



# Critical Literacy in English and History: Stages 3 & 4



***Kathy Rushton and Joanne Rossbridge explore the important concept of Critical Literacy. They explain why it is essential for teachers (in both primary and secondary classrooms) to use critical literacy to ensure student engagement, to teach our students how to properly analyse all text and to allow them to develop a wider view of, and critical understanding of, the world . . .***

*The aim of critical literacy is a classroom environment where students and teachers together work to (a) see how the worlds of texts work to construct their worlds, their cultures, and their identities in powerful, often overtly ideological ways; and (b) use texts as social tools in ways that allow for a reconstruction of these same worlds.*

Luke (2000) Critical Literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Vol. 43/5 448-461 p.453

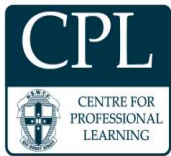
Teachers in the middle years, Stages 3 & 4, are supporting students in their transition from the primary to secondary years. This transition often requires students to interrogate more challenging texts and respond to and compose more sophisticated texts of their own. Teachers, therefore, need to develop their own critical analysis and curation of texts for use in the classroom and to develop a range of appropriate teaching and learning strategies to support the development of critical literacy for their students. The theoretical perspectives that inform this perspective relate to issues of race, gender and ethnicity and also how these issues impact on language choices.

## Designing learning with a critical literacy perspective

Defining critical literacy can be facilitated by reviewing the four reading resources (Freebody & Luke, 1990) particularly the *Text Analyst* role which supports students to question and analyse texts. Students can be supported in the development of critical literacy if teachers are able to identify links to critical literacy in English and History Syllabus documents. These links can then be exemplified for students by, for instance, elaborating on cross curriculum priorities and general capabilities.

In practice teachers can analyse features such as context, author background, date and place of publication and then support their students to discuss different perspectives and contestability. This is most easily done in a *modelled reading* lesson accompanied by strategies to support students before, during and after reading. Before reading, viewing and analysing images can support the development of field knowledge and provide a starting point for developing vocabulary related to the subject. Strategies such as *verbal ping pong*, which is often used to develop debating skills, can engage students in developing arguments for or against a topic as an initial strategy for developing field knowledge or following a modelled reading to elaborate on aspects of the topic. Similarly, a drama strategy such as *conscience alley* can be used before, during or after reading to help develop empathy for a character, historical or imaginary, when they face a critical event. (Dutton et al, 2018; Rossbridge & Rushton, 2011 & 2015)

By encouraging a focus on language choices, students are also supported in their analysis of perspectives. Some students may find that they are excluded from the texts which they are required to read or produce in the school (Bishop, 2003). Alton-Lee (2000) exemplifies this by reporting an incident in which a teacher in New Zealand accidentally excluded an Indigenous student “from the ‘we’ of the classroom” (p.26). It is easy to see how this situation could be replicated in any English or History classroom if the texts that are used do not analyse the “*we*” and identify the perspective from which they are written. For instance, texts written from the perspective of visitors to sites or ceremonies or as outsiders or invaders in events from the past rather than as actors ‘discovering’, ‘describing’ or ‘evaluating’ the same sites and events.



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## Selecting texts to develop critical literacy

If texts are viewed from a critical literacy perspective, a range of texts can be selected to represent a variety of perspectives in contemporary Australian society. Especially in History, texts should be considered in terms of contestability and empathetic understanding as well as how they develop and challenge understandings about contemporary issues and the past. To support students to engage critically in response to texts, teachers can identify, deconstruct and analyse language features to support critical analysis. In particular questioning perspectives based on context, author background, date and place of publication will support this process. In this way students will be supported to describe and assess the motives of individuals and groups within historical contexts and in literary texts. Supporting students to develop the ability to interpret, explain and identify perspectives in a range of texts in both English and History will support the understanding of subject matter and literacy. Intercultural understanding will also be supported through comparison of texts especially those written from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective. The table below suggests some questions which could be used to interrogate and analyse a text and to develop the role of the *Text Analyst*.

Table 1.

Guiding questions for selecting and curating texts: Developing the <b>Text analyst</b> role
How do you interpret the perspective of this text?
How does the context of the text differ from your own context?
What assumptions does the author make about the audience?
What perspective is assumed by the author?
Who do you think might disagree with the author’s stance? Why?
Is the text relevant to contemporary Australia? Why?
Is the text authoritative or does it explore the subject and allow you to think critically about it?
Whose voices are silent or whose interests absent?

## Working with texts to develop critical literacy

Developing a critical literacy approach to teaching is truly dependent on the curation of a range of texts that define perspectives such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or Asian perspectives and texts which also promote intercultural understanding. To develop empathetic understanding, teachers can identify and compare features from a range of texts. A sequence of teaching and learning strategies to support critical responses to texts can also be developed by critically analysing perspectives and making connections. Reading and writing in the subject area will also be supported if the critical literacy practices outlined in the English and History Syllabus documents and the cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities are properly considered.

## Writing from a critical literacy perspective

Writing is a way of investigating perspective and interpretations of History and responding to ideas and representations in texts in English. After exploring multiple texts across the English and History subject areas with a focus on historical events and perspectives, students can then be supported in writing. Of great importance is the establishment of a context for writing. As when reading from a critical literacy perspective, writers will also need to consider the identity or role of the writer, the audience, the mode of publication, the time of writing and the values and beliefs of the time. This will determine whether the writing is to be imaginative or more informative or argumentative as well as the overall purpose of the text. A focus on historical content might be based on significant historical events or significant individuals. Consider the contextual choices below and how they might construct different perspectives and empathetic understanding regarding the subject matter.

Subject matter	Time of publication	Author	Audience	Mode of publication
early contact between the Indigenous people and the colonisers	1788	journalist	colonisers in the Sydney area	newspaper article
daily life of a free settler	1795	female free settler	writer / family discovering diary 125 years later	diary
friendship between an Indigenous British child	2020	Australian author	children in contemporary Australia	comic or picture book

These contextual features will influence the language choices of a text. Any shift in these features will impact on the text features. Consider how a newspaper article about early contact between the Indigenous people and the colonisers would differ when published in 1788 compared to 2020.

Once a clear context for independent writing is established, teachers will need to think about similar texts to use as models to show students how to develop a critical literacy response through written language. Models for writing may be selected from those texts that students have already investigated from a critical literacy perspective or models can be written by teachers. Students will need to see such models and be guided through how text choices create or challenge a particular perspective. This will involve an explicit focus on language choices. For example, if writing an historical narrative, a focus could be placed on choices related to whose voice is included, how people are named and described and who is constructed as an actor or sensor (Rossbridge & Rushton, 2015). After *modelling* students could then participate in a *joint construction* where the writing process, development of ideas and talk of language choices is handed over to students with the teacher taking on the role of facilitator. The teacher will need to continue to support students in thinking about how their choices construct a particular perspective often through thinking aloud during the text construction. Once students are confident with discussing texts using modelled metalanguage they may move in to *independent construction*. The provision of clear criteria around perspectives and empathetic understanding will support them in drafting and reviewing their texts with a critical literacy approach.



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