Critical Reading

Some Things to Think About

The following questions are a good way to start thinking critically about a piece of writing. Some of these questions may be more helpful than others, depending on the text.

Origin: Who is the author? (Gender, class, nationality, profession, experience, reputation?) What is the context in which the source was written? (Audience, culture, historical period, publisher etc.) What influence might this have on the text itself?

Thesis: What is the purpose of the text? What is it trying to do? Look at the title, the headings, images, and the repeated ideas and vocabulary in the body of the text. Can you identify a main argument, a stated goal, a research question, a unique position, an ideological standpoint?

Structure: How is the text organized? Can you identify what each paragraph is doing or is about? Make an outline or diagram that shows the structure of this text.

Presentation: Look at layout, structure etc. Are there charts, figures, big quotations? What kind of images are used, and how are they used (how do they relate to the text)? What does the presentation method do for the text and the experience of reading it?

Rhetoric: What is the writing style and rhetorical method? What kind of language or vocabulary does it use? Does it project authority or uncertainty? Does it admit to limitations and biases? What image of him/herself does the author project? How?

Evidence and argumentation: How does the author make his/her case? Does the author provide reliable, credible evidence for his/her argument? Does the author acknowledge opposing views?

Try this:

Experiment: What would the text be like if you changed one of these answers? For example, what would happen if you had a text on global warming and removed all its scientific data, or if you had an art review with no images and then added several? Or, for example, what would happen if a scientific paper were written in street slang?