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Critical Thinking and Writing: Critical Writing

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Overview

Common feedback from lecturers is that students' writing is too descriptive, not showing enough criticality: "too descriptive", "not supported by enough evidence", "unbalanced", "not enough critical analysis". This guide provides the foundations of critical writing along with some useful techniques to assist you in strengthening this skill.



Key features of critical writing

Key features in critical writing include:

- Presenting strong supporting evidence and a clear argument that leads to a reasonable conclusion.
- Presenting a balanced argument that indicates an unbiased view by evaluating both the evidence that supports your argument as well as the counter-arguments that may show an alternative perspective on the subject.
- Refusing to simply accept and agree with other writers - you should show criticality towards other's works and evaluate their arguments, questioning if their supporting evidence holds up, if they show any biases, whether they have considered alternative perspectives, and how their arguments fit into the wider dialogue/debate taking place in their field.
- Recognizing the limitations of your evidence, argument and conclusion and therefore indicating where further research is needed.

Your Argument

What is an argument?

Essentially, the aim of an essay (and other forms of academic writing, including dissertations) is to present and defend, with reasons and evidence, an argument relating to a given topic. In the academic context argument means something specific. **It is the main claim/view/position/conclusion on a matter, which can be the answer to the essay (or research) question.** The development of an argument is closely related to **criticality**, as in your academic writing you are not supposed to merely describe things; you also need to analyse and draw conclusions.

Tips on devising an argument

- Try to think of a clear statement. It may be as simple as trying to prove that a statement in the essay title is right or wrong.
- Identify rigorous evidence and logical reasons to back up your argument.
- Consider different perspectives and viewpoints, but show why your argument prevails.
- Structure your writing in light of your argument: **the argument will shape the whole text, which will present a logical and well-structured account of background information, evidence, reasons and discussion to support your argument.**
- Link and signpost to your argument throughout your work.



Argument or arguments?

Both! Ideally, in your essay you will have an overarching argument (claim)

Structuring Your Writing to Express Criticality

In order to be considered critical, academic writing must go beyond being merely descriptive. Whilst you may have some descriptive writing in your assignments to clarify terms or provide background information, it is important for the majority of your assignment to provide analysis and evaluation.

Description:

Define clearly what you are talking about, introduce a topic.

Analysis:

Analysis literally means to break down an issue into small components to better understand the structure of the problem. However, there is much more to analysis: you may at times need to examine and explain how parts fit into a whole; give reasons; compare and contrast different elements; show your understanding of relationships.

Analysis is to much extent context and subject specific.

Here are some possible analytical questions:

- What are the constituent elements of something?
- How do the elements interact?
- What can be grouped together? What does grouping reveal?
- How does this compare and contrast with something else?
- What are the causes (factors) of something?
- What are the implications of something?
- How is this influenced by different

and several mini-arguments, which make points and take positions on the issues you discuss within the paragraphs.

**Don't raise your voice,
improve your
argument.**

Desmond Tutu



[Address at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Houghton, Johannesburg, South Africa, 23 November 2004]

ACADEMIC ARGUMENTATION

This help-sheet highlights the differences between everyday and academic argumentation



Argument

A useful guide developed by The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

external areas, such as the economy, society etc (e.g. SWOT, PESTEL analysis)?

- Does it happen all the time?
When? Where?
- What other factors play a role?
What is absent/missing?
- What other perspectives should we consider?
- What if? What are the alternatives?
- With analysis you challenge the “received knowledge” and your own your assumptions.

Analysis is different within different disciplines:

- Data analysis (filter, cluster...)
- Compound analysis (chemistry)
- Financial statements analysis
- Market analysis (SWOT analysis)
- Program analysis (computer science) - the process of automatically analysing the behaviour of computer programs
- Policy Analysis (public policy) - The use of statistical data to predict the effects of policy decisions made by governments and agencies
- Content analysis (linguistics, literature)
- Psychoanalysis - study of the unconscious mind.



Evaluation:

- Identify strengths and weaknesses.
- Assess the evidence, methodology, argument etc. presented in a source.
- Judge the success or failure of something, its implications and/or value.
- Draw conclusions from your material, make judgments about

it, and relate it to the question asked.

- Express "mini-arguments" on the issues you raise and analyse throughout your work. (See box Your Argument.)
- Express an overarching argument on the topic of your research. (See Your Argument.)

Tip: Try to include a bit of description, analysis and evaluation in every paragraph. Writing strong paragraphs can help, as it reminds you to conclude each paragraph drawing a conclusion. However, you may also intersperse the analysis with evaluation, within the development of the paragraph.

Useful resources



Learning Development, University of Plymouth (2010). Critical Thinking. *University of Plymouth*. Available from https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/1/1710/Critical_Thinking.pdf [Accessed 16 January 2020].

Student Learning Development, University of Leicester (no date). Questions to ask about your level of critical writing. *University of Leicester*. Available from <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/lid/resources/writing/questions-to-ask/questions-to-ask-about-your-level-of-critical-writing> [Accessed 16 January 2020].

Workshop recording

- Critical thinking and writing online workshop

Recording of a 45-minute online workshop on critical thinking and writing, delivered by one of our Learning Advisers, Dr Laura Niada.

Workshop Slides

-  [Critical Thinking and Writing](#)

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