# How to Learn Critical Writing

## A. Shift in Mindset

Critical writing is not simply repeating or reporting what authors say. It requires reasoning: showing why something matters, under what conditions, and where it fails.

* Move from “what is said” → to “why it matters, where it applies, where it fails.”
* Example: “Author X claims that transparency builds trust. This matters because in democratic contexts it supports legitimacy. However, in conflict zones it can create operational risk — therefore its application is conditional.”
* Always ask: Who benefits? Who is excluded? What does this mean in practice?

## B. Reading Workflow (using DIMER questions)

A disciplined workflow prevents superficial reading. Each step builds depth.

1. Skim (10 mins)
   * Read abstract, introduction, conclusion.
   * Identify scope, key arguments, main findings.
   * Question: What is this really about?
2. Map (10 mins)
   * Draw claim → evidence → warrant → limits.
   * Note where evidence does not fully support claims.
   * Example: Claim = “AI strengthens mission command.” Evidence = two NATO case studies. Limit = no data from small neutral states.
3. Interrogate (15 mins)
   * Answer DIMER questions (Describe, Interpret, Methodology, Evaluate, Author).
   * Explicitly note: what does it apply to? what does it not apply to?
4. Synthesize (10 mins)
   * Produce one-sentence thesis.
   * List 3 Limit → Implication pairs.
   * Example: “Because the study only analysed NATO members → findings cannot generalise to Ireland → implication: adapt cautiously.”
5. Record (5 mins)
   * Add notes to an “Evidence & Implication Log.”
   * Keep track of contradictions across sources.

## C. Writing Structure

Criticality must appear in how you organise your work:

* Paragraphs (PEEL-C)  
  Point (main idea) → Evidence (from source, cited) → Explain (how evidence supports or undermines claim) → Limit (weakness, bias, scope issue) → Consequent (so what for your argument/context).
* Sections (DIMER)  
  Each chapter or section mirrors Describe → Interpret → Methodology → Evaluate → Author.
* Slides (for presentations)  
  Claim → Evidence (one figure/table) → However (limit) → Implication (recommendation).  
  This prevents “data-dump” slides and ensures criticality is visible.

## D. Methodology Appraisal — Quick Prompts

Every source must be interrogated for design strength:

* Validity: Does the method actually measure what it claims?
* Reliability: Would findings be the same if repeated?
* External applicability: Can it be applied beyond the sample/setting?
* Bias: Was there institutional, disciplinary, or funding influence?

Hierarchy of evidence:  
Systematic review/meta-analysis → RCT → cohort/longitudinal → case-control → cross-sectional → case study → expert opinion/commentary.  
Use this to grade confidence: “supported by high-level evidence,” vs “tentative finding, based on weak evidence.”

## E. Practice Drills

Critical writing is a skill: it improves by practice.

1. Triangle drill: Take three sources. Show where A aligns with B but not with C. Explain why.
2. Limit → Implication table: For each article, list 3 limitations, and turn each into an implication.
3. Reverse lens: Draft the author’s best rebuttal to your critique. Then refine your critique to withstand it.
4. Context swap: Rewrite findings for a different context (e.g., NATO vs Ireland). Identify what changes.

## F. Language Bank for Criticality

* Analytical verbs: argues, substantiates, demonstrates, underdetermines, overstates.
* Contrastive phrases: however, by contrast, conversely, on the other hand.
* Hedging terms: suggests, appears to, plausibly, conditional on.  
  Use them deliberately: they signal critical stance to assessors.

## G. Self-Check Before Submission

* Have I answered all the DIMER questions?
* Have I included at least one “however” per major section?
* Have I identified author bias or stance?
* Does every limit have an implication?
* Is my tone formal, precise, concise, and correctly referenced in Maynooth Harvard style?