

Critical Reading II: Discovering the Author's Purpose

You may think the word “critical” has only a negative meaning, as in “Professor Smith criticized my paper unfairly.” However, a critical reader is a careful reader. According to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, one meaning of the word critical is “exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation.” In other words, critical reading means being able to comprehend and make educated judgments about what you read.



The skills involved in critical reading are explained in Critical Reading Tip Sheets I-VI.

What is Purpose?

When an author writes something, he or she wants that writing to have a particular effect on a specific audience. Depending on the intended audience, a writer will change the vocabulary, content, and presentation of his or her writing. Some writing is for general-interest readers, some can be for experts (like scientists), and some can be for special-interest groups (like religious or political groups). There are several purposes an author may have, some of them include:

<p>To persuade: some writing, like advertising or political speeches, is an attempt to make the reader do something.</p>	<p>Judy Glen's amazing Wrinkle Remover cream will make you look younger in thirty days or less. This remarkable cream has special ingredients to make your wrinkles disappear. The cost for a thirty day supply is only \$ 25.99!</p>
<p>To entertain: humorous books and articles, parody, and satire are written to amuse or entertain the reader.</p>	<p>It was a glorious morning in Alabama. The sun was shining through the trees. Alan couldn't wait to find his fishing pole and call his friend Sam to go fishing. They had a great time on these early morning fishing trips. They took their dogs with them and the dogs would swim in the lake while they fished. It was so funny to watch those dogs paddle around the lake.</p>
<p>To criticize: movie and book reviews, articles on sports, and restaurant reviews are types of writing that criticize, or pass judgment on people and things.</p>	<p>Judd Apatow is making the freshest, most honest mainstream comedies in Hollywood. The writer-director has managed to synthesize the neurotic, outsider comedy of Woody Allen, the benign satire of Paul Mazursky and the gross-out combustibility of the Farrelly Brothers into a sweet, raunchy and loose style all his own. –David Ansen, <i>Newsweek</i></p>
<p>To inform: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) pages on the internet, textbooks, news articles, and this tip sheet are all written to inform or teach an audience.</p>	<p>Laura Elizabeth Ingalls Wilder was born on February 7, 1867 in Pepin, Wisconsin to Charles and Caroline Ingalls. She met and married Almanzo James Wilder in 1885. She published many books based on her travels to the west. Her writing became the basis for the "Little House" series. She died in 1957.</p>

Paying attention to where a piece of writing comes from and how it is presented will help you identify who the intended audience of the writing is. After you discover who the author wrote for, you may then be able to determine why the author wrote the piece in the first place.

Adapted from McWhorter, Kathleen T. *Reading Across the Disciplines*. 2nd Ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.