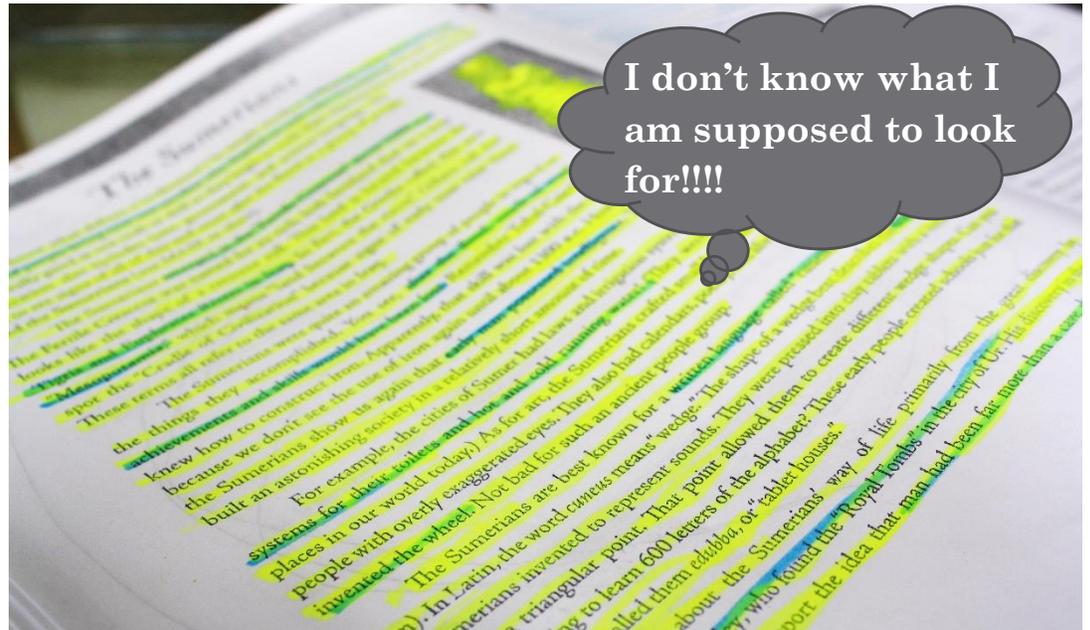


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# Great Ideas for Teaching 2016 Teaching Support Center



Do you feel like your students have difficulties capturing the main points of the course material/readings?  
Have you assigned readings expecting that your students will discuss them in-depth in class, but that doesn't happen?

## From What to How and Why: Helping students to critically analyze texts

### Background

This teaching idea is based on diverse discussions with faculty staff and peers regarding the question: [how can we help students gain deeper insights and comprehension from the course readings?](#)

As TAs and/or instructors we usually ask students to critically analyze and reflect on the course readings, expecting that students will 'know' how to identify the ideas, assumptions and arguments that a text contains e.g. relating particular readings to each other and/or to larger themes presented in class, making judgments, and extending their analysis beyond identifying basic information. However, we rarely provide students with tools to critically analyze the course readings and support their engagement with the authors' ideas, arguments and values. This situation is not new, and although it has been described by contemporary authors such as Ambrose et al. (2010), we still keep asking students to develop critical thinking skills by themselves, assigning complex readings such as theories and classic texts without checking if they have acquired these skills previously. Therefore, this learning activity seeks to [provide students with an opportunity to promote their engagement with the course material by creating questions that can support and guide their critical reading of a text.](#)

This learning activity is also designed to [encourage students to challenge the material that informs the course gradually](#), moving from identifying the main features of a text to interpreting and criticizing/evaluating the values, assumptions and underlying meanings of the text (the levels of learning expected to be achieved through this activity are aligned with those found in Bloom's Taxonomy, Anderson et al, 2001).

### Intended Audience

The intended audience of this activity is undergraduate and graduate students in different fields of study that are required to critically analyze texts, moving beyond identifying information to reach more complex levels of interpretation, analysis and critique.

## Key Concept of this activity

### *Critical thinking:*

Critical thinking is widely defined as a process that entails a continual questioning of the reading material and/or other discourses presented in a course. It is used to uncover and check our own assumptions as well as the assumptions embedded within readings and/or other types of information sources. In this way, critical thinking can help learners make informed decisions (e.g. analyze the potential application of a particular theory as a framework for their research/projects), compare different sources of information based on their evidence, accuracy and/or validity, and take alternative perspectives into account (Brookfield, 1991, 2011).



Picture retrieved from:

<http://thepeakperformancecenter.com/educational-learning/thinking/critical-thinking/>

## Learning outcomes

Students who complete the “From What to How and Why Activity” will be able to:

- Critically reflect upon what kind of information is essential to identify in the course material/readings (i.e. values, relationships between ideas, evidence)
- Create questions to refer to when critically analyzing the course material/readings by participating in the What, How and Why cycles.
- Apply previously learned information when selecting and valuing questions that can support in-depth comprehension of the course material/readings.

## Activity Outline

This activity entails three cycles of reflecting on potential questions, creating and selecting them. The purpose of each cycle is to create a set of questions that students can refer to when reading the course material in order to guide their analysis.

**The first cycle focuses on constructing “what” questions.** Students can work in small groups or independently. First, students are asked to take a moment to reflect on what kind of information is important to capture from the course readings, e.g. inferring from the course syllabus, course learning outcomes and/or previous knowledge. Having some ideas in mind, they are asked to construct “what” questions that can help identify/infer this type of information (e.g. what is the author’s main purpose? What does he/she want to communicate to/impose on us? What are the main values underlying the text? What is the author’s tone and position? What are possible gaps in his/her arguments?). Later, students are invited to write their questions on a white board or paper. Students are then asked to value and select the five most relevant questions, checking off each chosen question with a check mark. Finally, the questions with the most check marks will be selected to be used as guides when analyzing the course material. These questions should be shared in OWL and/or given to the students in paper format to ensure that all students have access to them. The questions can also be used to prompt discussion of the readings in class, which can gradually help students feel more comfortable analyzing and discussing texts in class.

**The second and third cycle focus on creating a set of “how” and “why” questions in the same way that the set of “what” questions was constructed.** Some examples of how questions include: How do you interpret the tone of the author? How does this text/theory conceptualize topics learned in class? How does this text/theory help you interpret concepts learned in class? Similarly, some examples of why questions include: Why was this theoretical lens/text developed? Why should we draw on this text/theory in our course assignment? Why should we study this text/theory in our field? Why should we care about the ideas/values embedded in the text?

• **Required time:** Depending on the number of students, each cycle can take from 20-45 minutes. An idea would be to start with the first cycle, trying the selected questions with a couple of readings to refine them before trying the next two cycles. Alternatively all cycles could be completed at the beginning of the course (in the first two classes) and the selected questions could then be refined throughout the class discussions. In this way, you can choose to make this activity a complement to your class or a core activity to which you can come back every class.

• **Resources:** paper or white board and markers.

### Works Cited

- Ambrose, S. A. et al. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
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