

Purpose

Instead of merely understanding ideas and arguments in a book or article, graduate students must learn to critically engage. “Critical engagement” occurs when you read “not just for data you can use in your own argument but more importantly for questions, problems, and arguments that spur your own thinking.”¹ For example, you will have to critically engage sources in position papers, research papers, and article/book reviews. The purpose of this paper is to help you understand three basic options: agree, disagree, or modify.

Agree

Let us suppose that after reading and understanding an argument and conclusion, you completely agree with the author. Even when you agree, there are still several ways to critically engage with the source. For example, answer the following questions:

- What did you find the most persuasive? Why?
- How did the author effectively answer the research question?
- How did the author effectively use his or her evidence?
- Can you think of additional evidence that further supports the author’s thesis?

¹ Wayne C. Booth et al., *The Craft of Research*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2016), 85.

Disagree

In some ways, it is easier to critically engage with an argument and conclusion if you disagree. Ask yourself the following question:

- What does the author assume? How are these assumptions faulty?
- What argument did you find the most unpersuasive? Why?
- How did the author fail to answer the research question?
- What pertinent evidence did the author not address?
- What counterexamples can you offer?
- Does the argument not warrant the conclusion? In other words, is the argument invalid?

As a second possible strategy, you could also consider the “special criteria for points of criticism” in *How to Read a Book*:

- “Show wherein the author is uninformd.”
- “Show wherein the author is misinformed.”
- “Show wherein the author is illogical.”
- “Show wherein the author’s analysis or account is incomplete.”²

Modify

If you agree with some parts of the argument or conclusion and disagree with other parts, you may need to modify. However, a special word of caution is required for this option. You should never modify an argument simply because it seems like the easiest option. You should always try to

² Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 156-163.

agree or disagree with an argument *before* you modify it. In other words, your primary options are to agree or disagree. If after great effort, you cannot agree or disagree, then you may *have* to modify.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- How can you more accurately define the author's key terms?
- Is the research outdated? What evidence have scholars uncovered since the research was published?
- What are the gaps in scholarship that impact the argument or conclusion? In other words, what limits of knowledge make the argument speculative?
- Can you introduce additional evidence that adjusts the results of the study?
- Is the conclusion generally true, but too strongly worded? Conversely, does the author understate his or her conclusion?

A Few Things to Note

Remember that you must first understand an argument and conclusion before you can agree, disagree, or modify. How can you tell if you understand an argument well enough to critically engage with it? One strategy is to summarize the argument in your own words. If you struggle to explain the main points of an argument, you are not ready to critically engage.³

You do not have to give the “final word” in your critical evaluation of a source. Scholarship is ongoing and it is appropriate to acknowledge the progressive nature of research. Instead of offering a firm conclusion to evaluating a source, you may decide to conclude with a statement toward further research. For example, it is often appropriate to conclude a paper about a current debate by listing potentially fruitful avenues of future research.

³ Booth et al., *The Craft of Research*, 88.