Thinking, reading, and writing critically

# Introduction

Your ability to be critical will be vital to your academic success. Any assignment that asks you to analyse, discuss, evaluate, examine, reflect, compare or contrast will require you to think, read and write critically.

Being critical encompasses a **range of skills** that are both vital to **academic study** and **transferable** to many other areas of life, including identifying arguments, analytical reasoning and synthesising information.

In this resource, you’ll explore **how to be critical**, highlighting **practical strategies** you can use in your academic reading and writing that will enable you to demonstrate critical analysis in your assignments.

# What is “being critical”?

To be critical means that you constantly question and evaluate what is put in front of you. Never accept anything on faith!

It means having confidence in your own analysis. Look for gaps within a scholar’s argument and pinpoint any assumptions they are making. Also always check an argument against other sources of evidence and your own existing knowledge.

## What are you reading for?

We all do a lot of reading in our day-to-day lives, but we don’t devote the same amount of time and attention to everything we read. The way you read a novel will be different to the way you read a noticeboard; your approach varies according to your purpose. The three main approaches to academic reading are information, understanding and analysis.

* **Reading for information**: This is when you read to find specific pieces of data.
* **Reading for understanding**: This is when you gather information, aiming to gain an overview of an area.
* **Reading for analysis**: This is when you engage your prior knowledge and actively apply it to what you’re reading.

## You’re the judge

Critical reading is much like being the judge at a trial; you must cross examine the arguments of other scholars. Remember these arguments are **subjective,** much like a witness testimony in court.

By questioning everything you read in this way, examining all pieces of evicence and how they relate to each other, you can make a critical decision about the validity and relevance of the arguments made.

You can use this simple step-by-step process to help you be critical when reading. Following each step will ensure that you engage fully with the texts you’re reading.

1. **PREDICT:** what are you expecting?
2. **IDENTIFY**: what are the main ideas?
3. **QUESTION**: how do I know this?
4. **CLARIFY**: what is unclear?
5. **SUMMARISE**: what is it saying?

This strategy will help you to focus your reading effectively, taking note of both the small details and the wider context.

# Predict

Prediction will assist you in guiding your reading in a purposeful way.

It helps you to create links between what you’re reading and what you already know; by doing so you’ll start to make connections between theories and concepts.

Predication also gives your brain something to focus on; it’ll help you to avoid getting to the end of a text and realising that you’ve not got what you need out of it.

Before you start reading the text in full, ask yourself the following questions:

* What do you want to get out of reading it?
* What are your expectations?
* What is your goal?
* What are your limits?
* What do you think the main arguments of the text will be?

Write down your predictions; you’ll refer back to them later in the process.

**💡 Tip:** If you’re reading a book or a book chapter, you can skim the introduction and conclusion to answer these questions. For articles you can usually answer these questions from reading the abstract, then the discussion and/or conclusion.

# Identify

At this stage, you are focusing on understanding the text by identifying the main ideas. The main ideas are the arguments that the author has arrived at via analysis of the facts and data; **the facts and data themselves are not the main ideas**.

Read the text in full, asking yourself the following questions:

* What are the main ideas in the text?
* What are the key pieces of information?
* What links these together?
* How do these ideas link with others you’ve read?

You’ll start to recognise patterns within the text, and how it links with other texts you’ve read. What themes are emerging from your reading?

# QUESTION

Having read and understood the text, this is where your analysis begins.

Look for weaknesses or limitations in the argument, discussion or experiment. Sometimes these will be explicitly stated; more often they’ll be implicit and harder to identify.

Ask yourself:

* Is there any information missing?
* Are the arguments valid?
* Is the data reliable?
* What are the implications?
* What is the author’s position? Is there a bias or distortion?
* Are the arguments applicable beyond the context of this particular text?
* How does it fit with other evidence, and what you already know about the topic?

Look for themes in the questions that you’re asking of the text; these will help you to recognise your opinions of the patterns that are emerging, which can help to inform what you write.

# Clarify

This stage further develops your understanding of the text. You need to ensure that you understand all of the relevant terminology, otherwise you may misinterpret the point:

Ask yourself:

* Are any words, phrases or sentences unclear?
* Do you understand all of the relevant terminology?
* Are there any other theories or authors referred to that are relevant to your reading?

The answers to these questions can inform what else you need to read.

# Summarise

Summaries are vital to cementing your understanding, ensuring that you have grasped the important concepts and can reconstruct them in your own words.

Summarise the key arguments of the text in your own words in a couple of sentences.

Once you’ve done this, refer back to your prediction, do the two match up? Did you get what you needed from the text?

This should assist you in deciding what you do next. For example, if you are looking to find evidence to support one of your arguments and you don’t find it in the text, you will need to look elsewhere to get what you need.

**💡 Tip:** If you can’t summarise the text you’ve just read, you haven’t understood it! If you find yourself struggling to summarise a text in your own words, you may need to go back to the identify stage to ensure that you’ve understood the main arguments and ideas.

# Writing critically

The vast majority of your written assignments will require you to write critically. This is where the analysis you have done in your reading is evidenced in your writing.

Critical writing is your opportunity to:

* **Introduce** your audience to your arguments and ideas
* **Demonstrate** your thought process
* **Guide** your reader through your analysis and evidence
* **Contribute** new ideas to the conversation around your topic

Critical writing requires analysis and discussion, rather than merely description. This section will examine the differences between descriptive and analytical writing and look at a strategy you can use to ensure your writing remains critical throughout your assignments.

## Description vs analysis

It’s important to recognise the difference between description and analysis. Descriptive writing is not critical; while you’ll include some descriptive writing in your assignments, you will need to ensure that you include enough analysis in there too. Being able to recognise the difference between the two will help you with this.

### **Descriptive writing**

* Reports facts, events and/or data.
* Descriptive writing provides an account of a situation but does not draw conclusions, highlight implications or otherwise provide anything to aid the reader in understanding the significance of the information.

Example: The school board met to discuss district policy, tenure and the start date for the new academic year.

**Analytical writing**

* Interprets facts, events and/or data.
* Analytical writing compares, contrasts and synthesises information, clarifies the importance of some data over others and provides arguments and ideas supported by the evidence drawn from the facts and data.
* Example: Following a summer of debate, the school board met to discuss the impact district policy and tenure will have on the start of the new school year; with tensions running high around the cost of new initiatives, the meeting often divided along party lines.

# Critical writing strategy: It says, I say, and so

This strategy will help ensure you are writing critically by breaking your writing down into three areas.

**It says…** These are the facts: the data and examples you will use to support your opinions.

**I say…** This is your analysis of the data, showing your understanding of the topic and allowing your reader to understand the process you followed to form your opinions.

**And so…** This is the implications of your analysis, and how it connects with the rest of your writing. This is key as it ensures that you are presenting a cohesive and thoughtful piece of writing.

Bear this in mind when you’re reviewing your work; check that you’ve got enough “I say” and “And so” within your assignment to make sure you avoid purely descriptive writing.

# Summary

Being critical is a vital component of the academic process and when employed it will result in you gaining a thorough and deeper understanding of your discipline.