Buletin Edukasi Indonesia (BEI)
DOI: 10.56741/IISTR.bei.002383

E-ISSN 2962-1674
P-ISSN 2962-5742



From Surface Reading to Evidence-Based Judgment

A Critical Integrative Review of Scientific-Article Reading in Higher Education

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Article submitted: 2 June 2026
Revised: 31 August 2026
Accepted: 9 September 2026

Abstract

University students are routinely expected to evaluate scientific articles, yet academic reading is often assigned without explicit instruction in how to identify claims, appraise methods, verify evidence, or monitor comprehension. This article critically integrates research on metacognition, academic literacies, critical reading, and strategy instruction to answer two questions: which processes distinguish evaluative reading from surface reading, and how can those processes be translated into an implementable higher-education protocol? A concept-centred integrative review was conducted using peer-reviewed empirical, review, and theoretical sources identified through publisher platforms, ERIC, and citation chaining. Sources were retained when they addressed academic or critical reading, metacognitive regulation, disciplinary literacy, source evaluation, or embedded literacy instruction. The synthesis compared constructs, instructional mechanisms, reported outcomes, and implementation conditions rather than pooling heterogeneous effects. Five recurring functions emerged: framing a reading purpose, mapping the article's argument and research design, interrogating assumptions, verifying the relationship between claims and evidence, and synthesizing a defensible judgment. These functions were consolidated into the FRAME-V protocol, an iterative heuristic for reading scientific articles. The review indicates that named routines such as SQ3R, PQ4R, questioning, annotation, collaborative reading, and digital scaffolds are useful only when they activate monitoring, evaluation, and evidence integration; procedural completion alone does not guarantee critical reading. The article contributes an aligned set of learning activities and assessment criteria for lecturers and student-support units. Because the review is integrative rather than exhaustive and the protocol has not yet been experimentally validated, the framework should be treated as a theory-informed design proposition for subsequent classroom testing.

Keywords: *academic literacy; critical reading; higher education; metacognition; scientific articles; student support*

Introduction

Reading scientific articles is a central but frequently under-taught practice in higher education. Students are expected to locate a research problem, distinguish claims from evidence, evaluate methodological fit, and decide what a study justifies. These expectations exceed literal comprehension. They require purposeful regulation of attention, knowledge of disciplinary genres, and judgment about evidence quality [1]-[4]. When instruction treats reading as a generic study skill, difficulties are easily attributed to individual motivation or vocabulary. An academic-literacies perspective instead shows that reading practices are also shaped by disciplinary conventions, assessment demands, access to tacit rules, and institutional support [5]-[8].

The distinction matters because common student behaviours—highlighting extensively, extracting quotable sentences, or producing a summary—can create an appearance of engagement while leaving the article's reasoning untested. Empirical work with undergraduate and language-learning populations shows that students vary in their use of previewing, questioning, rereading, inferencing, credibility checking, and synthesis [9]-[14]. Explicit instruction can improve strategy use and critical-reading performance, but transfer is not automatic: learners may follow the visible steps of a routine without monitoring whether they understand or whether the evidence supports the conclusion [15]-[18].

Existing literature is fragmented across reading comprehension, metacognition, English for academic purposes, science literacy, critical thinking, and student support. Consequently, strategy labels are sometimes treated as competing interventions even though several activate similar cognitive functions. SQ3R and PQ4R organize a reading sequence; annotation externalizes attention; self-questioning exposes uncertainty; collaborative reading makes reasoning discussable; and credibility checks connect text comprehension with epistemic evaluation [13], [16], [19]-[22]. What is missing is a compact account of the functions that these strategies should perform when the object of reading is a scientific article.

This review therefore asks: (1) Which cognitive, metacognitive, and contextual functions distinguish critical engagement with scientific articles from surface reading? (2) How can these functions be organized into a teachable and assessable protocol for higher education? The contribution is not a claim that another acronym is universally superior. It is a synthesis that separates underlying reading functions from named classroom techniques and links each function to observable evidence of student performance.

Conceptual Framework

A. Critical Reading as Evidence-Based Judgment

Critical reading is defined here as constructing an accurate representation of a text while evaluating how its claims are produced, supported, bounded, and positioned. It includes comprehension but adds appraisal and response. For a scientific article, readers must coordinate at least four representations: the research problem, the argumentative structure, the methodological design, and the evidentiary warrant connecting results to conclusions [3], [12], [23]. A reader may accurately restate findings yet remain uncritical if limitations, alternative explanations, or the scope of inference are not considered.

B. Metacognitive Regulation

Flavell's account of metacognition distinguishes knowledge about cognition from monitoring and regulation of cognitive activity [1]. In reading, this distinction appears as planning before reading, checking comprehension during reading, and evaluating whether the reading goal has been achieved afterward [2], [9], [24]. Strategy inventories commonly group behaviours into global, problem-solving, and support strategies [9], but frequency is not equivalent to quality. Highlighting may support mapping when selective and purpose-driven, yet become superficial when it substitutes for explanation. The relevant unit of analysis is therefore the function accomplished by a strategy.

C. Academic Literacies and Institutional Responsibility

Academic-literacies research rejects the assumption that one transferable reading technique is sufficient across all disciplines [5]-[8]. What counts as persuasive evidence differs between an experiment, an ethnography, and a conceptual paper. Students also encounter hidden expectations about how to question authority, use sources, and articulate disagreement. Effective provision therefore combines generic metacognitive routines with discipline-specific modelling, guided practice, feedback, and opportunities to discuss competing interpretations [7], [20], [25]. This shifts intervention from remediation at the margins to curriculum-embedded development.

Methods

A. Review Design and Scope

A critical integrative review was selected because the research question required synthesis across theoretical, quantitative, qualitative, and pedagogical literature. Integrative reviews can combine diverse evidence when the selection logic, comparison categories, and limits of inference are made explicit [26]-[28]. The review was concept-centred rather than effect-size driven; it did not attempt a meta-analysis because interventions, populations, outcomes, and definitions of critical reading were heterogeneous.

B. Source Identification and Eligibility

The source set was developed through searches of publisher platforms, ERIC records, and backward and forward citation chaining. Search combinations included critical reading, academic reading, scientific article, higher education, metacognitive reading strategies, academic literacies, source evaluation, embedded literacy, and strategy instruction. Foundational works published before 2020 were retained when they defined central constructs or established widely used measures; recent studies and reviews were prioritized for current instructional evidence. Eligible sources were peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books, or methodological papers that contributed directly to at least one of five domains: (1) critical or academic reading, (2) metacognitive monitoring and regulation, (3) appraisal of claims and sources, (4) explicit or embedded instruction, or (5) review methodology. Sources focused solely on decoding, early literacy, or reading speed without an evaluative component were excluded. The search was closed on 31 August 2026. Because database coverage and screening were not designed to claim exhaustiveness, the article is reported as an integrative review rather than a systematic review.

C. Extraction, Appraisal, and Synthesis

Each included source was read for its definition of proficient reading, target population, strategy or instructional mechanism, reported outcome, and stated implementation condition. Evidence was compared in a matrix, then coded into three provisional categories: comprehension construction, metacognitive control, and epistemic evaluation. Constant comparison was used to merge overlapping codes and preserve disconfirming observations, such as evidence that strategy frequency can coexist with weak judgment or that digital support can either scaffold or displace active reading [14], [22], [29]. Methodological quality was considered in interpreting claims: experimental findings were used for

intervention effects, qualitative studies for process and learner experience, and theoretical papers for construct definition. No causal conclusion was drawn from descriptive or correlational evidence.

Table 1. Review logic and safeguards

Stage	Decision rule	Safeguard against overclaiming
Identification	Use concept-linked terms across publisher platforms and ERIC; extend by citation chaining.	Do not present the set as exhaustive or calculate a pooled effect.
Eligibility	Retain sources that illuminate reading functions, instruction, appraisal, or institutional implementation.	Exclude works concerned only with speed or decoding.
Extraction	Record construct, population, mechanism, outcome, and implementation condition.	Separate empirical outcomes from theoretical propositions.
Synthesis	Compare mechanisms across strategy labels and evidence types.	Treat contradictions as boundary conditions, not noise.
Translation	Convert recurring functions into observable learner actions.	Label FRAME-V as a design proposition pending validation.

Results of the Integrative Synthesis

A. Surface Reading Is a Functional Failure, Not Merely Low Effort

Across the literature, surface reading is best identified by what it fails to accomplish. A reader may complete the text, underline passages, and reproduce its conclusion but still fail to identify the research question, distinguish reported results from author interpretation, or notice a mismatch between design and claim. Studies of undergraduates report uncertainty about what critical reading entails and inconsistent explicit instruction [10]-[12]. Similar patterns appear in EFL contexts, where linguistic load can consume attention that would otherwise support inferencing and evaluation [13], [14]. These findings do not justify a deficit label for students. They indicate a misalignment between complex assessment expectations and the visibility of the reading processes required to meet them.

B. Effective Strategies Perform Five Recurring Functions

The synthesis yielded five recurring functions. First, framing establishes why the text is being read and activates relevant prior knowledge. Second, mapping reconstructs the article's architecture: problem, question, method, results, and conclusion. Third, interrogation generates questions about concepts, assumptions, missing perspectives, and alternative interpretations. Fourth, verification examines source credibility, methodological adequacy, data-to-claim alignment, and corroboration. Fifth, synthesis produces a bounded judgment that states both what the article contributes and what it cannot establish. Monitoring connects all five functions: uncertainty should trigger rereading, external checking, discussion, or revision of the initial interpretation.

Table 2. Functional comparison of commonly used reading approaches

Approach	Primary contribution	Critical limitation if used mechanically	Best use in scientific-article reading
SQ3R / PQ4R	Provides a before-during-after sequence and prompts recall.	Questions may remain factual; recitation can reproduce rather than evaluate.	Use the sequence to organize purpose, mapping, and post-reading judgment.

Annotation and structured notes	Externalizes attention and records relationships among ideas.	Over-highlighting may mark importance without explaining it.	Require labels for claim, evidence, assumption, limitation, and uncertainty.
Self-questioning and inferencing	Makes comprehension gaps and implicit relations visible.	Generic questions can become ritualized.	Link questions to argument warrants, methods, and alternative explanations.
Collaborative strategic reading	Exposes interpretations to challenge and supports modelling.	Dominant peers may replace individual reasoning.	Assign rotating roles and require individual evidence before consensus.
Digital or AI-supported reading	Offers prompts, vocabulary support, and rapid comparison.	Summaries may displace primary-text reading or obscure hallucinated claims.	Use tools for challenge and verification; require return to cited passages.
Critical appraisal checklist	Directs attention to validity, relevance, and bias.	Checkbox completion can ignore disciplinary nuance.	Pair each judgment with textual evidence and an uncertainty statement.

C. Strategy Instruction Requires Modelling, Fading, and Alignment

Intervention evidence supports explicit strategy instruction, but effectiveness depends on how it is enacted [15]-[18], [21]. Lecturers need to model expert thinking with an authentic article, including moments of uncertainty and revision. Guided practice should then reduce prompts gradually rather than moving immediately from explanation to independent performance. Assessment must reward the same behaviours that instruction promotes. If assignments award marks mainly for the number of citations or completeness of summary, students rationally prioritize extraction over evaluation. Conversely, rubrics that require a claim map, method appraisal, evidence-based judgment, and reflection make critical reading visible and consequential.

D. The FRAME-V Protocol

FRAME-V translates the five functions into a compact workflow: Frame, Reconstruct/Map, Ask/Interrogate, Match/Verify, and Express/Synthesize, with verification and monitoring operating recursively. The acronym is a mnemonic rather than a claim of a new cognitive theory. Its value lies in aligning prompts, learner products, feedback, and assessment. Figure 1 illustrates the cycle, while Table III specifies evidence that a lecturer can inspect.

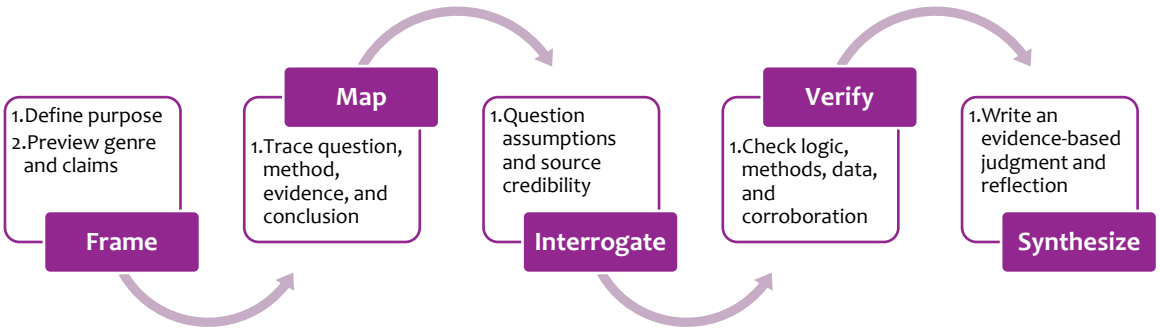


Fig. 1. FRAME-V heuristic protocol for critical reading of scientific articles.

Table 3. Operationalization of FRAME-V

Function	Guiding questions	Observable learner evidence
Frame	Why am I reading this? What genre and disciplinary conventions apply?	A stated purpose, prior-knowledge note, and prediction about the article.
Map	What problem, question, design, findings, and conclusion form the argument?	A concise claim-evidence-method map using the reader's own words.
Interrogate	Which assumptions, concepts, voices, or alternatives require questioning?	Two or more text-specific questions and a reason each matters.
Verify	Do the methods and data warrant the claims? Can key information be corroborated?	A validity judgment anchored to passages, data, and external sources.
Synthesize	What is defensible, uncertain, transferable, or limited?	A bounded evaluative summary plus implications and unresolved questions.
Monitor throughout	Where did comprehension or confidence change, and what repair was used?	A brief reflection documenting rereading, checking, discussion, or revision.

Introduction

A. Theoretical Contribution

The synthesis clarifies that critical reading is not a collection of isolated techniques. It is coordinated regulation of comprehension and epistemic judgment within a disciplinary and institutional context. This resolves an important ambiguity in strategy research: the same visible action may be productive or superficial depending on its purpose and quality. Rereading can repair a local comprehension failure, or it can repeat confusion; annotation can map an argument, or merely decorate a page. FRAME-V therefore defines performance through functions and evidence rather than the frequency of named behaviours.

The framework also connects metacognitive and academic-literacies perspectives. Metacognition explains how readers plan, monitor, and regulate cognition [1], [2], [9]. Academic literacies explains why the goals, genres, and criteria being monitored are socially and disciplinarily situated [5]-[8]. Combining them avoids two reductions: treating difficulty solely as an individual cognitive deficit, and treating institutional context as sufficient without specifying the mental operations readers must learn.

B. Implications for Teaching and Student Management

At course level, a short sequence can introduce the protocol without creating a separate reading subject. In the first session, the lecturer models FRAME-V on one article and projects an incomplete claim-evidence map. Students then work in pairs on a second text with structured prompts. In later tasks, prompts are faded while the output criteria remain stable. Feedback should identify which function is weak—for example, accurate mapping but unsupported verification—rather than giving the undifferentiated comment 'be more critical.'

At program level, critical reading should be distributed across the curriculum. Introductory courses can emphasize framing and mapping; research-methods courses can deepen verification; capstone work can demand cross-source synthesis and defensible uncertainty. Student-support units can provide clinics and exemplars, but disciplinary lecturers remain essential because methodological and evidentiary standards vary. Program evaluation should inspect student artifacts over time rather than relying only on self-reported strategy frequency.

Digital and generative-AI tools require a specific safeguard. They can reduce language barriers, generate questions, and help compare explanations, but a fluent summary may conceal errors or remove the productive difficulty through which readers learn to evaluate evidence [22], [29], [30]. A suitable rule is tool-to-text return: every AI-assisted claim must be traced back to the original article, checked against the reported method or data, and labelled when uncertainty remains. This positions AI as a challenger and support, not an epistemic substitute.

C. Limitations and Research Agenda

This review has four limitations. First, it is integrative and concept-centred, so it does not claim exhaustive database coverage. Second, included studies use heterogeneous populations and outcomes, limiting direct comparison of effectiveness. Third, much strategy research depends on self-report, which may not capture the quality or timing of actual reading behaviour. Fourth, FRAME-V is synthesized from literature and has not been validated as a complete intervention. These limits are material: the protocol should not yet be described as proven to improve achievement.

Future research should conduct a preregistered mixed-method evaluation with first-year university students. A feasible design would compare usual instruction with modelled-and-faded FRAME-V instruction, using a blinded performance assessment based on unfamiliar scientific articles. Outcomes should include argument mapping, methodological appraisal, evidence integration, delayed transfer, and calibration between confidence and accuracy. Think-aloud or trace data could test whether students use the functions at appropriate moments, while interviews could identify disciplinary and linguistic barriers. Such research would establish whether the protocol adds value beyond existing study routines.

Conclusion

Critical reading of scientific articles requires more than completing a text, locating quotations, or summarizing findings. The literature converges on five functions: framing a purpose, mapping the article's reasoning, interrogating assumptions, verifying claim-evidence alignment, and synthesizing a bounded judgment. FRAME-V organizes these functions into an iterative protocol and links each one to observable student work. Its practical implication is that universities should align modelling, guided practice, feedback, and assessment with evidence-based reading performance. The framework is sufficiently specified for classroom piloting, but its effectiveness and transfer across disciplines require empirical validation. Accordingly, it should be used as a transparent design proposition rather than marketed as an already proven model.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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