



Evaluating critical sources

Using a short text such as a short story or poem, around which there is supportive critical material in the form of articles, books or reviews, pull out small extracts to represent a range of different critical viewpoints that relate to the text. Alternatively, this activity could take place in two short stages at the beginning of two supervisions, with the students finding and evaluating their own critical material as part of their work on their next essay.

1. Ask students to read the text and explore their own first readings. This stage could be fairly brief (10-15 minutes).
2. Offer (or ask students to bring next time) short extracts of critical material and ask them to talk about what it contributes to their initial reading, using the following prompts:

Does your critical extract:

- give you any extra-textual knowledge or information that helps you interpret the text ?
- confirm your interpretation, (perhaps expressing something you talked about in a particularly lucid way?)
- add to or develop your interpretation ?
- challenge your interpretation?
- Ask students to explain the view of the critic and the way in which it developed or challenged their own reading of the text.

There are alternative approaches at this stage:

- Go straight into writing, asking students to write a brief five-minute response to the original text that in some way draws on the critical material they've looked at, either using it to support their initial reading, or arguing back to it.
- A de-briefing discussion might explore issues around the usefulness of criticism, ways of using it to help establish your own reading, as well as using the student writing to reflect on what makes for appropriate, telling uses of criticism in essays.
- You might want to add the extra dimension of analysing the critical material itself, to explore the nature of the critical stance being adopted, questioning whether it is written from an identifiable critical position, or tradition of criticism, or looking at ways in which critical positions have changed over time, in relation to a text or writer.

It is worth noting that there is a useful practical criticism activity on the Faculty of English Virtual classroom pages that takes students through their own interpretation of a text and towards responding independently to context and the critical viewpoints.