

## Chapter 3: Critical Literacy

Bringing critical perspectives towards texts encourages readers to:

- Actively analyze texts;
- Uncover underlying messages;
- Engage with texts;
- Apply it to real-life events and personal experiences;
- Make judgements based on the validity and ethical use of the information; and
- Analyze writers' perspectives and motivations.

Critical literacy has been influenced by work in the fields of feminism, racism, and queer theory and has extended from there.

Literacy education should be concerned with raising the critical consciousness of learners.

Key tenets of critical literacy

1. Literacy is not a neutral technology, it is always ideologically situated. It is shaped by power and, in turns, shapes subjects and discourses
2. Learners are differently positioned in relation to access to dominant literacy discourses through aspects such as 'race', class, culture, gender, language, sexual orientation, and physical abilities
3. Critical literacy practices can foster political awareness and social change
4. Critical literacy involves any or all of the following: having a critical perspective on language and literacy itself, on particular texts and/or on wider social practices
5. Learners' own cultural and semiotic resources should be utilized within classrooms and their critical stances towards these resources recognized and extended
6. Text design and production can provide opportunities for critique and potential transformation of discourses of power

Students contextualize new material by connecting the information to knowledge that the students already have; they apply the new information to past experiences in order to make sense of it. Critical literacy expands this process by making students self-aware of this contextualization process. Students can then consider how others might interpret texts and information differently based on their different past experiences.

Critical literacy involves a number of key principles and repertoires for practice:

- Engaging with local realities
- Researching and analyzing language-power relationships, practices, and effects
- Mobilizing students' knowledges and practices
- (Re)designing texts with political and social intent and real-world use
- Subverting taken-for-granted 'school' texts
- Examining how power is exercised and by whom

Important to this work is the emphasis on children as critical agents who bring to the classroom a wealth of critical insights on their world and who do not need to acquire a set of print-based literacy skills and knowledge before they can engage in critical literacy practices.

### Essential Question

1. What is the importance of critical literacy, and how does one embed these strategies into one's day to day activities?

### **Critical Literacy and the Program of Studies:**

“Critical thinking, learning and language are interrelated. Students use language to make sense of and bring order to their world and to play an active role in various communities of learners within and beyond the classroom. They use language to examine new experiences and knowledge in relation to their prior knowledge, experiences and beliefs. They make connections, anticipate possibilities, reflect upon and evaluate ideas, and determine courses of action. By becoming critical thinkers, students also become independent, successful and contributing members of society.” *Program of Studies, English Language Arts (Senior High). ‘Introduction: Critical Thinking and Learning through Language,’ pg. 2.*

### **Activities**

**Division 1:** (Note: This activity could be altered to be applied in multiple situations, however we have chosen to adhere to the concept researched. Source: NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, 2009)  
Around Christmas time, have students write letters to Santa, and prepare for a classroom visit with him. Then have a Santa of a different nationality come and surprise the students on the day of the visit. Have students respond after the visit with discussion about the visit, their expectations of what Santa looks like, and other preconceptions that were affected during this visit. Present other visuals of multicultural Santa figures if desired to expand student conceptions of what Santa could look like in different cultures and countries to encourage further discussion and exploration of the topic.

**Division 2:** Using two opposing texts, such as *The Three Little Pigs* and *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka, have students read each text, then compare and contrast the ideas that are being communicated by the text. Students can then argue for and against the two perspectives in small groups, then write a defense paper either on their own or as a collaborative writing exercise. Student writing can then be peer reviewed and assessed for persuasive writing skills.

**Division 3:** Have students read two different newspaper articles on the same event. After reading, students will compare and contrast the authors’ differing perspectives and motivations, and discuss how the language in the articles influences meaning. Below is a video that shows how this activity can be implemented into a classroom.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8wM95cv2j8>

**Division 4:** Have students read a satirical text such as Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* without priming them for content. Then have students respond in a Think Pair Share or classroom discussion. Either wait for students to catch on to the satirical element of the text via discussion, or (if necessary) direct students to this concept. Once students have identified the problems with the verity of the text (breaking the codes), have them reread it and discuss the meaning of the text and its function. Students can then analyze the structures used in the text that have resulted in such an effective presentation of rhetoric and consider why they work and how they might use this kind of writing in their own lives and work.