

What is critical writing?

It is common for feedback on student writing to focus on the need to engage more critically with the source material. Typical comments from tutors are: 'too descriptive', or 'not enough critical analysis'. This Study Guide gives ideas for how to improve the level of critical analysis you demonstrate in your writing. Other Study Guides you may find useful are: *What is Critical Reading? Using Paragraphs* and *The Art of Editing*.

What is critical writing?

The most characteristic features of critical writing are:

- a clear and confident refusal to accept the conclusions of other writers without evaluating the arguments and evidence that they provide;
- a balanced presentation of reasons why the conclusions of other writers may be accepted or may need to be treated with caution;
- a clear presentation of your own evidence and argument, leading to your conclusion; and
- a recognition of the limitations in your own evidence, argument, and conclusion.

What is descriptive writing?

The most characteristic features of descriptive writing are that it will describe something, but will not go beyond an account of what appears to be there. A certain amount of descriptive writing is needed to establish for example:

- the setting of the research;
- a general description of a piece of literature, or art;
- the list of measurements taken;
- the timing of the research;
- an account of the biographical details of a key figure in the discipline; or
- a brief summary of the history leading up to an event or decision.

The difference between descriptive writing and critical writing

With **descriptive writing** you are not *developing argument*; you are merely setting the background within which an argument can be developed. You are representing the situation as it stands, without presenting any analysis or discussion.

Descriptive writing is relatively simple. There is also the trap that it can be easy to use many, many words from your word limit, simply providing description.

In providing only description, you are presenting but not transforming information; you are reporting ideas but not taking them forward in any way. **An assignment using only descriptive writing would therefore gain few marks.**

With **critical writing** you are participating in the academic debate. This is more challenging and risky. You need to weigh up the evidence and arguments of others, and to contribute your own. You will need to:

- consider the quality of the evidence and argument you have read;
- identify key positive and negative aspects you can comment upon;
- assess their relevance and usefulness to the debate that you are engaging in for your assignment; and
- identify how best they can be woven into the argument that you are developing.

A much higher level of skill is clearly needed for critical writing than for descriptive writing, and this is reflected in the higher marks it is given.

Finding your academic voice

When you engage in critical writing you are developing your own academic voice within your subject. Wellington *et al.* (2005 p.84) offer some suggestions for distinguishing between the academic and the non-academic voice. They suggest that the academic voice will involve:

- “healthy scepticism ... but not cynicism;
- confidence ... but not ‘cockiness’ or arrogance;
- judgement which is critical ... but not dismissive;
- opinions ... without being opinionated;
- careful evaluation of published work ... not serial shooting at random targets;
- being ‘fair’: assessing fairly the strengths and weaknesses of other people’s ideas and writing ... without prejudice; and
- making judgements on the basis of considerable thought and all the available evidence ... as opposed to assertions without reason.”

Wellington J., Bathmaker A., Hunt C., McCulloch G. and Sikes P. (2005). *Succeeding with your doctorate*. London: Sage.

Try to get into the habit of writing critically, by making sure that you read critically, and that you include critique in your writing.

Stringing together of quotes

It can be tempting to string together quotes to support an argument, feeling that the more quotes you include, the stronger your argument. It is important, however, to remember that you also need to *interpret* the quotes to the reader, and to explain their relevance, discuss their validity, and show how they relate to other evidence.

Strategic use of paragraphs

There are several ways in which you can use the paragraph to enhance your critical writing.

You can use paragraphs to make a clear and visual separation between descriptive writing and critical analysis, by switching to a new paragraph when you move from description to critical writing, and vice versa. This can help in:

- emphasising to the reader that you are including both description and critical analysis, by providing a visual representation of their separation; and

- pushing you to produce the necessary critical writing, especially if you find that your description paragraphs are always longer, or more frequent, than your critical analysis paragraphs.

A paragraph break can provide a brief pause for your readers within a longer argument; giving them the opportunity to make sure they are keeping up with your reasoning. Paragraphs that are overly long can require readers to hold too much in their mind at once, resulting in their having to re-read the material until they can identify the point you are making.

You can also use paragraphs to push yourself to include critical writing alongside descriptive writing or referencing, by considering each paragraph almost as an essay in miniature. Within each paragraph you would:

- introduce the point you want to make;
- make the point, with supporting evidence;
- reflect critically on the point.

If it's worth including, it's worth telling us why

A certain amount of descriptive writing is essential, particularly in the earlier parts of the essay or assignment or dissertation. Beyond that, however, there is a danger that too much descriptive writing will use up valuable words from your word limit, and reduce the space you have for the critical writing that will get you higher marks.

A useful habit to get into is to make sure that, if you *describe* some evidence relevant to your argument, you need then to *explain* to the reader why it is relevant. The logic of your explanation contributes to the critical component of your writing.

So, a sentence or two might describe and reference the evidence, but this is not enough in itself. The next few sentences need to explain what this evidence contributes to the argument you are making. This may feel like duplication at first, or that you are explaining something that is obvious, but it is your responsibility to ensure that the relevance of the evidence is explained to the reader; you should not simply assume that the reader will be following the same logic as you, or will just work out the relevance of the quote or data you have described.

Line of argument

So far this Study Guide has considered the detail of what you write. The other key element in critical writing is the overall structure of your piece of writing. For maximum effectiveness, your writing needs to have a line, or lines of argument running through it from the Introduction to the Conclusion.

Just as you have used paragraphs on a micro scale to present your critical writing, so you need to consider the ordering of those paragraphs within the overall structure. The aim is to lead your readers carefully through the thread of your argument, to a well-supported conclusion.

Example of effective critical writing

The text below is an example of good critical writing, and is based on essay material supplied by University of Leicester's School of Psychology.

The author refers to the available evidence, but also evaluates the validity of that evidence, and assesses what contribution it can realistically make to the debate.

There are a number of inherent methodological difficulties in evaluating treatment efficacy in this area, and this has contributed to controversy within the research literature surrounding treatment outcomes for this group of offenders (Marshall, 1997). Firstly, while there is no doubt that the primary criterion of treatment success is a reduction in the rate of re-offending (Marshall *et al.*, 1999), reconviction data does not, in isolation, provide a

realistic representation of actual levels of re-offending by this group. It is well established that there is a discrepancy between re-offending and reconviction rates: the latter underestimating the number of offences committed (Grubin, 1999). Indeed, a significant proportion of offences committed by offenders are either unreported, or do not result in the offender being convicted (Abel *et al.*, 1987).

You can see how the author is considering the available evidence, but also the limitations on that evidence, and will be taking all of this into account in drawing conclusions.

Checklist for an overall review of your writing

It is always worth taking a critical look at your own writing before submitting it for assessment. The kinds of questions that might be useful to ask at that stage are:

What is the balance between descriptive and critical writing?

While a certain amount of description is necessary to set the context for your analysis, the main characteristic of academic writing is its critical element. A useful way to check this balance in your own writing is to use two coloured pens and to mark in the margin whether the lines are descriptive or critical. The balance will change at different points, but you need to make sure there is enough of the colour that represents critical writing.

Why should the reader be convinced by what I've just written?

Remember that, just as you are asking 'Why should I believe what I've just read?', the readers of your work will be asking the same question of your writing. A critical read through your own writing may reveal gaps in your logic, which you can rectify before you submit it for the critique of others.

Is my conclusion trailed and supported sufficiently well by my preceding analysis and argument?

Check out the conclusions that you have drawn, then locate and check the supporting evidence you provide earlier on. This is a good way of making sure you haven't forgotten to include a crucial piece of evidence. It is also a way of checking that, when your reader comes to the end of your writing, the conclusions make sense, rather than being a surprise, or an unconvincing leap of logic.

Have I included any unsubstantiated statements?

Sometimes a generalised, sweeping statement can slip through: the kind of statement that might be acceptable on conversation, but not in academic writing. There are three main ways of dealing with such statements:

- present the evidence to support the statement
- re-phrase the statement to sound more cautious e.g.: 'it could be argued ...' or 'this suggests that ...'
- remove the statement

This study guide is one of a series produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills.

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