WEEK 8

CRITICAL WRITING IN THE ACADEME

Academic writing is far from a one-size-fits-all genre. Applicable to the broad variety of academic disciplines and their unique approaches to conducting and documenting research efforts in the field, one might find it challenging to identify clearly what constitutes academic writing.

Defining Critical Academic Writing

According to the University of Birmingham publication, "*A short guide to critical writing for Postgraduate Taught students,*"

> "***Critical writing is an involvement in an academic debate****. It requires 'a refusal to accept the conclusions of other writers without evaluating the arguments and evidence they provide.'"*

A Lancaster University publication adds that "*The aim of academic writing is not to present 'the right answer,' but to discuss the controversies in an intelligent way*."

Here are tips to help you reflect critical thinking in critical academic writing.

- Be sure to answer the right and relevant questions.
- Give enough contexts so that the reader can follow your ideas and understand your principles.
- Include references to the material you have read.
- Try to group different studies thematically or categorically and make links between ones that are related.
- Explain source material to your readers to show why it is valuable and relevant.
- Discuss the ideas that come from these source texts in your writing.
- Justify your judgments. Say why you think an idea is relevant, valid or interesting.
- Acknowledge the drawbacks or limitations of ideas, even the ones you disagree with.
- Avoid absolute statements. Use hedging language to make your statements more convincing.

- Do not be afraid to make intelligent suggestions, educational guesses or hypotheses.
- You are supposed to make judgments based on evidence, so your conclusions must be meaningful and completely objective.
- Note that conclusions are usually plural. A single conclusion—rare but possible—is usually straightforward and is worth discussing.
- Do not ignore arguments just because you disagree with them.
- Avoid praising authors just because they are famous in the field. Praise them for the substance of their work assessed with objectivity, not with subjectivity.
- Check that your argument flows logically.

Constructing a Good Academic Argument

A good academic argument makes an evidence-based claim designed to advance a specific field of study. It also demonstrates an understanding of the foundational research for the claim and the implications of the results on the field. Points of view can strengthen your argument, either by providing evidence to support your argument or by providing food for thought when constructing your argument to effectively debate counterclaims.

A Belmont University resource titled, "*Writing an Argument,*" states:

> *"The purpose of argument writing is to present a position and to have an audience adopt or at least seriously consider your argument." Further, it notes that "Good argument writing is critical, assertion-with proof-writing. It should reflect a serious attempt on the writer's part to have considered the issue from all angles."*

The Simon Fraser University "*Resources on argumentation in academic writing*" claims that:

> *"Argumentation is less about trying to change 'what readers believe, think, or do,' and more about convincing 'yourself or others that specific facts are reliable or that certain views should be considered or at least tolerated'".*

In another resource titled, "*Building Good Arguments*", they describe six elements of a well-reasoned argument: claim, reason, qualifier, warrant, backing, and conditions of rebuttal.

The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill offers that:

> "…*by considering what someone who disagrees with your position might have to say…, you show that you have thought things through, and you dispose of some of the reasons your audience might have for not accepting your argument*."

Critically Evaluating Source Materials

According to the Cleveland State University Writing Center, "*Critical reading means that a reader applies certain processes, models, questions, and theories that result in enhanced clarity and comprehension*."

Critical evaluation of source materials allows you "to evaluate the strength of the argument being made by the work". The University of Toronto resource, "*Critical Reading Towards Critical Writing*" echoes this mindset, stating:

> *"To read critically is to make judgments about how a text is argued. This is a highly reflective skill requiring you to "stand back" and gain some distance from the text you are reading."*

For those new to critical evaluation of a source, however, you should ask "What aspects are important to consider when critically evaluating a source?"

According to Sheldon Smith, founder and editor of EAPFoundation.com in an article on Critical Reading, "*In addition to what a text says, the reader needs to consider how it says it, who is saying it, when it was said, where it was said (i.e. published), and why it was said (i.e. the writer's purpose)."*

Why is it important to be able to critically evaluate source materials?

The University of Minnesota Center for Writing says, "*When you understand how what you read is written, you can work to incorporate those techniques into your own writing*", while the Walden University Academic Skills Center offers that "*You are not simply*

absorbing the information; instead, you are interpreting, categorizing, questioning, and weighing the value of that information" in support of critical reading processes.

Receiving Criticisms

Many times, critically evaluating the work of others is much easier than receiving critical feedback on your own writing efforts. It is just harder to be at the receiving end.

According to Eric Schmieder, "*I think you have to face criticism with an open mind and a willingness to learn. Sometimes the comments are harsh, but mostly they are well-intentioned efforts to help you improve. Consider the source and select ones whose feedback you value when possible*."

To better respond to critical feedback on your writing, TurnItIn offers seven ways to improve writing by receiving feedback.

1. Feedback Connects to Your Goals

Feedback lets you know how much development you have made towards your writing goals and what else you need to do to meet them. It also gives you a clearer picture of where you are in your timeline of progress.

2. Feedback Can Be More Important Than Your Score

Scores and grades only measure performance -- they do not tell you how to get better. Read all the comments and use them to revise your work. A good score without feedback leaves you at a plateau while a bad score with feedback leaves you an opportunity to progress and improve without limits.

3. Feedback Helps You Ask the Right Questions

You might not always understand the comments you get. You may even disagree with them, and sometimes you may have trouble understanding how to apply them. Ask your instructor for more clarification and advice. Teachers prefer assertive students that show interest for learning.

4. Feedback Lets You Determine What Is Most Important

Focus on the comments that will make your ideas clearer and help readers understand, then work your way down.

5. Feedback Aids in Revision and Practice

Use your comments to revise and practice your writing. You may also use your current feedback to reflect on the mistakes that you have committed in the past.

6. Feedback Helps You Take Ownership of Your Writing

Find your voice as a writer, and establish your own style and principles.

7. Feedback Gets You on the Same Page as Your Teacher

Your teacher's comments are there to help you, not criticize you. Your feedback is part of a conversation through which your teacher is trying to support you and your writing development.