***How to Read Literary Criticism***

Reading an essay can be quite different from reading a story—for one thing, there’s no central narrative. Rather, there’s an argument (sometimes more than one) about a text—an interpretation, an analysis, a contextualization, etc. While you do not have to agree with everything you read—indeed, you’ll find that these experts often don’t agree with each other—you do need to take their arguments seriously and consider carefully whether you find them convincing.

As with stories, you may want to skim first. But as you skim, ask yourself the following questions:  
**What is this writer’s central claim?  
What kind of evidence does the writer employ to support that claim? Are there quotations from literary texts? From other critics? From theorists?  
Does the writer acknowledge counter-arguments?  
Are the examples well chosen?**

You’ll probably also want to note *when and where* the essay was first published, and see if you can ascertain anything about the intended audience from that information.

**As you read, take notes or mark up your text. Look up words you don’t know and write down the definitions.**

You may want to think about three different kinds of passages that you will encounter:  
1) **key details**: evidence and/or examples that are central to the writer’s claim  
2) **formal features**: the way the argument is constructed, literary techniques  
3) **larger implications:** what is the central claim? What might follow from the central claim? Where does the writer want the reader to go next?

Remember, a piece of literary criticism is, first and foremost, an *essay*. That means it will have all of the same features as an essay that you would write, including:

1. **A thesis**: the author is trying to prove a central point. While the thesis statement may not be a single sentence, look through the introductory paragraphs for some statement of purpose.
2. **Proof:** Just like the essays that you write, the burden of proof is placed on the writer of a piece of literary criticism to prove his/her thesis. This proof will come in the form of quotations from the source text, as well as quotations from other critics.
3. **Context:** This may be some of the most difficult material for you to get through as a high school reader, as the context provided by the author will often refer to other critics and sophisticated ways of thinking about a text. The author is going to try to provide a background for where his/her argument is going to exist. The same way that you explain your argument more deeply and include relevant plot summary (think of the first “E” in a READE paragraph), a literary critic is going to do the same.
4. **Concluding statements:** This is the best place to go if you’re seriously struggling to find the purpose of a text. The concluding paragraph(s) will sum up an author’s point in a concise way. If you’re having a really hard time, go there.

Adapted from: http://twicetoldtalesfys.wordpress.com/schedule-of-readings-and-assignments/how-to-read-literary-criticism/