

# Promoting Critical Thinking and Reading Comprehension in Higher Education Students through Digital Texts

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## Abstract

This article presents a literature review on how digital texts can foster critical thinking and reading comprehension in higher education students, focusing on research published between 2020 and 2024. During this period, the works of 20 authors were examined. These studies highlight how the integration of these texts influences the development of fundamental cognitive skills, such as critical analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of information. The article examines various strategies and approaches implemented to maximize the impact of digital texts on student learning, providing an overview of the opportunities and challenges associated with their use in higher education. The results indicate that digital texts, being interactive and easily accessible, facilitate critical thinking and improve reading comprehension when appropriate teaching strategies are employed. Students can benefit from access to multiple sources and supporting tools, such as digital annotations and integrated dictionaries, which enrich the learning experience. However, there are also challenges, such as information overload and distraction, that can limit the effectiveness of close reading and critical thinking. Furthermore, digital literacy is essential for students and teachers to maximize the potential of digital texts in the educational process. The findings highlight the need for an intentional and reflective pedagogical approach that promotes the critical use of digital texts, overcoming barriers and promoting the development of cognitive skills in higher education students.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking, reading comprehension, digital texts, higher education, digital literacy.

## 1. Introduction

In the digital age, higher education is facing an unprecedented transformation, where technology has redefined the way students access, interact with, and process information. Among the many resources that have emerged in this environment, digital texts are gaining prominence, not only for their accessibility and versatility, but also for their potential to foster essential cognitive skills such as critical thinking and reading comprehension (Kravchenko et. al, 2024). These skills, fundamental for academic and professional success, allow students to effectively analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information, skills that are increasingly in demand in a world characterized by data overabundance and information complexity (Baig et. al, 2020).

Critical thinking, understood as the ability to analyze and evaluate information in a logical and coherent manner, is a skill that allows students not only to absorb knowledge, but also to question, interpret, and apply it in various contexts. This cognitive process is crucial for the development of intellectual autonomy, as it prepares students to face a dynamic work environment and a constantly changing society, where the ability to make informed decisions is vital (Mejía, 2024). On the other hand, reading comprehension, which involves the ability to understand, interpret, and reflect on the content of a text, is essential for the acquisition of knowledge in all disciplines. The ability to understand texts in a deep and critical way is what allows students not only to learn, but also to innovate and contribute new ideas to their respective fields of study (Mallén & Valero, 2024).

In this context, digital texts are presented as powerful tools that, when used effectively, can improve these cognitive skills. Unlike traditional printed texts, digital texts offer a number of unique features that make them particularly suitable for learning in the digital age. These features include interactivity, the possibility of personalizing the reading experience, instant access to a wealth of resources, and the integration of multimedia elements that can enrich understanding and analysis of the content (Godoy, 2023). For example, hyperlinks allow students to access additional information with a single click, while digital annotation tools allow them to interact with the text in a way that is not possible with printed books. These features not only make reading more engaging, but also facilitate a deeper and more critical approach to the content.

However, the use of digital texts in higher education is not without its problems. Information overload, distraction, and lack of digital literacy skills are major barriers that can limit the effectiveness of these resources. Information overload, an increasingly common phenomenon in the digital age, refers to the difficulty in processing and managing the vast amount of information available online. This can lead to students feeling overwhelmed and losing the ability to focus on deep and thoughtful reading, which is essential for the development of critical thinking and reading comprehension (Camacho, 2023). Furthermore, distraction is another major challenge, as students are exposed to a multitude of digital stimuli competing for their attention, from social media notifications to pop-up ads. These factors can interfere with students' ability to maintain concentration while reading, thereby reducing learning effectiveness (Montalvo & Martos, 2019).

Another crucial aspect to consider is digital literacy, understood as the set of skills necessary to effectively use digital technologies in the learning process. This skill is essential not only for students, but also for teachers, who must be trained to integrate digital texts into their teaching in ways that maximize their potential (Krees, 2005). Digital literacy includes the ability to critically navigate online information, assess the quality and reliability of sources, and use digital tools to enhance understanding and analysis of content. Without these skills, students risk becoming passive consumers of information, rather than active users who can critically and reflectively evaluate and use knowledge (Tosi, 2020).

The literature review presented in this article covers recent studies published between 2020 and 2024 and focuses on identifying key authors who have contributed to the analysis of these skills in the digital context. Through this analysis, we aim to provide an overview of how digital texts can be effectively used to promote the development of critical thinking and reading comprehension in higher education, as well as to propose practical recommendations for their implementation in different educational contexts.

## 2. Literature

The integration of digital texts in the field of higher education has attracted increasing interest in the academic community, particularly with regard to their impact on the development of critical thinking and reading comprehension. This literature review explores recent studies published between 2020 and 2024, which address the effectiveness of digital texts as educational tools, the challenges associated with their implementation, and recommended instructional strategies to maximize their impact.

Digital texts and critical thinking.

Critical thinking is an essential skill for higher education students, and digital texts have proven to be a valuable resource for its development. According to Morales and Espinosa (2022), digital texts allow students to interact more dynamically with information, facilitating critical thinking and the evaluation of multiple perspectives. Digital formats, such as e-books and interactive platforms, offer features that promote in-depth analysis, such as the ability to annotate, highlight text, and access external links that enrich the understanding of the content.

On the other hand, Franco and Morales (2024) emphasize that the use of digital texts can promote student autonomy, a key feature of critical thinking. By having access to a wide variety of digital resources, students can explore topics independently, allowing them to develop the analytical and synthesis skills necessary to solve complex problems.

Reading comprehension in digital environments.

Reading comprehension, defined as the ability to understand, interpret, and evaluate written texts, is significantly affected by the format in which information is presented. Espinosa and Torres (2021) found that digital texts, through features such as instant search and linked footnotes, can improve comprehension by facilitating access to additional information and contextual clarification. This type of interactivity, the authors note, allows students to clarify complex concepts and connect new ideas to prior knowledge more effectively than in traditional print texts.

Without exception, there are still interruptions in digital text messaging. Rodriguez and Fernandez (2020) argue that information overload and the distractions inherent to digital media can impair reader concentration and, therefore, comprehension. The ease with which various online courses can be accessed, while an advantage, can also disperse students' attention, where educational training is needed to guide students in the proper use of these courses.

### Educational challenges and strategies

The implementation of digital text messaging in higher education is not very disappointing. Lopez et al. (2023) highlight the importance of digital literacy for both students and faculty. For digital text messaging to be effective, it is critical that users are familiar with their digital devices and platforms. Lack of digital skills can limit the spread of digital text messaging, and in some cases this means generating frustration and responding to these technologies.

In response to these challenges, Pérez and Ruiz (2021) propose educational strategies that include training in digital skills, the creation of hybrid learning techniques combining printed and digital texts, and the promotion of critical thinking through collaborative activities. These strategies not only improve interaction with digital text messages, but also promote the critical and conscious use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

### Impact and recommendations

The literature reviewed suggests that digital texts have significant potential to transform learning in higher education, particularly when it respects the reader's discovery of thought and critical understanding. However, as this potential is material, it is essential to address the issues identified, such as digital literacy and information availability.

Finally, the studies reviewed agree on the need for adapted educational training that includes both ongoing educational training in the use of digital technologies and the incorporation of active methods that encourage critical thinking through interaction with digital text messages. These are fundamental recommendations to ensure that digital text messages are not just an additional link, but an integral part of the educational process in higher education.

## 3. Methodology

This article is based on a literature review, focusing on the exploration and analysis of studies published between 2020 and 2024. This methodology was chosen in order to obtain an in-depth and up-to-date understanding of the use of digital texts to promote critical thinking and reading comprehension among higher education students.

### Selection of sources and inclusion criteria.

To ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies, specific inclusion criteria were established:

1. Publication period: Only studies published between 2020 and 2024 were considered, ensuring that the results reflect the most recent trends and developments in the integration of digital texts in higher education.
2. Thematic relevance: Only studies that directly addressed the relationship between digital texts, critical thinking and reading comprehension in the context of higher education were included.
3. Type of publication: Peer-reviewed scientific articles, academic book chapters, and systematic reviews that met the criteria of quality and scientific rigor were selected.

4. Accessibility: Studies with open access or available through recognized academic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC and Google Scholar, were prioritized.

#### Examination procedure

1. Literature search: A comprehensive search was conducted in academic databases using keywords such as “digital texts,” “critical thinking,” “reading comprehension,” “higher education,” and combinations of these terms. Time filters were used to limit the results to publications from 2020 to 2024.

2. Initial assessment: The titles and abstracts of the identified studies were reviewed for relevance. At this stage, studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded.

3. Detailed analysis: The selected studies were subjected to detailed analysis. They were examined in depth to extract significant data, identify emerging trends and assess the quality of reported results.

4. Data organization: The collected data were organized in a table, which includes the title of the article, the authors, the year of publication, a summary of the study and the corresponding DOI. This table served as the basis for the discussion and synthesis of the results.

#### Data analysis

A qualitative analysis approach was adopted to synthesize the results of the selected studies. The results were categorized into emerging themes, such as the development of critical thinking, improving reading comprehension, the impact of digital tools, challenges and limitations, and pedagogical recommendations.

Data triangulation was used to ensure the validity of the findings, comparing and contrasting findings from different studies to identify consistencies, discrepancies and areas requiring further research.

#### Limitations of the study.

It is important to note that the literature review, although comprehensive, is limited to the information available in the sources examined. The absence of recent experimental studies and the possible lack of access to certain publications may have influenced the magnitude of the results. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the analysis means that interpretations are subject to the author's own interpretation.

The methodology used in this article focused on the critical and systematic review of the relevant literature, with the aim of providing a comprehensive and updated view of the impact of digital texts on the development of critical thinking and reading comprehension in higher education.

#### 4. Results

The analysis of the literature on promoting critical thinking and reading comprehension in higher education students through digital texts revealed several key findings, organized into the following categories: development of critical thinking, improvement of reading comprehension, impact of digital tools, challenges and limitations, and educational recommendations.

##### Development of critical thinking.

One of the most consistent findings in the reviewed literature is the ability of digital texts to facilitate the development of critical thinking among higher education students. Pérez, Fernández, and Rodríguez (2021) and López, Gómez, and Martínez (2023) agree that, when digital texts are used appropriately, they can stimulate a reflective and analytical approach in students, helping them develop critical skills necessary to evaluate and question information.

Hernández and Morales (2024) reinforce this idea by showing that digital tools, when integrated into the reading process, can significantly improve students' ability to critically interact with texts. Espinosa and Torres (2021) also demonstrate that digital media are beneficial in this regard, but emphasize the importance of proper and contextualized implementation within the school curriculum.

##### Improve reading comprehension

In terms of reading comprehension, a review of studies such as those by Batista and Quintana (2021) and García and Sánchez (2022) suggest that digital texts can offer considerable advantages over traditional reading methods. Students who use digital reading platforms tend to show greater understanding of the content due to interactivity and advanced features, such as the ability to annotate and instantly search within the text.

Silva and González (2022) point out that interactive texts not only improve reading comprehension, but also facilitate the development of critical skills, because they allow students to interact more deeply with the content. However, studies such as that of Rodríguez and Fernández (2020) warn that information overload and the distractions inherent to digital environments can counteract these benefits, highlighting the need for education in digital skills.

##### Impact of digital tools

Digital tools appear to be a crucial factor in improving critical thinking and reading comprehension. Carmona and Estrada (2023) and Morales and Espinosa (2023) point out that the integration of technologies such as digital annotations and interactive platforms in higher education allows students not only to access information more efficiently, but also to engage in deeper and more critical reflection, which allows them to advance in the learning process.

Navarro and Gómez (2024), as well as Torres and Martínez (2024), suggest that while digital tools are powerful, their effectiveness depends largely on instructional design and the ability of teachers to integrate them into the school curriculum in a way that corresponds to educational objectives. These tools should be used not only as a complement, but as a central part of the educational experience to maximize their impact.

Challenges and limitations

Despite the identified benefits, the study also highlights several challenges associated with the use of digital texts. Domínguez and García (2020) and Franco and Morales (2024) identify digital literacy as a major barrier to the full use of these resources, emphasizing that students and teachers must be adequately trained to use digital tools effectively.

Educational recommendations

The literature review suggests several pedagogical recommendations to improve the use of digital texts in higher education. Aguilar and Contreras (2022) and Pérez and Ruiz (2021) propose that educational institutions develop digital literacy programs that not only teach students how to use technological tools, but also guide them on how to use these resources critically and reflectively.

Martínez and López (2023) and Morales and Espinoza (2022) suggest that digital texts should be integrated into the curriculum in ways that align with essential skills development objectives. They further recommend that teachers adopt a teaching approach that promotes in-depth reflection and analysis, rather than merely superficial interaction with texts.

The results of this literature review highlight the significant potential of digital texts to improve both critical thinking and reading comprehension among higher education students. However, they also highlight the need for careful and strategic implementation to overcome the challenges and maximize the benefits of these resources in the educational context.

Table 1Document Review Matrix

#	Qualification	Name of Author(s)	Year	Summary	DOI
1	Enhancing Critical Thinking through Digital Media in Higher Education	Pérez, C., Fernández, A., & Rodríguez, M.	2021	This study examines how digital media can enhance critical thinking in higher education students, highlighting the importance of a reflective pedagogical approach.	10.1080/17439884.2021.1931268
2	Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking in University Students: A Longitudinal Study	López, P., Gómez, S., & Martínez, L.	2023	A longitudinal study examining the relationship between digital literacy and critical thinking development in college students, with recommendations for improving these skills in the curriculum.	10.1016/j.comp.edu.2023.01.004
3	The Role of E-books in Enhancing Reading Comprehension in Higher Education	Batista, J., & Quintana, S.	2021	This study explores how e-books can improve reading comprehension in higher education students, analyzing the advantages and limitations of these digital resources compared to traditional printed texts.	10.1080/21532974.2021.1948128
4	Digital Tools for Critical Reading in Higher Education: An Empirical Study	Hernandez, R., & Morales, P.	2024	An empirical study investigating the use of digital tools to foster critical reading in higher education students, with a focus on evaluating the impact of these tools on academic performance.	10.2190/EC.61.1.d
5	Using Digital Annotations to Promote Critical Engagement with Academic Texts	Carmona, D., & Estrada, L.	2023	This article discusses how digital annotations can be used to promote critical engagement with academic texts in higher education, presenting results from an experimental study in several educational contexts.	10.1080/23793406.2023.2120374
6	The Influence of Digital Reading Materials on Critical Thinking Development	Espinoza, M., & Torres, L.	2021	An analysis of how digital reading materials influence the development of critical thinking in higher education students, with recommendations for teachers on the selection and use of these resources.	10.1016/j.chb.2021.106901

#	Qualification	Name of Author(s)	Year	Summary	DOI
7	Information Overload and Its Impact on Digital Reading Comprehension in University Students	Rodríguez, L., & Fernández, P.	2020	This study explores how information overload affects digital reading comprehension in university students, highlighting the importance of teaching information management skills in the university curriculum.	10.1080/1475939X.2020.1796952
8	Strategies for Fostering Digital Literacy in University Contexts	Torres, J., & Ramírez, F.	2023	This article analyses the most effective pedagogical strategies to foster digital literacy in university contexts, with a focus on how these strategies can support the development of critical thinking and reading comprehension.	10.1016/j.edurev.2023.100420
9	Critical Thinking and Digital Texts: A Review of Current Research	Aguilar, S., & Contreras, J.	2022	A review of current research on the relationship between digital texts and critical thinking in higher education, identifying emerging trends and areas for future research.	10.1080/00220671.2022.1926385
10	Texts for Digital Natives: Enhancing Comprehension and Critical Analysis in Higher Education	Franco, C., & Morales, M.	2024	This study examines how digital texts can be adapted to improve comprehension and critical analysis in university students, especially those belonging to the generation of digital natives.	10.1080/14675986.2024.1055369
11	The Impact of Digital Reading Platforms on Comprehension in Higher Education	García, M., & Sánchez, R.	2022	An analysis of how digital reading platforms influence reading comprehension in higher education students, with a focus on the advantages of these platforms compared to traditional reading.	10.1016/j.jedt.2022.03.005
12	Overcoming the Challenges of Digital Reading: Strategies for Higher Education	Navarro, R., & Gómez, M.	2024	This article discusses strategies to overcome the challenges of digital reading in higher education, including information overload and distraction, with recommendations for educators and students.	10.1007/s11145-023-10345-w
13	Digital Literacy and Its Impact on Critical Reading Skills in Higher Education	Dominguez, P., & García, V.	2020	A study examining how digital literacy affects critical reading skills in college students, highlighting the importance of integrating these skills into the curriculum.	10.1037/edu0000368
14	Promoting Reflective Thinking through Digital Texts: A Pedagogical Approach	Martínez, J., & López, A.	2023	This article analyses how digital texts can be used to promote reflective thinking in higher education students, presenting a pedagogical approach based on critical reflection and in-depth content analysis.	10.1080/07294360.2023.1878790
15	Enhancing Critical Reading Through Interactive Digital Texts	Silva, A., & González, E.	2022	A study investigating how interactive digital texts can improve critical reading in higher education students, highlighting the importance of interactivity in the process of text comprehension and analysis.	10.1080/14703297.2022.1920801
16	The Effect of Digital Texts on Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking in Higher Education	Ramírez, A., & Torres, F.	2021	An empirical study examining the effect of digital texts on reading comprehension and critical thinking in higher education students, comparing the results with those of students who use traditional printed texts.	10.1016/j.edurev.2021.102127
17	Integrating Digital Tools in Higher Education: Impacts on Critical Reading and Analysis	Morales, S., & Espinosa, M.	2023	An analysis of how the integration of digital tools in higher education can impact critical reading and analysis, with a focus on the practical implementation of these tools in the classroom.	10.1080/10494820.2023.1932392
18	Digital Reading Strategies for Enhancing Comprehension in University Students	Torres, J., & Martínez, R.	2024	This study explores digital reading strategies that can improve reading comprehension in university students, offering practical recommendations for the implementation of these strategies in educational contexts.	10.1080/17439884.2024.1953923
19	The Role of Digital Media in Promoting Critical Thinking in Higher Education	Pérez, L., & Ruiz, G.	2021	An analysis of how digital media can be used to promote critical thinking in higher education, with a focus on the pedagogical implications of this integration.	10.1016/j.tate.2021.103198
20	Understanding the Challenges of Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking in Higher Education	Morales, C., & Espinoza, A.	2022	This article discusses the challenges associated with digital literacy and critical thinking in higher education, proposing strategies to overcome these barriers and improve student learning.	10.1016/j.edurev.2022.102413



## 5. Discussion

The increasing integration of digital texts in higher education has had a significant impact on the development of advanced cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and reading comprehension. In recent years, several studies have addressed this issue from different angles, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges that these resources present in the educational field.

Pérez, Fernández, and Rodríguez (2021) highlight that digital media can enhance critical thinking among higher education students, provided that reflective teaching strategies are used. In their analysis, they emphasize the importance of an intentional approach that allows students not only to interact with the content, but also to question and critically evaluate it. This approach is supported by López, Gómez, and Martínez (2023), who, in a longitudinal study, examine how digital literacy is intrinsically linked to the development of critical thinking, suggesting that teaching these skills should be a priority in university programs.

Regarding reading comprehension, Batista and Quintana (2021) point out that e-books offer important advantages over printed texts, such as accessibility and the possibility of personalizing the reading experience. However, they also warn about the need to guide students in the effective use of these resources to avoid a superficial understanding of the content. This warning is complemented by Hernández and Morales (2024), who, in their empirical study, find that digital tools can be particularly effective in promoting critical reading, provided they are implemented with an appropriate pedagogical approach.

On the other hand, Carmona and Estrada (2023) explore how digital annotations can be used to promote critical engagement with academic texts, suggesting that these tools allow for deeper interaction with the content, which in turn facilitates the development of analytical skills. Similarly, Espinosa and Torres (2021) analyze the influence of digital reading materials on critical thinking, concluding that these resources can be highly beneficial when effectively integrated into the curriculum.

Despite these benefits, Rodríguez and Fernández (2020) warn about the dangers of information overload, a phenomenon that can hinder students' ability to concentrate and engage in deep, thoughtful reading. This problem is exacerbated by the constant distraction students are exposed to in a digital environment, which, according to Torres and Ramírez (2023), requires specific educational strategies to mitigate its negative effects.

Aguilar and Contreras (2022) provide a comprehensive review of current research on the relationship between digital texts and critical thinking, identifying emerging trends and highlighting the importance of digital literacy as a key component of higher education success. Similarly, Franco and Morales (2024) explore how digital texts can be adapted to enhance comprehension and critical analysis, particularly among students belonging to the digital native generation.

Regarding the impact of digital reading platforms, García and Sánchez (2022) find that they can significantly improve reading comprehension compared to traditional methods, but only when

used in a complementary way to other teaching strategies. On the other hand, Navarro and Gómez (2024) discuss strategies to overcome the challenges of digital reading, emphasizing the importance of teaching students to manage information effectively to avoid cognitive overload.

The relationship between digital literacy and critical reading is also addressed by Domínguez and García (2020), who highlight the need to integrate these skills into the academic curriculum to ensure that students can effectively navigate a digital environment. Martínez and López (2023) reinforce this idea by proposing a teaching approach based on critical reflection, which allows students to not only understand, but also question and analyze the content of digital texts. Silva and González (2022) study how interactive digital texts can improve critical reading, highlighting the importance of interactivity in the process of comprehension and analysis. This approach is supported by Ramírez and Torres (2021), who find that digital texts can have a positive effect on critical thinking and reading comprehension, as long as they are accompanied by appropriate teaching strategies.

Finally, Morales and Espinosa (2023) and Torres and Martínez (2024) agree that the integration of digital tools in higher education can have a significant impact on the development of advanced cognitive skills, but they emphasize the need for a thoughtful and well-structured approach to maximize these benefits. Pérez and Ruiz (2021) and Morales and Espinoza (2022) conclude this discussion by emphasizing that while digital media offer great potential to promote critical thinking and reading comprehension, their effectiveness largely depends on the digital literacy of students and teachers, as well as the ability to overcome the challenges associated with their use.

These studies highlight the importance of an integrated teaching approach that combines digital literacy with effective teaching strategies to maximize the positive impact of digital texts in higher education. By facing and overcoming the challenges, the opportunities that these resources provide for the development of students' critical and comprehension skills can be fully exploited.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis of the literature on the use of digital texts to promote critical thinking and reading comprehension among higher education students reveals several important findings that highlight both the benefits and challenges associated with these tools. First, it is observed that the integration of digital texts in the educational environment can provide students with unique opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. Digital resources allow for more dynamic interaction with content, facilitating in-depth reflection and analysis. This ability to interact is fundamental to the formation of sound critical thinking, as students have the opportunity to question, compare and evaluate information more effectively.

Improving reading comprehension is also a notable advantage of digital texts. Digital tools, such as interactive platforms and e-books, offer features that can enrich the reading experience, making content easier to understand through functions such as annotations and instant searches.

These features allow students to manage and explore information more effectively, promoting a deeper and more detailed understanding of texts.

However, the analysis also highlights several challenges that need to be addressed to maximise the potential of digital texts in higher education. One of the main problems identified is information overload and the distractions associated with the digital environment. The abundance of information and multiple sources of distraction can hinder students' ability to concentrate and engage in critical reading. Furthermore, digital literacy is presented as a major barrier, as students and teachers must be adequately trained to use these tools effectively.

To overcome these challenges, it is recommended that digital texts be carefully integrated into the school curriculum. It is essential that educational institutions develop digital literacy programs that equip students with the skills to manage digital information critically and reflectively. Likewise, teachers should adopt pedagogical approaches that encourage in-depth reflection and analysis, using digital texts as a central part of the educational experience.

While digital texts offer significant potential for improving critical thinking and reading comprehension in higher education, it is essential to address the challenges associated with their use. With strategic implementation and an appropriate didactic approach, these digital resources can effectively contribute to the development of advanced cognitive skills in students. The combination of opportunities and challenges suggests that while the path to successful integration may be complex, the potential benefits justify the effort and investment to adopt and optimize digital texts in education.

#### Acknowledgement

This research is funded by the authors themselves.

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