

A model for reading so we can ask critical questions of academic texts

The Hermeneutic Circle - The What!?!

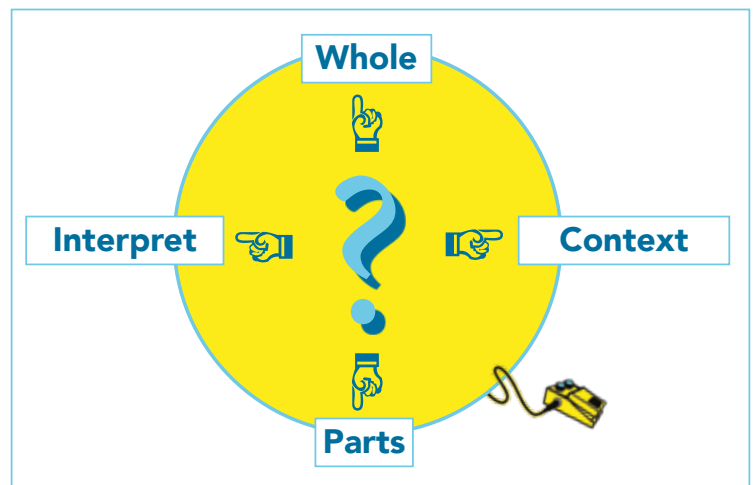
Hermeneutic (say "herm-en-yew-tick") means a method of interpretation.

Hermes was the messenger of the gods in Greek mythology and hermeneutics are how we interpret those messages. So this fancy name is just a way to help us understand the texts we have to read.

When trying to understand the meaning of a text we need to take into account each part of the text separately and then think about how they fit to make up the whole picture.

When reading academically we constantly question the text – it is important not to take anything at face value.

The Hermeneutic Circle has 4 aspects to consider. These help us to see the bigger picture or what the text is getting at. As we read we keep bringing these 4 aspects back to the centre of our thoughts.



Whole - Context - Parts - Interpret

Whole

What do we think the overall message of the text is?
How do the other aspects shift our opinion of this?

Context

The context of a piece of writing is the circumstances that it is set in or why it occurred. We also need to consider who wrote the article and consider their reasons for writing it. For example when reading about Hip-Hop you need to consider the context - the circumstances that it arose in. In this case it would be inner-city African Americans in the late 1970s. So it's not just the Hip Hop music but all the circumstances that caused it to develop you need to think about when you are reading. So if you are reading about Jay-Z's \$70 million wealth we may need to put this into context. What is his background? How does his music business compare to that of early Hip-Hop.

Parts

In order to properly interpret a text we should consider the meaning of individual sections. Is that meaning informed by the whole piece? Also how do the individual parts inform the understanding of the complete text. We keep going back between the whole and the parts looking for meaning. Do all the sections add up?

Interpret

How do we interpret what we are reading? What do we think it means? What conclusions are we drawing? What other works does this relate to or seem to be in conflict with?

This circle is a useful tool to remind us to question what we read:

1. Question each section - how do they all relate to each other?
2. What is the context of this writing? Who wrote it? When? Why?
3. What do I think the whole text is trying to say?
4. What do I think of this text? Do I agree? Why?