

## Critical Reading: Outcomes (a) – (b), part I

(Slide 1) There are four learning outcomes in this course relating to critical reading. This lecture introduces the first two outcomes.

### Basic Concepts

(Slide 2) This lecture will address the following learning outcomes individually:

- a) Summarize the explicit content of a text
- b) Describe the structure of a paper or book's argument

Subsequent lectures will similarly deal with two more outcomes, as follows:

- c) Describe the grounds for drawing an inference from a text or an argument
- d) Incorporate content from footnotes/endnotes, bibliography, and other features of academic writing to state the explicit meaning of, or predictable inferences from, a text

However, before tackling these outcomes individually it may be better to step back and look at some distinctions that run throughout the critical reading outcomes for this course. The first two outcomes presume a distinction between form and content; the next two presume a distinction between conclusions and inferences.

(Slide 3) Let's begin by explaining the two key terms that occur in the first two outcomes. **Content** means more or less the same thing as "meaning." The content of a text is what the text means, or says. This is a straightforward concept, so we won't spend too much time explaining it. Being able to produce a good summary, however, isn't necessarily straightforward, so before you're asked to practice this skill you'll be given some practical guidance.

(Slide 4) Take a simple text, composed of just one sentence, "the cat is on the mat." In the picture there's a cat and there's a mat, and the cat is on the mat. That's really all that the sentence means. In principle, that's how any text gets its content: each word and each sentence has a meaning, and the content of the entire text is just the combination of all those individual meanings. But as you'll see, things aren't that simple. For one thing, as a text gets longer or more complex, it becomes easier to interpret it in multiple ways, and if you take courses in literature or philosophy, you'll see very quickly that what a text says isn't always straightforward. So let's consider how we should understand the content of a longer text like a book.

(Slide 5) Clearly, if you were asked to tell someone what a book said, one way of answering the question would be to read the whole book to the person. Another way would be to paraphrase what the book

said. A complete paraphrase will contain the same content as the original, so it's liable to be more or less the same length as the original. Generally, however, if someone is asking about the content of a text, they're asking for a **summary**, which is a selective paraphrase: it doesn't include everything that the original does, but only the most important things. What's most important? Well, any two educated people are likely to differ at least to some extent when the text is complex, but very likely they'll at least understand why the other person identifies the elements that he does. So there are generally a number of summaries that would count as good, though there are a lot more bad, or simply wrong, ones.

(Slide 6) So this is a brief account of what "content" and "summary" mean. Why do the outcomes specify that content to be summarized is "explicit"? Because it's easy to read into a text something that isn't exactly there. If you listen carefully to conversations in daily life, you'll see that frequently the words we say don't exactly express the ideas we intend to communicate. For example, if I'm looking at my hands and I ask "do my hands look the same?" you might answer "it looks like the left one is a little swollen." Someone who takes everything very literally might think that you haven't answered my question, because I asked a question about size and you answered a question about swollenness.

But it's clear what's going on here: maybe I hit my hand, and I'm wondering whether I damaged it. Normally hands should be roughly mirror images of each other, and if I'm not sure if my hand is swollen, I'll compare it to the other one. I know they aren't the same (they're in fact mirror images) and I don't really care whether they're the same. I care whether one's swollen. You recognize that from the context (which includes the fact that one looks swollen, and you know that's a bad sign), so you answer the question I intended to ask, not the one that someone could get from a literal reading of the words I used.

A simpler example is found in greetings. "How are you doing?" and "what's going on?" aren't really questions about the interlocutor's health or activities. They are just fancy, but common, ways of saying HELLO.

(Slide 7) In fact, it's sometimes hard to stop interpreting what someone says and actually listen to the words they're using. But sometimes we need to do this, as a step towards making sure we aren't misunderstanding their real meaning. So in this course we begin with explicit content, or what a text says directly, and then move to more complex (but still rather strictly constrained) outcomes like what conclusions or inferences we can draw from a text.

(Slide 8) **Structure** may be harder to get a grasp of than content, but it's a very important concept nonetheless. Let's provisionally define structure as "the parts of a thing, and how those things are combined." What makes the concept of structure difficult is the fact that any given thing can be decomposed into parts in a variety of ways. We'll therefore begin with a tangible example before we start to consider how arguments are structured.

(Slide 9) Consider the type of ancient Greek pot illustrated here, which is known as an amphora. The picture on the left shows you what an entire amphora looks like – the amphora style is defined by the pot’s shape. The picture on the right shows a detail from a different amphora.

The way the Greeks made these decorated vessels was to form the clay into the proper shape, then paint colored glazes onto them. The red background in the amphora on the right is the natural color of the clay. So the amphora can be decomposed into its material parts: the clay and the glaze. Any amphora, even the simple one to the left, can also be decomposed into the various parts of an amphora, such as base, handles, or neck. And the decoration of the pot on the right can be decomposed into parts, such as (in this case) the one-eyed giant Polyphemus who you see prominently in the middle of the photo, Odysseus (the smaller figure immediately to Polyphemus’ left), and the stick that Odysseus is jabbing into Polyphemus’ eye.

(Slide 10) We can use this example for two purposes: to see how structure is the combination of parts that constitute a thing, and to see how the same thing can be decomposed into parts in a variety of distinct ways. The amphora can be decomposed either into its physical materials (clay and glaze) or into its functional parts (base, neck, handle). If we’re studying the technology of how pottery was made, then we’ll be interested in the physical decomposition. If we’re interested in stylistics, then we’re interested in the functional parts. After all, an amphora is defined in terms of its shape, and the functional parts are elements of its shape; an amphora is distinguished by its shape from a hydria, say, or a pelike, two other forms of vessels for carrying liquids shown to the bottom right of the slide.

(Slide 11) We can do the same kind of decomposition to an argument. Consider the simple argument presented on this slide:

*The clouds appear dark today.  
It’s probably going to rain.*

The first sentence describes an observation, let’s call it “evidence,” and the second is what we conclude from this observation, let’s call it a “conclusion.” We could break the sentences down into words or letters, but words aren’t a part of the argument, like evidence and conclusions are. The words are analogous to the material parts of the amphora, the clay and the glaze, whereas the evidence and conclusion are analogous to the handles and neck, since handles and neck are part of the amphora inasmuch as it is an amphora.

(Slide 12) In the last slide we illustrated how one goes about describing the structure of a simple argument. We’ll look in somewhat greater detail in a subsequent lecture in this unit at what parts make up an argument, and we’ll return to this again later in the course, notably when we address the final learning goal, which is argumentation. For present purposes, let’s just say this: an argument starts with one or more claims, and then draws a conclusion from them. In this course we’ll focus on arguments that don’t require special background. In the example from the last slide, everyone knows that dark

clouds are evidence that it will rain, so we don't need to worry here about why, or how, this counts as evidence. We know it does and that's good enough.

As a practical matter, what the skill *describe the structure of an argument* amounts to is finding the largest elements of a book or chapter, then finding the major elements of those, and so on downward as far as you want or need to go. In this context, "main elements" means main elements of the argument that the book or chapter makes. The basic elements of a book are chapters, and often chapters are broken down into subsections with headers. That's not what mean by "main elements." In a given book, each main component of the argument may be given its own chapter, but that's not always (or generally) the case.

### Summary

(Slide 13) In this lecture we looked at three basic concepts (content, structure, and summary) and also began to consider the contrast between explicitness and implicitness. To briefly review, the content of a text is what the text means, or says. A summary is a selective paraphrase of a text's content. Structure is the parts of a thing, and how they are combined.

We then looked at two types of examples: Greek pottery was used as a visual analogy to help us get at the notion of structure, and then we looked at a very simple (two sentence) text that presented an intuitively obvious argument. While these examples offer the virtue of simplicity, they have the disadvantage that they are somewhat trivial. When you begin to apply Outcomes (a) and (b) to the kind of texts that you'll be reading in college, you'll realize that practicing these skills requires a lot more than understanding concepts. That's why practice will prove helpful. Before moving on to other outcomes, we'll provide you with some more illustrations how these skills are used in practice. But that will have to wait until another lecture.

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