportant. Assume that everything in the work appears there for a reason.
   - Which elements stand out the most? Which are less prominent?
   - What do color, composition, and similar features emphasize?
   - If words accompany the image, what do they contribute in relation to the image?

   In the *Time* ad the most prominent element is the photograph: the blond boy, the man, the scanning tool, the “Baggage Claim” sign overhead, the clutter of people and activity in the background. Color, type, and shape form the familiar image of a *Time* cover, with the scanner centered in it like the bull’s-eye on a target. Beneath the visual elements, the ad’s text guides readers’ impression of the photograph and *Time* cover. Positioned on a white background, the words attract attention even though they are set in small type. They encourage readers to question what they see and to seek (or continue seeking) answers in *Time* magazine.

3. **Interpreting**
   - Consider what the elements of the work say about the assumptions and intentions of its creator.

   - What do the various elements of the work say, in images or in words?
   - What appeals do the elements make to viewers? Do they emphasize reason or feelings or a combination?
   - What does the creator seem to assume about viewers’ interests, beliefs, and needs?
   - What seems to be the purpose of the work?

   The *Time* ad appeals partly to reason: to the interest of readers in current news and opinion, to their grasp of the need for national security, to the value of “common sense” solutions, and to “conversation” as a way to reach solutions. But the ad also appeals strongly to emotion. Treating a boy as if he were a security threat is absurd, even humorous. The boy’s innocent, patient, nervous expression...
The *Time* ad can be evaluated both as a work of persuasion and, within that category, as a work of advertising. As persuasion, advertising rarely meets high standards of reasonableness and accuracy. Its promotional purpose encourages one-sidedness and selective use of evidence, when evidence is offered.

*Time* makes a central claim, that it provides dialog about difficult issues. The claim is not supported directly, although readers could seek support ... They would have to decide for themselves whether to be engaged or provoked by the ad's subtle message about profiling.

Judged solely as an advertisement, the *Time* piece fares well. Eye-catching, humorous, and concise, it entices the reader to study the photograph and nod in response to the question. ... the magazine that may strengthen the loyalty of current subscribers and induce occasional readers to become subscribers.

### EXERCISE 7

**Writing about the *Time* advertisement**

In a paragraph, write your own evaluation of the *Time* ad on page 135. Base your evaluation on analysis, interpretation, and synthesis, as outlined on the preceding pages. What do you see in the ad? How effective is it?

### EXERCISE 8

**Viewing an image critically**

Look in a magazine or book for an image that interests you. Or search the wide array of images at the Corbis photograph collection (http://corbis.com) or the WebMuseum (http://www.ibiblio.org/wm). Using the questions on the preceding pages, "read" the image methodically and critically, writing down your responses. (A writing suggestion based on this exercise appears on p. 141.)

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**Writing critically**

Critical writing is largely influenced by the discipline or profession in which it occurs. Thus the topic is covered more extensively in Chapters 7 (argument), 52 (literature), 53 (other humanities), 54 (social sciences), and 55 (natural and applied sciences). In this introduction, we’ll look at some fundamentals and an illustration.
Remember that critical writing is not summarizing. You may write a summary to clarify for yourself what the author says, and you may briefly summarize a work in your own larger piece of writing. But your job in critical writing is not just to report what a text says, it is to transmit your analysis, interpretation, synthesis, and perhaps evaluation of the text.

The following essay by Charlene Robinson, a student, is a response to Thomas Sowell’s “Student Loans.” Robinson arrived at her response through the process of critical reading outlined in this chapter and then by gathering and organizing her ideas, developing her own central idea (or thesis) about Sowell’s text, and drafting and revising until she believed she had supported her central idea. Robinson does not assume that her readers see the same things in Sowell’s essay or share her views, so she offers evidence of Sowell’s ideas in the form of direct quotations, summaries, and paraphrases (resitations in her own words). (See pp. 131–132 for more on these techniques.) Robinson then documents these borrowings from Sowell using the style of the Modern Language Association (MLA): the numbers in parentheses are page numbers in the book containing Sowell’s essay, listed at the end as a “work cited.” (See Chapter 49 for more on MLA style.)

Weighing the Costs

In his essay "Student Loans," the economist Thomas Sowell challenges the US government’s student-loan program for several reasons: a scarce resource (taxpayers’ money) goes to many underserving students, a high number of recipients fail to repay their loans, and the easy availability of money has led to both lower academic standards and higher college tuitions. Sowell wants his readers to "weigh the costs of things" (133) in order to see, as he does, that the loan program should not receive so much government funding. But does he provide the evidence of cost and other problems to lead the reader to agree with him? The answer is no, because hard evidence is less common than debatable and unsupported assumptions about students, scarcity, and the value of education.

Sowell’s portrait of student-loan recipients is questionable. It is based on averages, some statistical and some not, but averages are often deceptive. For example, Sowell cites college graduates’ low average debt of $7,000 to $9,000 (131) without acknowledging the fact that many students’ debt is much higher or giving the full range of statistics. Similarly, Sowell dismisses “heart-rending stories” of “the low-income student with a huge debt” as “not at all typical” (132), yet he invents his own exaggerated version of the typical loan recipient: an affluent slacker (“Rockefellers” and “Vanderbilts”) for whom college is a “place to hang out for a few years” spooning off the government, while his or her parents clear a profit from making use of the loan program (132). While such students (and parents) may well exist, are they really typical? Sowell does not offer any data one way or the other—for instance, how many loan recipients come from each income group, what percentage of loan funds go to each group, how many loan recipients receive significant help from their parents, and how many receive none.

Another set of assumptions in the essay has to do with “scarcity”: “There is never enough of anything to fully satisfy all those who want it,” Sowell says (131). This statement appeals to readers’ common sense, but does the “lack” of scarcity necessarily apply to the student-loan programs? Sowell omits many important factors needed to prove that the nation’s resources are too scarce to support the program, such as the total cost of the program, its percentage of the total education budget and the total federal budget, and its cost compared to the cost of defense, Medicare, and other expensive programs. Moreover, Sowell does not mention the interest paid by loan recipients, even though the interest must offset some of the costs of running the program and covering unpaid loans.

The most fundamental and most debatable assumption underlying Sowell’s essay is that higher education is a kind of commodity that not everyone is entitled to. In order to diminish the importance of graduates’ average debt from education loans, Sowell claims that a car loan will probably be higher (131). This comparison between education and an automobile implies that the two are somehow equal as products and that an affordable higher education is no more a right than a new car is. Sowell also condemns the “irresponsible” students who drop out of school and “the increasingly easy availability of college to people who are not very serious about getting an education” (132). But he overlooks the value of encouraging education, including education of those who don’t finish college or who aren’t scholars. For many in the United States, education has a greater value than that of a mere commodity like a car. And even from an economic perspective such as Sowell’s, the cost to
society of an uneducated public needs to be taken into account.

Sowell writes with conviction, and his concerns are valid: high taxes, waste, unfairness, declining educational standards, obtrusive government. However, the essay’s flaws make it unlikely that Sowell could convince readers who do not already agree with him. He does not support his portrait of the typical loan recipient, he fails to demonstrate a lack of resources for the loan program, and he neglects the special nature of education compared to other services and products. Sowell may have the evidence to back up his assumptions, but by omitting it he himself does not truly weigh the costs of the loan program.

Work Cited

—CHARLENE ROBINSON (student)

EXERCISE 9
Responding to critical writing
Read Charlene Robinson’s essay carefully. What is Robinson’s critical question about Sowell’s essay? How does it relate to her thesis statement? What assumptions does she identify in Sowell’s essay? What conclusions does she reach about the essay? Do you think her response is accurate and fair? Is it perceptive? Does Robinson provide enough evidence from Sowell’s essay to convince you of her points? Does she miss anything you would have mentioned? Write your responses in a brief essay.

EXERCISE 10
Writing critically about an essay
Write an essay based on your own critical reading of Thomas Sowell’s essay (Exercise 4, pp. 132–33). Your critique may be entirely different from Charlene Robinson’s, or you may have developed some of the same points. If there are similarities, they should be expressed and supported in your own way, in the context of your own approach.

EXERCISE 11
Writing critically about a magazine
Write an essay based on your critical response to People magazine or another magazine (Exercise 5, p. 133). Follow the guidelines on page 138 for developing and organizing your essay.