

CRITICAL READING: From What to Why

We're going to be working with a recent comment from Christopher Poole, the founder of 4chan.org. We'll read through his argument several times, each time asking it different questions – questions about the topic and the thesis, about the organization of the argument, and about the argument's premises. You can apply the same general approach to any text.

TOPIC and THESIS

What topic are we discussing, and what is the author's thesis about that topic? Describe the topic in your own words, and underline the thesis.

Anonymous online communities are endangered by persistent user identity.

Think about it: your online identity lives in one of three places now – a Twitter, a Facebook; maybe a MySpace. People are putting loads of information on these sites in order to create a strong identity. This means that we're becoming very comfortable with sharing intimate details about our lives.

The thing is, that's not true: we're comfortable when all of that information is online in a user profile, but we're not comfortable when we're asked to share that information in different ways. For example, if someone called you up on the phone and asked you to give out all of these things that people post online you'd say, "Hell no," and hang up.

So we need to think about sharing personal information in different terms. Here's what I mean: First, we're being tricked into giving out this information. Second, the more people get tricked like this, the less chance anonymous communities have of surviving. It's time for people to push back.

Topic: _____

CRITICAL READING: From What to Why

ORGANIZATION: Paragraph Level

What do these paragraphs *do*? Explain their function by identifying 1) the thesis, 2) any supporting evidence, and 3) the conclusion.

PARAGRAPH	FUNCTION?
1 Anonymous online communities are endangered by persistent user identity.	←
2 Think about it: your online identity lives in one of three places now – a Twitter, a Facebook; maybe a MySpace. People are putting loads of information on these sites in order to create a strong identity. This means that we’re becoming very comfortable with sharing intimate details about our lives.	←
3 The thing is, that’s not true: we’re comfortable when all of that information is online in a user profile, but we’re not comfortable when we’re asked to share that information in different ways. For example, if someone called you up on the phone and asked you to give out all of these things that people post online you’d say, “Hell no,” and hang up.	←
4 So we need to think about sharing personal information in different terms. Here’s what I mean: First, we’re being tricked into giving out this information. Second, the more people get tricked like this, the less chance anonymous communities have of surviving. It’s time for people to push back.	←

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ORGANIZATION: Sentence Level

Each paragraph has one topic sentence – the main claim that the author is making in that paragraph. Underline these sentences.

1 Anonymous online communities are endangered by persistent user identity.

2 Think about it: your online identity lives in one of three places now – a Twitter, a Facebook; maybe a MySpace. People are putting loads of information on these sites in order to create a strong identity. This means that we're becoming very comfortable with sharing intimate details about our lives.

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PREMISES

Now we know about the thesis, the conclusion, and the topic sentences. Now we have to ask a question: *why* does all of this make sense? The answer will be the author's reasons – the premises of his argument.

Let's start with the **overall argument**. How do the topic sentences support the overall conclusion? First, number the topic sentences that you underlined above. Try sketching lines of dependency that show these main numbered reasons depend on each other.

Next, look at the **individual paragraphs** (numbers 2, 3, and 4). How do the other sentences in the paragraph support the topic sentence? Again, number the sentences, and then sketch a diagram that shows how the individual pieces of evidence add up to the topic sentence.

2

3

4

This is the hardest part, so take your time!

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PREMISES

Now put both diagrams together. You should be able to show how the sentences fit together – how each sentence builds on the previous one, leading to the conclusion.

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NEXT STEPS and FURTHER READING

You've just done the hardest work involved in critical reading: figuring out how an argument works is the most important part. Often, though, you'll want to go further and ask if what you're reading is a *good* argument. There are many different ways to do this – and again, questioning is a useful method. The following is a very small sample of a large number of possible questions you can ask a text:

Are any of the words or sentences ambiguous – that is, could they have multiple meanings?

Has the author taken anything for granted? *Unstated* assumptions often play a big part in an author's reasoning, and those assumptions can be problematic even if the *stated* argument is not.

How good is the evidence that's used? Is there other important evidence which has been left out?

Has the author made any errors in reasoning (logical fallacies)?

Is the author's perspective biased? Would adopting a different ideology or point of view lead to a different interpretation of the evidence?

Is *your* perspective biased?

There are great resources for critical reading available in the library and online. This handout, for instance, relied on the following:

Browne, M. Neil, and Stuart M. Keely. *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking*. 2nd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1986.

Knott, Deborah. "Critical Reading towards Critical Writing." New College Writing Centre, University of Toronto.

<<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/reading-and-researching/critical-reading>>.

McLaughlin, Jeff. "How to Read a Philosophy Paper (Including This One)." Department of Philosophy, Thompson Rivers University. <<http://www.cariboo.bc.ca/ae/php/phil/mclaughl/courses/howread.htm>>.