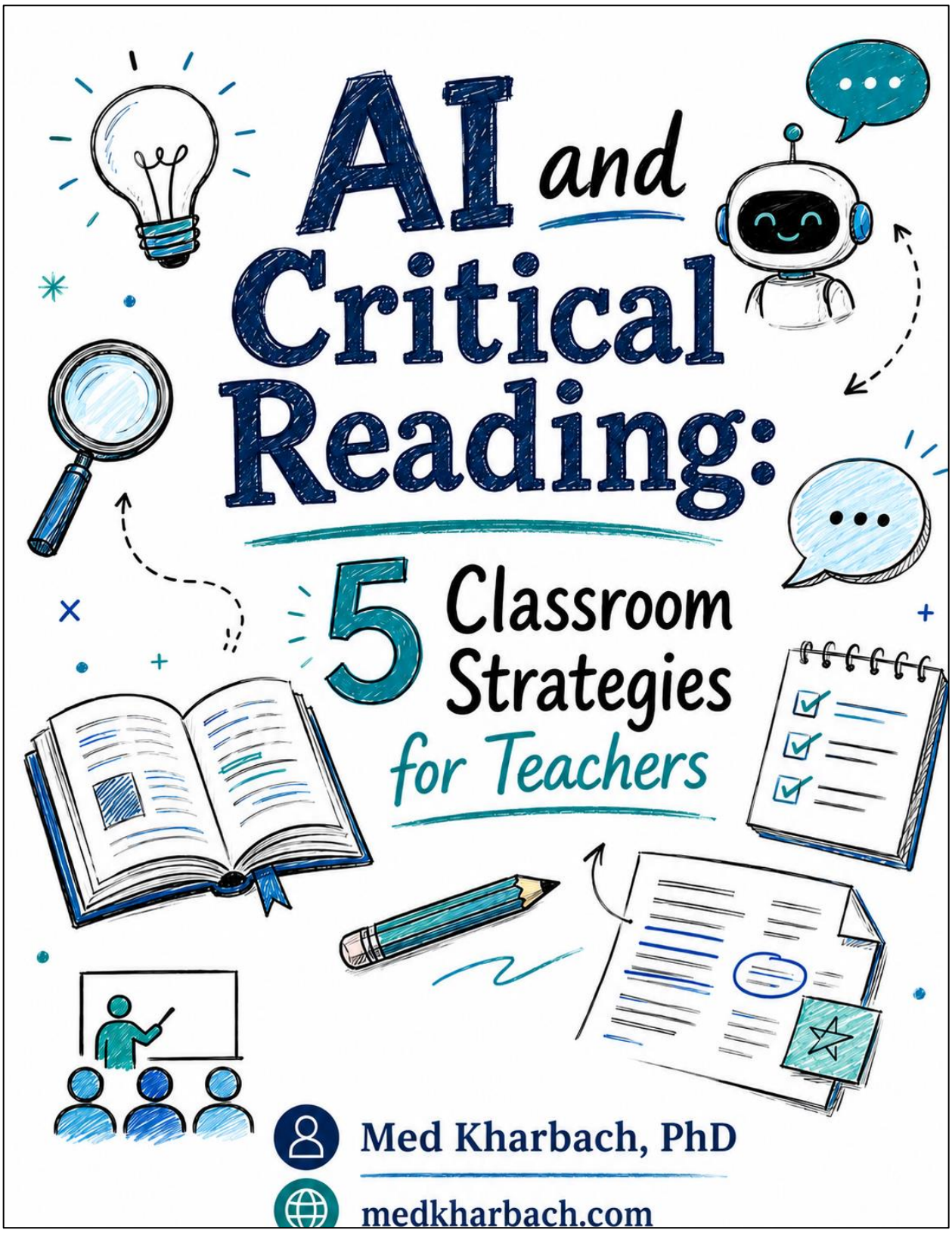
AI and Critical Reading:
5 Classroom Strategies for Teachers
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Introduction

At the turn of this century, the social web emerged and changed everything about how we share information. Scholars at the time warned about something they called the culture of amateurism (Keen, 2007), and looking back, they had a point. The internet suddenly made it possible for anyone to set up a blog or platform and publish content to the world. No gatekeepers. No editorial boards. No peer review standing between an idea and an audience.

This was a dramatic shift. Before Web 2.0, publishing was hard. If you wanted your work out there, it had to pass through layers of scrutiny. Editors, reviewers, publishers. They filtered what reached the public. The social web dismantled those filters. Anyone could build a platform, grow a readership, and position themselves as an expert. And while this democratization had its benefits, it also opened the floodgates to shallow thinking. Nicholas Carr (2010) wrote about this cost, how the ease of publishing invited a wave of content that looked credible on the surface but lacked the rigor underneath.

For those of us in teaching and research, this created real challenges. We spent time helping students distinguish credible sources from unreliable ones. Wikipedia became the go-to example of what not to cite in academic work because it was seen as too open, too anecdotal, too easy to manipulate.

Now generative AI has pushed this problem into entirely new territory. What we saw with Web 2.0 feels almost quaint compared to what's happening now. Today, a single prompt can produce a polished essay in seconds, written in language that looks convincingly human to the untrained eye. Over the past two years, AI-generated content has flooded the internet. Browse Amazon and you'll find shelves of new books

across every topic, many produced by authors with no real credentials or expertise. The barriers to publishing have essentially disappeared.

I want to be clear here. I am not against using AI to support writing. I use it myself every day. What concerns me is using AI to generate ideas that aren't yours and then presenting them as if they are. Outsourcing the cognitive work of thinking to a machine and calling the output your own. The power of AI lies in amplification, not replacement. Use it to polish your language, clean up your prose, handle the mechanical side of writing. But the ideas need to come from you.

That's the writing side. Reading, which is what this guide is about, faces similar challenges. AI can support reading comprehension in powerful ways, but only when we use it with intention and strategy. Otherwise, we risk the same shallow engagement that has plagued online content for years. This is exactly why critical reading matters more now than it ever has.

What is Critical Reading?

When we teach reading, we usually focus on two things: can students decode the words, and do they understand what the text is saying? Critical reading goes a step further. It asks students to evaluate what they are reading. To judge whether the ideas hold up. To consider what the author is really trying to accomplish and whether the argument is worth buying into (Cunningham, 1980).

Think of it this way. Comprehension asks "what does this text say?" Critical reading asks "should I believe it? Why was this written? What is missing?"

This is harder than it sounds, especially in school settings. Textbooks and assigned readings come with built-in authority. Students tend to trust them because they come from institutions. But every text reflects choices. Someone decided what to include, what to leave out, how to frame the topic (Luke et al., 1983). Critical reading helps students see those choices instead of accepting them as neutral facts.

Here is another piece that often gets overlooked. Meaning is not just sitting inside a text waiting to be extracted. What a reader takes away depends on what they bring to the reading. Their background, their experiences, their knowledge of the subject. Two students can read the same article and walk away with different interpretations, and both can be valid (McDonald, 2004). Critical reading embraces this. It treats meaning as something constructed through the interaction between reader and text.

There is also a social dimension to all of this. Texts do not appear out of nowhere. Someone wrote them, for a reason, within a particular context (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). A news article, a textbook chapter, a social media post. Each one was produced by someone with a perspective, and that

perspective shapes what ends up on the page. Critical readers learn to ask who is behind the text, what their purpose might be, and whose interests are being served.

And then there is the question of positioning. Every text nudges readers toward certain beliefs, values, or ways of seeing the world (Gee, 1996). Sometimes this is obvious. Sometimes it is subtle. Critical reading teaches students to notice when a text is trying to position them and to ask whether they want to go along with it.

At a practical level, this means questioning, rereading, and digging into layers of meaning that are not immediately visible on the surface (Fisher & Frey, 2012). It is a skill that takes practice, but once students develop it, they approach texts differently. They stop being passive consumers and start being active evaluators.

AI-Enhanced Critical Reading Strategies

The following are practical strategies teachers can use to help students become more critical readers. Each strategy targets a specific dimension of critical reading, from investigating sources to detecting bias to questioning assumptions. And each one includes ways to integrate AI as a supportive tool.

Strategy 1: Source Investigation and Author Interrogation

The first level of critical reading has nothing to do with what the text says. It focuses on who wrote it and where it was published. Before students engage with the content itself, they need to ask some basic questions. Who is behind this? What are their credentials? Are they an individual, an organization, an institution?

This matters more than ever. Someone sharing medical advice online, for instance, should have relevant qualifications. The same goes for financial guidance, legal information, or scientific claims. A blog post about nutrition written by a certified

dietitian carries different weight than one written by someone with no background in the field. Students need to learn to check.

But credentials alone are not enough. There are other questions worth asking. Is there funding behind the content? Is the author being paid to write this, and if so, by whom? A pharmaceutical company funding research on its own drug is not the same as independent academic research. An influencer promoting a product they are paid to endorse is not the same as a genuine recommendation. Following the money often reveals motives that are not immediately visible on the surface.

Then there is the platform itself. Where is the content published? A personal blog operates differently than a peer-reviewed journal. A news magazine has editorial oversight that a random website does not. A social media post can be written by anyone and seen by millions without ever passing through a filter. Investigating the author should always go hand in hand with investigating the medium. The platform tells you something about what kind of vetting, if any, the content went through before reaching you.

Some common red flags to watch for: authors with no verifiable credentials, websites with no clear editorial standards, content that lacks citations or sources, pages filled with ads or sponsored content, and articles that seem designed to provoke an emotional reaction. None of these automatically mean the content is wrong, but they are signals that warrant extra scrutiny.

Now, when it comes to actually doing this investigation, I prefer a standard search engine like Google. Google now has an AI mode you can use to help with searches, and it works well for pulling together factual information about authors and publications. I do not recommend using ChatGPT or other chatbots for this kind of task. Not at this stage. The goal here is to find factual, verifiable data, and unfortunately these tools still struggle with accuracy. They hallucinate. They fabricate details. They present made-up information with the same confidence as real facts. For source verification, that is a problem.

Classroom Activity: Author and Platform Analysis

One way to bring this into the classroom is to assign students a piece of text and have them carry out a first-level analysis focused on the author and the website. Who wrote this? What can you find out about them? Where was it published? What does that tell you about how much to trust the content?

Here is where it gets interesting. You can have students use both a chatbot like ChatGPT and a standard search engine like Google to conduct their investigation. Then have them compare what they find. This veers off slightly from the main intent of the activity, but it creates a valuable teaching moment. Students will likely notice inconsistencies between what the chatbot tells them and what the search engine pulls up. Some details might not match. Some information from the chatbot might turn out to be fabricated entirely. This becomes a lesson in itself. Students learn firsthand why

relying on chatbots for factual verification is risky, and they develop a healthier skepticism about the tools they use every day.

Strategy 2: Bias and Positioning Detection

Critical readers understand that texts are not neutral. Every piece of writing comes from a perspective, and that perspective shapes what gets said, how it gets said, and what gets left out. Texts position readers. They nudge us toward certain beliefs, invite us to see the world in particular ways, and sometimes ask us to adopt identities or values without us even realizing it. The job of a critical reader is to notice when this is happening.

Students can start by asking some pointed questions about the text in front of them:

- What does the author want me to believe?
- What identity or perspective am I being invited to take on?
- What assumptions is the author making about me as a reader?

- What emotions is this text trying to provoke, and why?
- Whose viewpoint is centered here, and whose is absent?

These questions force students to step back from the content and examine how the text is working on them. It is one thing to understand what an article says. It is another to recognize how that article is trying to shape your thinking.

For this kind of analysis, I would highly recommend that students do the initial work themselves, without AI. Let them sit with the text. Let them wrestle with the questions. Let them form their own understanding of the perspectives, assumptions, and biases at play. This is where the real thinking happens, and outsourcing it to a chatbot from the start defeats the purpose.

Once students have developed an initial interpretation, that is when AI becomes useful. They can upload the text and share their understanding with the chatbot, then use it as a thought partner to push their analysis further. The conversation might include prompts like:

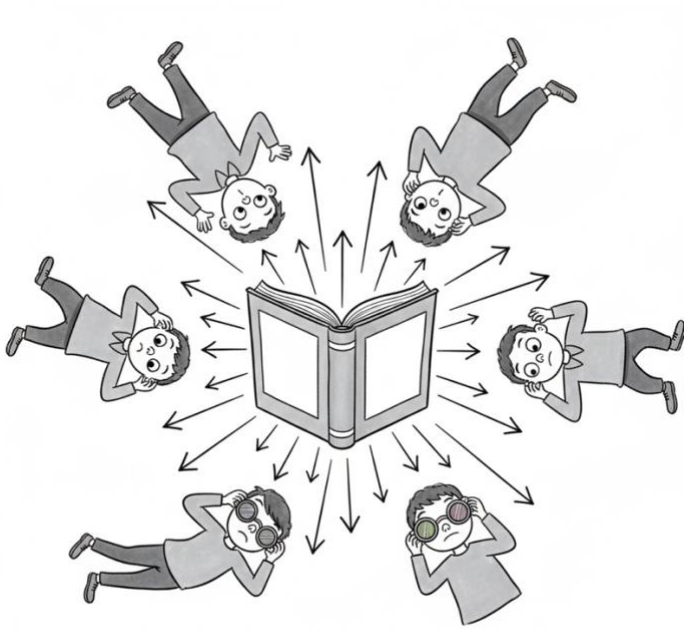
- Is this the perspective I think the author is taking, or am I missing something?
- Did I understand the author's main argument correctly?
- Are there any hidden biases in this text that I did not pay attention to?
- How is language being used to influence the reader? Are there specific vocabulary choices that reveal the author's stance?
- Which perspectives or voices are marginalized in this text, and why might that be?

This kind of collaborative, dialogic exchange with AI can help students refine their thinking. The chatbot becomes a sounding board, not a replacement for analysis. Students bring their interpretation to the table, and the AI helps them stress-test it,

catch blind spots, and consider angles they might have missed. The key is that the thinking comes first. AI supports and extends that thinking, but it does not do the work for them.

Strategy 3: Alternative Readings and Resistant Reading Practice

Another potent way to build critical reading skills is to teach students that texts invite certain interpretations while actively discouraging others. Every piece of writing has a preferred reading, the interpretation the author wants you to walk away with. But that does not mean it is the only possible reading. Critical readers learn to push back. They explore alternative angles, consider opposing viewpoints, and ask what happens when you read against the grain.



This is what researchers call resistant reading (McDonald, 2004). It means refusing to accept the text on its own terms and instead questioning the assumptions baked into it. What if you do not share the author's values? What if you come from a different

background or hold a different set of beliefs? How does the text look from that position? These are powerful questions because they reveal how texts work to limit interpretation, and they open up space for students to think independently.

In practice, this can be challenging for students, especially if they are used to reading for comprehension and accepting what they find. Coming up with alternative interpretations on their own requires confidence and practice. This is where AI can play a useful role.

Classroom Activity: Generating and Evaluating Alternative Readings

Have students read a text and identify what they believe the author's intended message is. What interpretation does the text seem to push toward? What beliefs or values does it assume the reader shares?

Then have them turn to AI with prompts like:

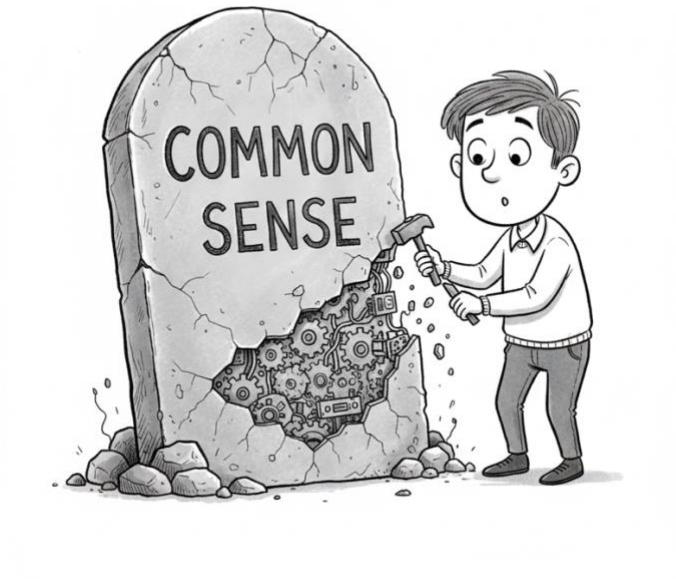
- What are some alternative ways to interpret this text?
- How might someone with a different political or cultural background read this differently?
- What opposing viewpoints could challenge the author's argument?
- What assumptions does this text make that not everyone would agree with?
- If I wanted to argue against this text, what would be my strongest points?

Once the AI generates these alternative readings, the real work begins. Students evaluate which interpretations the text actually supports and which it resists. They look for evidence. They consider why the author might have framed things in a way that closes off certain readings. They discuss what is gained and what is lost when you read with the text versus against it.

This activity does two things at once. It helps students see that meaning is not fixed, that texts can be read in multiple ways depending on where you stand. And it builds their capacity to think critically about how authors use language and structure to guide readers toward particular conclusions while steering them away from others.

Strategy 4: Questioning the "Naturalness" of Ideas

Now let's talk about the taken for granted. Some ideas are formulated in such a way that they seem obvious, natural, beyond question. They are presented as common sense, as just the way things are. And that is precisely what makes them powerful. When something feels natural, we do not think to challenge it. It slips past our critical defenses because it does not seem like a claim at all. It seems like a fact of life.



Gee (1996) calls these Discourses, the socially recognized ways of thinking, valuing, and acting that communities adopt over time. Discourses carry ideologies, but they do not announce themselves as ideological. They present their assumptions as neutral, as what any reasonable person would believe. Think about phrases like "hard work leads to

success" or "technology improves our lives" or "parents want the best for their children." These statements feel true because we hear them constantly. They are embedded in the way we talk, the way institutions operate, the way stories get told. But each one carries assumptions that are not as universal as they appear.

Critical readers learn to spot these moments. They notice when a text treats something as given and ask why. Why is this being presented as obvious? Who benefits from this idea being seen as common sense? What would it mean to question it?

This is difficult work for students because they are often swimming in the same Discourses as the texts they read. The assumptions feel natural to them too. They need practice stepping outside that frame and seeing the water they have been swimming in.

Classroom Activity: Unpacking Common Sense

Choose a text that makes certain assumptions without defending them. Opinion pieces, advertisements, and political speeches work well for this, but even textbooks contain unexamined premises.

Have students first read the text and identify statements that are presented as obvious or natural. What does the author seem to assume everyone agrees with? What ideas are treated as starting points rather than claims that need to be argued?

Then students can bring these to AI with prompts like:

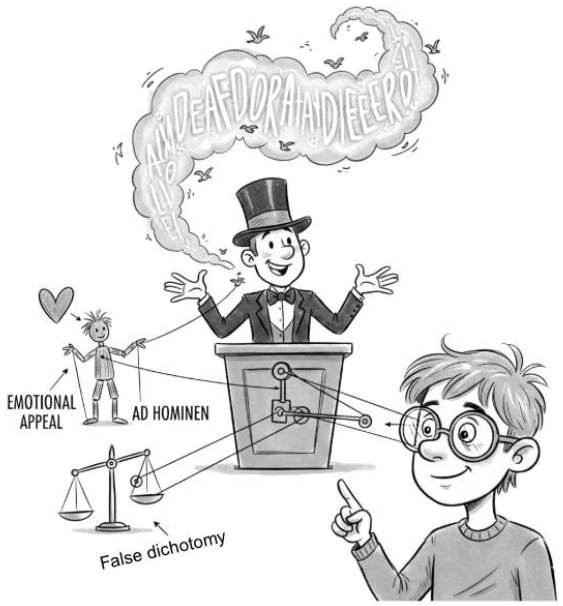
- This text assumes that [idea]. Why might someone see this as common sense?
- What are the underlying beliefs or values behind this assumption?
- Who benefits from this idea being accepted as natural?
- Are there cultures, communities, or perspectives where this assumption would not hold?

- What would change about this argument if we questioned this premise?

The goal is not to reject every common-sense idea as false. Some widely held beliefs hold up under scrutiny. The goal is to teach students that "obvious" does not mean "true," and that the ideas we never think to question are often the ones most worth examining. When students learn to surface these hidden premises, they gain a deeper understanding of how texts work to shape belief, often without readers ever noticing.

Strategy 5: Rhetorical and Argumentative Strategies

We have talked about assumptions, perspectives, and hidden biases. But how do these actually show up in a text? They are expressed linguistically through a wide variety of strategies. There are entire fields dedicated to studying this. Rhetoric. Argumentation theory. Discourse analysis. These disciplines have developed detailed frameworks for understanding how writers persuade, manipulate, and convince.



But you do not need a degree in rhetoric to help students recognize these moves. What matters is that students learn to notice when an author is using a particular technique

to influence their thinking. Once they can name these strategies, they become much harder to fall for.

Some common ones worth knowing (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.):

- **Appeal to emotion:** When a writer uses fear, anger, sympathy, or excitement to bypass logical evaluation. A news story that leads with a heartbreaking anecdote before presenting policy arguments is making an emotional appeal.
- **Appeal to authority:** When a text invokes an expert or respected figure to lend credibility, sometimes legitimately, sometimes not. The question is whether the authority is actually relevant to the claim being made.
- **Straw man fallacy:** When a writer misrepresents an opposing argument to make it easier to knock down. Instead of engaging with what critics actually say, they attack a weaker version of the position.
- **False dichotomy:** When a text presents only two options as if they are the only possibilities, ignoring the middle ground or alternative approaches.
- **Loaded language:** When word choices carry strong connotations designed to influence the reader's response. Calling a group "freedom fighters" versus "militants" describes the same people very differently.
- Bandwagon appeal: When a text suggests that because many people believe something or do something, you should too.

These strategies are not inherently bad. Skilled writers use rhetorical techniques all the time, and there is nothing wrong with making an emotional appeal or citing an expert. The point is that students should recognize when these moves are being made so they can evaluate the argument on its merits, not just be carried along by the technique.

Classroom Activity: Identifying Rhetorical Moves with AI

Give students a persuasive text. An opinion piece, an advertisement, a political speech, a fundraising letter. Have them read through and flag moments where they feel the author is trying to persuade them, even if they cannot name the specific technique.

Then have them work with AI to dig deeper. They can use prompts like:

- What rhetorical strategies is this author using to persuade the reader?
- Are there any logical fallacies in this argument?
- Where does this text appeal to emotion, and how does it do so?
- Does this author use loaded language? Can you point to specific examples?
- How does the author establish credibility, and is it legitimate?
- Are there any straw man arguments or misrepresentations of opposing views?

The AI can help students put names to techniques they sensed but could not articulate. It can also catch strategies they missed entirely. From there, students can discuss whether the rhetorical moves strengthen or weaken the argument, and whether they feel the author is being fair or manipulative.

This builds a vocabulary for talking about persuasion. And once students have that vocabulary, they start seeing these strategies everywhere, in the news, in advertising, in social media, in everyday conversations. That awareness is one of the most practical outcomes of critical reading.

Conclusion

Critical reading has always been important. The ability to evaluate sources, question assumptions, detect bias, and see through rhetorical manipulation has long been a mark of an educated reader. But what was important before has become essential now.

Generative AI has changed the equation. Anyone can produce polished, professional-looking content in seconds. The barriers to publishing have collapsed almost entirely. This means more content, more voices, more information competing for attention. And not all of it is trustworthy. Not all of it is even written by people who understand what they are writing about. In this environment, the ability to critically examine what you read is no longer a nice-to-have skill. It is a necessity.

In this guide, I shared some practical strategies teachers can use to help students become critical readers. We looked at investigating sources and authors, detecting bias and positioning, practicing resistant readings, questioning ideas that present themselves as natural, and identifying rhetorical and argumentative strategies. Each of these approaches gives students tools to engage with texts more thoughtfully and to resist being passive consumers of information.

I also explained how AI can support this work. My approach to AI, one I always advocate in my teaching and writing, is a dialogic approach. AI works best as a cognitive partner, not a replacement for thinking. Students do the thinking. They wrestle with the text, form their own interpretations, develop their own questions. Then AI helps refine, challenge, and extend that thinking. It becomes a conversation partner that pushes students further than they might go on their own.

This is the balance we need to strike. AI is powerful, but it is only as useful as the thinking that guides it. When students learn to read critically and use AI strategically, they gain something valuable. They become readers who can navigate a world flooded with content and still find their footing. That is the goal.

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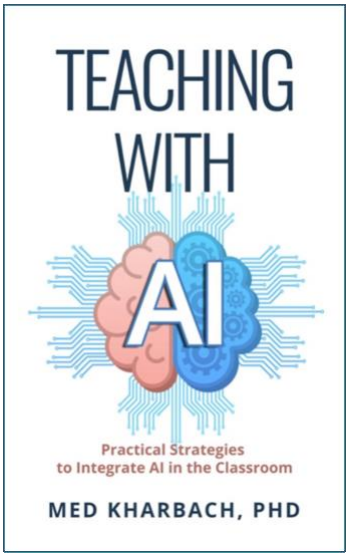

About the Author

I'm Med Kharbach, an educator and researcher based in Canada. I hold a PhD from Mount Saint Vincent University, where I also teach part-time. My work focuses on literacy, language, and educational technology, and in recent years I've turned my attention to generative AI and what it means for teaching and learning.

Since 2012, I've been sharing practical resources for teachers through my platform Educators Technology. I've also co-authored books on AI in education, including The BEARA Framework for Pedagogical Integration with Dr. Jonathan Woodworth. I work with educators around the world through workshops, keynotes, and guides that aim to make AI integration practical and grounded in real classroom needs.

To learn more about me and my work, visit www.medkharbach.com.

P.S. Visual illustrations in this guide were generated using Gemini Nano Banana.

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