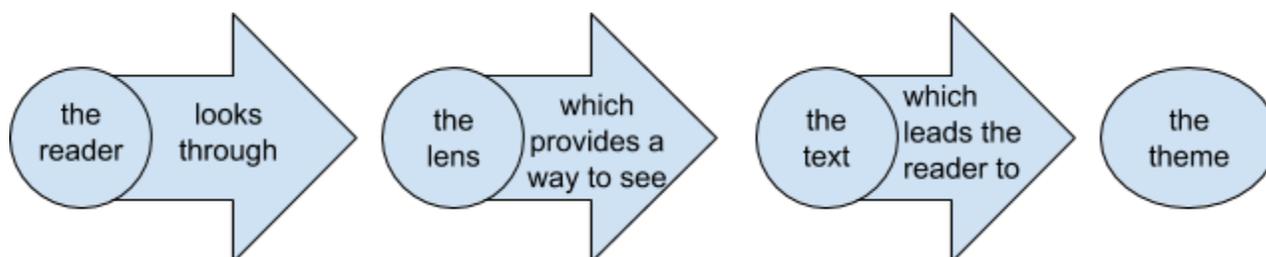


Choosing and Using A Critical Lens

Critical lens is the academic term for a way of looking at a text (and thus interpreting it) from a specific perspective. You already do this any time you interpret a text's meaning. Below are some examples of various lenses through which to view a text as well as strategies used for each. As you read, consider shifting your perspective or viewpoint.



1. **Reader Response Lens:** Reading a text for personal meaning

- In what ways is the text familiar to your life? Think of events in the story, the types of characters, or the setting... Can you relate to it on a personal level?
- In what ways is the text different than your life?
- How did the text affect you?
- How has the text increased your interest in the subject matter?
- How has the text changed your worldview?

2. **Psychological Lens:** Reading a text for patterns in human behavior. While everyone's formative history is different in particulars, there are basic recurrent patterns of development for most people.

- Is the way the characters act believable?
- Why do certain characters act the way they do?
- Think of what is a general viewpoint on life for children, youth, young adults, middle-aged, or elderly people. Do the characters follow the patterns associated with these groups?
- Think of random human emotions. How do they come to play in the text? (happiness, anger, depression, indifference, confusion, etc.)
- What did you think of the moral/ethical choice the character made? What would you have done?
- Think about the broader social issues the text attempts to address.

3. **Historical Lens:** Reading a text for its contextual significance. This would include information about the author, his or her historical moment, or the systems of meaning available at the time of writing.

- Research the author's life and relate the information to the text. Why did the author write it? What is the author's worldview?
- If the author is writing on a debatable issue does he or she give proper consideration to all sides of the debate? Does he or she seem to have a bias?
- Research the author's time (political history, intellectual history, economic history, etc.) and relate the information to the work.
- Upon reading the text, how has your view on the given historical event changed?

4. Gender Lens: Reading a text for its gender related issues or attitudes toward gender. The assumption here is that men and women are different: they write differently, read differently, and write about their reading differently. These differences should be valued.

- Consider the gender of the author and the characters: what role does gender play in the text?
- Observe how gender stereotypes might reinforce or undermine. Try to see how the text reflects or distorts the place men or women have in society.
- Imagine reading the text from the point of view of someone from the opposite gender.

5. Race Lens: Reading a text for its issues of race, heritage, and ethnicity.

- Analyze how the text discusses race, heritage, and ethnicity. Or consider what images of “others” are present in the text. How are these “others” presented?
- Are there any unfair stereotypes? Are there any generalities that hold true?
- Analyze the text for how it deals with cultural conflicts, particularly between majority and minority groups.

6. Socio-Economic Lens: Reading a text for its socio-economic issues.

- Explore the way different demographics are represented in texts.
- What world view does the text represent?
- What does the text say about class structures?
- Analyze the social effects of the text.

7. Spiritual Lens: Reading a text for its spiritual and faith related issues.

- Analyze the text for its issues as they relate to one’s faith in a higher being.
- Compare aspects of the text as they relate to religious writings/scriptures.
- If one believes in a higher being or creator, how does that creator speak to the reader through the text?
- What does the text say about various world religions?
- What does the text say about faith? Grace? Love? Forgiveness? Hope?

8. New Criticism Lens: Reading a text for the unity and complexity of its form. The focus should be on the text itself.

- What types of symbolism are in the text?
- What themes recur throughout the text?
- Are the plot and subplots believable?
- Where could the story go from here?
- What did you think of the ending?
- What is the strength - or most noticeable weakness - of the text?
- Does the story fit an archetype? (i.e romance, tragedy, comedy, satire, irony) How do those “types” manifest themselves?