• what is the *purpose* of the selection, and how is the author trying to achieve it?

• who is the intended *audience*, and what assumption is the writer making about it?

• what is the *subject* of the selection, and how would you evaluate its cogency and reliability?

• who is the *writer*, and what perspective does she bring to the writing selection?

• what is the larger *context* in which this selection appears? Is the writer responding to a particular event or participating in an ongoing debate?

The questions that we explored earlier in this chapter are often used to generate writing and can also help with critical reading.

***Questions of Interpretation:*** Questions of interpretation probe for relationships among ideas.

• is a *time sequence* given in this text? If so, what is its importance?

• is a *process of growth or development* explained in this text? If so, what is its importance?

• what is *compared or contrasted* in this text? What are the purposes of any comparisons?

• what is the *context* of the selection, and what contextual components might be significant? (For example, the time of its writing, characteristics of that time, the relationship to other works by the same author, whether or not it is a translation)

• Are *causes* discussed in this text? If so, what is suggested about those causes and their effects?

***Questions of Analysis:*** Questions of analysis look at parts of a text and the relationship of those parts to the whole, and at the reasoning being presented.

• is this text divided into identifiable *sections?* What are they? Are sections arranged logically?

• what *evidence* or *examples* support the ideas presented in the text?

• does the text give *alternatives* to the ideas presented?

***Questions of Evaluation:*** Questions of evaluation establish the truth, reliability, and applicability—the value of the text. They usually address the effectiveness of the writing as well.

• what is the *significance* of the ideas in this text?

• what is the apparent level of *truth* in this text? What criteria for truth does it meet?

• what are the sources of information in this text? Are they *reliable?* Why?

• Can the ideas in this text be *applied* to other situations?

76 Chapter 2 Thinking Critically

• What is *effective* about the writing in this text? Clarity? The right tone?

Appropriate—or imaginative—word choices? Organization?

Of course, you are not likely to ask all these questions about everything you read, and you will find other questions to ask as well.

**USING A PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH**

Successful readers often approach difficult reading passages with a problem-solving approach, similar to the method we will be exploring in Chapter 3. Here’s how a critical thinker might apply this approach to reading a difficult work:

*Step 1: What is the problem?* What don’t I understand about this passage? Are there terms or concepts that are unfamiliar? Are the logical connec- tions between the concepts confusing? Do some things just not make sense?

*Step 2: What are the alternatives?* What are some possible meanings of the terms or concepts? What are some potential interpretations of the central meaning of this passage?

*Step 3: What is the evaluation of the possible alternatives?* What are the “clues” in the passage, and what alternative meanings do they support? What reasons or evidence support these interpretations?

*Step 4: What is the solution?* Judging from my evaluation and what I know of this subject, which interpretation is most likely? Why?

*Step 5: How well is the solution working?* Does my interpretation still make sense as I continue my reading, or do I need to revise my conclusion?

Of course, expert readers go through this process very quickly, much faster than it takes to explain it. Although this approach may seem a little cumbersome at first, the more you use it, the more natural and efficient it will become. Let’s begin by applying it to a sample passage. Carefully read the following passage from the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Existentialism Is Humanism,” and use the problem-solving approach to determine the correct meanings of the italicized concepts and the overall meaning of the passage.

*Existentialism*, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being that exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that *existence precedes essence*? We mean that man first of all exists,

Reading Critically 77

encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees himself as not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. . . . If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. . . . That is what I mean when I say that man is *condemned to be free.* Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is *responsible for everything he does*. . . . In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait.

**Thinking Activity 2.10**

**A PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH TO READING**

*Step 1:* What parts (if any) of this passage do you find confusing?

*Step 2:* What are some possible definitions of the italicized words, and what are some potential interpretations of this passage?

*Existentialism:*

*Existence precedes essence: Condemned to be free:*

*Responsible for everything he does:*

Overall Meaning:

*Step 3:* What contextual clues can you use to help you define these concepts and determine the overall meaning? What knowledge of this subject do you have, and how can this knowledge help you understand this passage?

*Step 4:* Judging from your evaluation in Step 3, which of the possible definitions and interpretations do you think are most likely? Why?

*Step 5:* How do your conclusions compare with those of the other students in the class? Should you revise your definitions or interpretation?

Select a challenging passage from a course textbook and apply the preceding problem-solving approach.