

Teaching Students to be Critically Literate

One of the most valuable life skills a reader needs to develop is information literacy. Being critically literate requires the reader to go beyond basic comprehension. He or she must take the next step by evaluating what has been read and to ascertain its reasonableness, followed by determining if the author is credible. This process requires a new way of thinking in order to derive meaning from learning.

An information-literate person is one who follows these steps:

Step	Example
1. recognizes that in order to make an intelligent decision it is vital to have information that is accurate and complete	Based on a classroom study of Civil War, the student decides that he or she needs to evaluate slavery.
2. recognizes the need for locating the information	In order to consider slavery, the student realizes he or she needs to locate information about slavery.
3. develops question(s) based on information needs	The student asks himself/herself, "How did slaves feel about slavery? What was the slave experience like?"
4. identifies potential sources of information	The student lists where he or she can seek resources about slavery.

5. develops successful strategies for searching for information	The student plans how he or she will go about obtaining the needed resources.
6. accesses information from many different resources including electronic ones	The student uses past experience or seeks help to locate library, classroom, or technical resources to find information about slavery.
7. carefully reads the located information to determine if it is relevant to the topic at hand	The student reads the information about slavery he or she has located and determines if it is useful to his or her needs. He or she sets aside the information that cannot be used.
8. evaluates the credibility of the information	The student uses the chart of questions (See activities that follow.) to determine if the information about slavery is credible.
9. organizes the information for his or her own use	The student organizes the information about slavery in a way that helps him or her better understand it. (Taking notes is one possibility.)
10. makes a decision based on this critical evaluation.	The student makes an informed decision about slavery being a positive or negative experience for slaves.

Learners who are able to do this will have the lifelong skills required for existence in the Information Age that is upon us. Knowing how to ask the right questions may be the single most important step in learning. The process that is conducted in order to find these answers leads to the point where information becomes knowledge.

These skills are particularly applicable to social studies. The National Council for Social Studies developed standards in 1993 that state, "it is important that students be able to connect knowledge, skills, and values to action as they engage in social inquiry." Information literacy, then, is central to all successful learning.

How does a person acquire the skills to become critically literate? He or she learns through direct instruction in the classroom and by practicing the required skills. But there is an important caveat. In order for learning to be meaningful, the skills must be taught in a relevant context. Throughout this guide, many lessons have been carefully designed to assist teachers in this endeavor. In addition to having students work with information related to historical content, an important goal of each activity is to help teachers guide students in acquiring critical literacy skills.