



Being Critical

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Agenda

What is Critical Writing?

A Model for Critical Thinking

Critical Reading

Critical Writing

Critical Writing Structure





Introduction

- Critical writing is an essential part of academic writing.
- It is an involvement in an academic debate.
- It requires a refusal to accept the conclusions of other writers without evaluating the arguments and evidence that they provide

(University of Birmingham, 2015)



What is critical
writing?

Critical Thinking

- The word "critical" can mean different things in different contexts. For example, it can refer to the importance of something, or can also mean pointing out the negative aspects of something, i.e. to criticise something.
- However, critical thinking at university does not mean looking only for the most important aspects of a topic or just criticising ideas. It is also about not accepting what you read or hear at face value, but always questioning the information, ideas and arguments you find in your studies.



(University of Leeds, 2023)

Critical Thinking

- Critical thinking is a key skill that should be applied to all aspects of your studies.
- As a university student, you need to be able to think critically about the resources and information you use in your work.
- You need to ask the right questions when reading the work of others; your writing needs to show you have the ability to weigh up different arguments and perspectives and use evidence to help you form your own opinions, arguments, theories and ideas.
- Critical thinking is about questioning and learning with an open mind.

(University of Leeds, 2023)



Critical Thinking

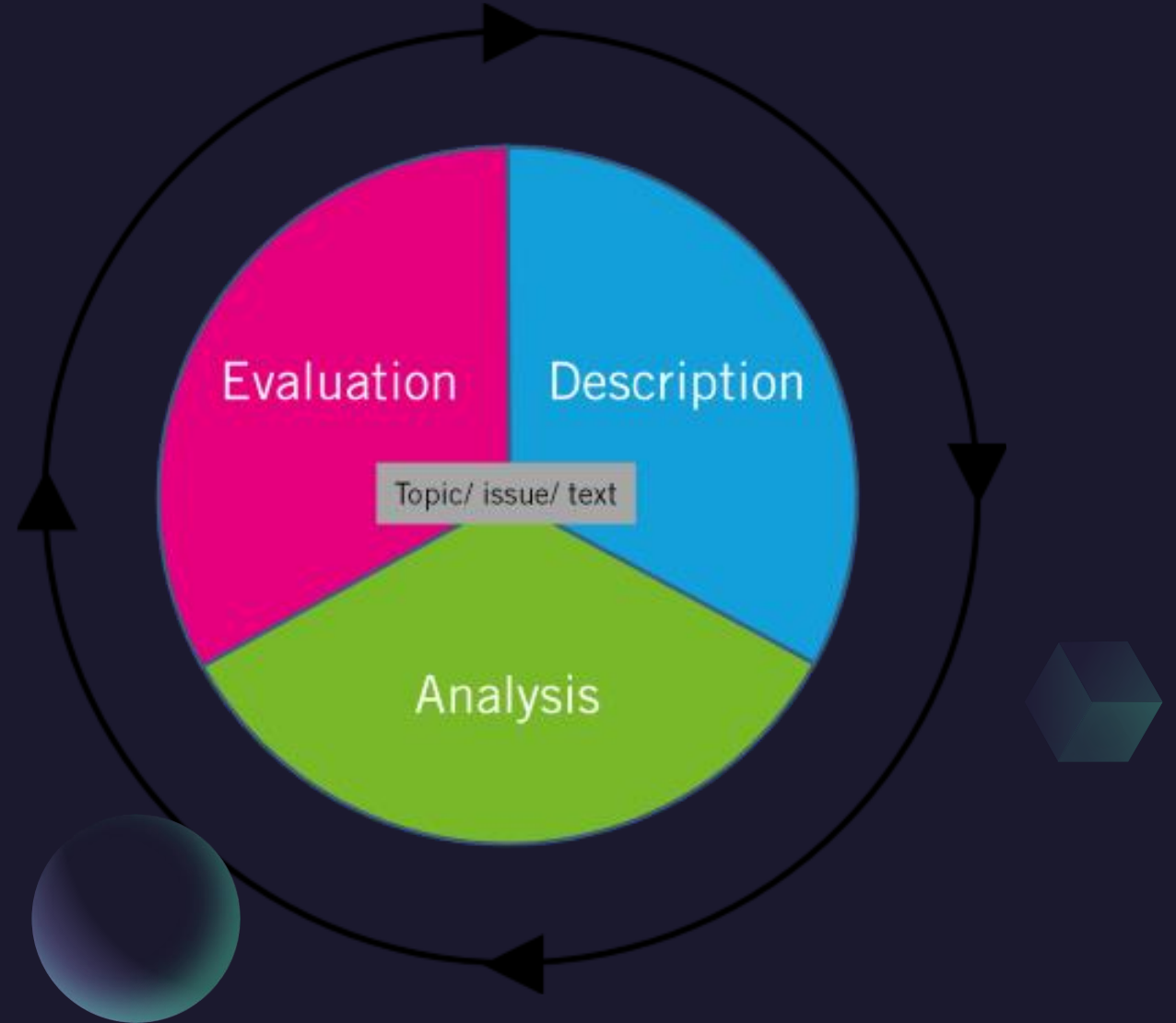
- Critical thinking should help you to:
- interpret evidence, data, arguments, etc. and be able to identify the significance to your assignment question
- develop well-reasoned arguments of your own for your assignments
- use and draw on evidence to justify your arguments and ideas
- synthesise your thoughts and the thoughts of differing authors/researchers/theorists.

(University of Leeds, 2023)

A Model for Critical Thinking

A Model for Critical Thinking

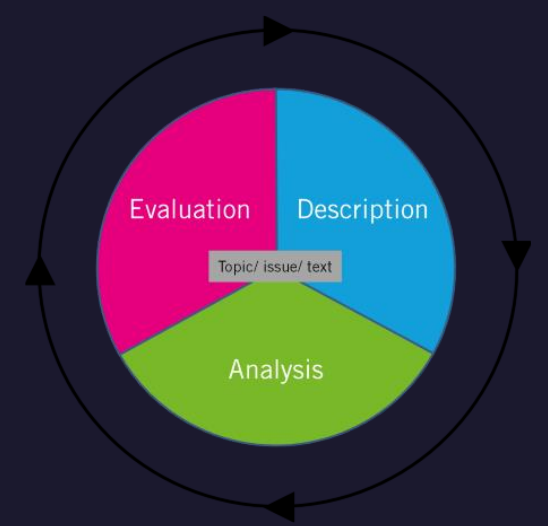
- Critical thinking is an important life skill, and an essential part of university studies. Central to critical thinking is asking meaningful questions.
- This three stage model, adapted from LearnHigher (2022) is designed to help you generate Questions to understand, analyse, and evaluate something, such as an information source.



(LearnHigher, 2022)

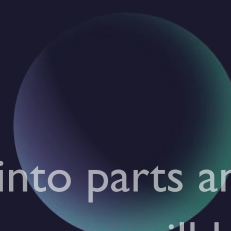
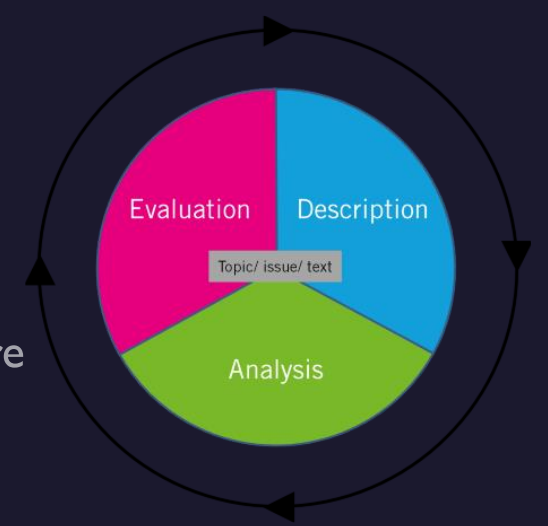
Description

- Starting with the description stage, you ask questions such as: What? Where? Why? and Who? These help you establish the background and context.
- For example, if you are reading a journal article, you might ask questions such as:
 - Who wrote this?
 - What is it about?
 - When was it written?
 - What is the aim of the article?
- If you are thinking through a problem, you might ask:
 - What is this problem about?
 - Who does it involve or affect?
 - When and where is this happening?
- These types of questions lead to descriptive answers. Although the ability to describe something is important, to really develop your understanding and critically engage, we need to move beyond these types of questions. This moves you into the analysis stage.



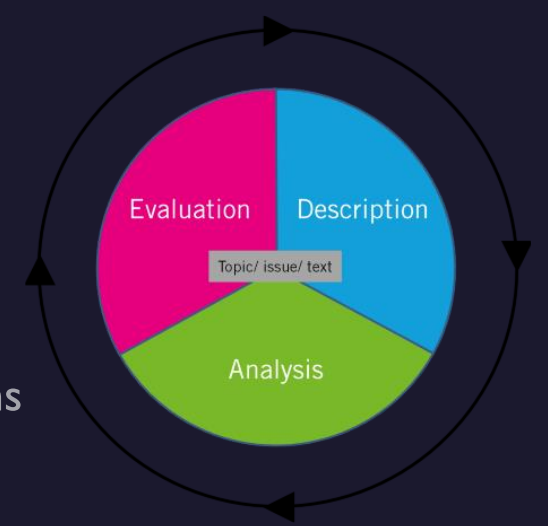
Analysis

- Here you will ask questions such as: How? Why? and What if? These help you to examine methods and processes, reasons and causes, and the alternative options. For example, if you are reading a journal article, you might ask:
 - How was the research conducted?
 - Why are these theories discussed?
 - What are the alternative methods and theories?
- If you are thinking through a problem, you might ask:
 - What are the contributing factors to the problem?
 - How might one factor impact another?
 - What if one factor is removed or altered?
- Asking these questions helps you to break something into parts and consider the relationship between each part, and each part to the whole. This process will help you develop more analytical answers and deeper thinking.



Evaluation

- Finally, you come to the evaluation stage, where you will ask 'so what?' and 'what next?' questions to make judgments and consider the relevance; implications; significance and value of something.
 - You may ask questions such as:
 - What do I think about this?
 - How is this relevant to my assignment?
 - How does this compare to other research I have read?
- Making such judgments will lead you to reasonable conclusions, solutions, or recommendations.



- The way we think is complex. This model is not intended to be used in a strictly linear way, or as a prescriptive set of instructions. You may move back and forth between different segments. For example, you may ask, 'what is this about?', and then move straight to, 'is this relevant to me?'
- The model is intended to encourage a critically questioning approach, and can be applied to many learning scenarios at university, such as: interpreting assignment briefs; developing arguments; evaluating sources; analysing data or formulating your own questions to research an answer.



(University of Leeds, 2023)



Critical Reading

Critical Reading

- The most characteristic features of critical reading are that you will:
 - examine the evidence or arguments presented;
 - check out any influences on the evidence or arguments;
 - check out the limitations of study design or focus;
 - examine the interpretations made; and
 - decide to what extent you are prepared to accept the authors' arguments, opinions, or conclusions.



(Bangor University, 2023)

Why do we need to take a critical approach to reading?

- Regardless of how objective, technical, or scientific the subject matter, the author(s) will have made many decisions during the research and writing process, and each of these decisions is a potential topic for examination and debate, rather than for blind acceptance.
- You need to be prepared to step into the academic debate and to make your own evaluation of how far you are willing to accept what you read.
- A practical starting point therefore, is to consider anything you read not as fact, but as the argument of the writer. Taking this starting point you will be ready to engage in critical reading.



(Bangor University, 2023)

Critical Reading

- You will select sources and read them in different ways depending on their value to your assignment. For example, you might read to:
 - Get a general overview of the text by skimming through it
 - Look for specific information or to understand some core concepts by scanning the text
 - Examine the text in depth and actively ask questions of the source, in order to understand its relevance and reliability for your own research topic.
- The last approach is particularly important for any work you submit for assessment.



(University of Leeds, 2023)

- You should ask yourself:
- Why am I reading this? Are you reading for a presentation, assignment, pre-reading for a lecture, or for finding ideas?
- What do I want to get out of it? Are you looking for specific facts, a general idea of the content, the author's viewpoint?
- What do I already know?
- How will I know when I have read enough?



(University of Leeds, 2023)

Select What and How to Read

- Usually, you can't read all the texts you find on a topic, or even everything suggested on a long reading list. You need to make choices and be selective.
- Opt for quality and not quantity, and choose reliable and current sources. We also recommend that you start with an easy text to give you an overview of the topic.
- **Predicting**: making an educated guess about what the text is about before you start to read.
- **Scanning**: looking through the text very quickly to look for keywords.
- **Skimming**: reading the introduction and the first line of each paragraph to work out what the text is about.
- **Intensive reading**: reading a short section of text slowly and carefully.

Criteria for Choosing and Using Evidence

- Current or recent (last 3-5 years)
- Credibility of the author (do they know what they are talking about?)
- Peer reviewed
- Type of study - can they make valid claims?
- Funding - who has paid for the study?
- Bias - which lens? Any hidden interests / agendas?



(Bangor University, 2023)



Critical Reading Task

Please Open From your Moodle Page or use your Handout



UWTSD Library

[UWTSD Library Link](#)



1. Open the link and Sign in using your student log in details
2. Search 'Critical Writing Guide'
3. Choose a listing
4. Use your Task Sheet to DESCRIBE ANALYSE AND EVALUATE your findings.



Online Resource

Online Article

1. Open the link
2. Use your Task Sheet to DESCRIBE ANALYSE AND EVALUATE your findings.

Compare your task sheets to Evaluate the evidence that you have found, let's Discuss



Evaluating The Authors Argument

- When you have found a section of text that is directly relevant to your essay title or research, you need to slow down and read it more intensively. Critical reading is about analysing and evaluating the author's argument, not just looking for information.
- The author should outline their viewpoint clearly and provide evidence from reliable sources to back this up.
- Ask yourself:
 - Is the author's argument clear? How is it presented?
 - What evidence is provided? How is it used and interpreted?
 - Is the argument convincing? How does it reach its conclusion?



TOP TIP... Make notes!

- Making meaningful notes as you read can help you to clarify your thinking, organise your ideas and engage critically with the information.
- Microsoft OneNote can help you organise your notes. You can upload screenshots or scans of your journal article, textbook etc. and annotate them with your own comments. The “highlighter tool” can be particularly useful for noting strengths and weaknesses in an argument.
- This is available as part of the STUDENT OFFICE 365 pack and can be found on your outlook homepage



Critical Writing

Critical Writing

- Students sometimes receive feedback such as "your essay is too descriptive" or "you need to show more critical analysis". While some description may be necessary – for instance if you are providing background information – most university assignments require you to produce work that is analytical and critical in its approach.
- **We want to know what you think!!**
- Your writing needs to show your interpretation of the evidence and source material, how you have used that information to demonstrate your understanding, and your subsequent position on the topic. Being critical in your writing means engaging in academic debates and research happening in your subject area.
- The sources you select, the way you show how they agree or disagree with other pieces of evidence, and the way you structure your argument will all show your thought process and how you have understood the information you have read.

Use Evidence to strengthen what you think

- Always keep your reader in mind and try to anticipate the questions they would ask
- You can use evidence to help you strengthen your position, answer readers questions, and "neutralise" opposing points of view.
- Remember to keep descriptive statements to a minimum — there is no need to provide large amounts of background or historical information.
- Make sure you move from description to analysis and evaluation.
- Give your interpretation of the facts, and explain the significance, consequences and implications of the statements you have made.

Descriptive vs Critical writing examples

- State what happened VS identify it's significance
 - To write critically you will need to not only describe what happened, but also identify the significance of what happened.
- Descriptive Example:

"The data shows that the incidence (new cases) of asthma rates in children under 15 years old increased rapidly from 1977, peaking in 1993 and then declining, though rates still remain significantly higher than pre-1976 levels."
- Critical Example:

"The trend, from 1977 until 1993, of a rapid rise in rates of asthma diagnosis in children under 15 years, suggests that one of the causal factors was particularly prevalent during this time, but has since declined in importance or effect."

(Cottrell, 2003)

Explain the Theory vs show it's relevance

- Descriptive writing will explain what the theory says. To write critically you need to go further and show why that theory is relevant.

- Descriptive Example:

"Carl Rogers' theory of a person-centred approach focuses on the freedom of the individual to determine what values should be used to measure successful personal outcomes or benefit, and is particularly relevant for social workers when wanting to take into account the diverse needs of the client group."

- Critical Example:

"Carl Rogers' theory of a person-centred approach is particularly suitable for social workers wanting to work with a client group with diverse needs because it allows the client to determine what values should be used to measure successful outcomes, rather than those externally determined by, for example, the service, state or dominant culture in society."

- NOTE that rather than simply noting the method used (descriptive), a critical writer will show how appropriate that method was.

- Descriptive Example:

"In addition to competency-based questions, the candidates were asked to complete an in-tray exercise, which required them to allocate different priority levels to tasks, as an appropriate method to measure their likely performance in the actual job"

- Critical Example:

"In addition to competency-based questions, candidates were asked to complete an in-tray task prioritisation exercise. This was because it was considered a more effective way to measure likely performance in the actual role as the majority of the job would involve similar tasks, with little interaction with customers and therefore less requirement for highly developed communication skills."

(Cottrell, 2003)

Critical Writing Structure

Structure your writing

- The main body of your assignment should present a clear and logical response to the question. You should discuss and evidence a few key points in detail, rather than including lots of points that are dealt with in a superficial way.
- You should use focussed and connected paragraphs to develop your argument.
- Paragraphs are an important part of how we structure writing. They form distinct sections of text, usually on one topic or theme and are made up of several sentences. Without paragraphs it would be difficult to follow the argument in an essay or the evidence presented in a report.
- Whatever type of writing you undertake at university and beyond, well-constructed paragraphs will enhance the readability and presentation of your work.

What makes a good Paragraph?

- In academic work, paragraphs should have:
 - a purpose
 - an appropriate writing style for your discipline
 - criticality
 - balance.
- You may be asked to produce different types of writing at university. Essays are one of the most common types of writing, but you might also need to write reports, reflections, summaries, reviews or blogs. Paragraphs in different forms of writing can have different characteristics.
- For example, in essay writing it is important to be balanced and represent the voice of the writer. In a report, you still need purpose, clarity, accuracy and criticality, but the extent to which every paragraph within that report needs balance and a writer's voice, might vary.

Purpose

- Every paragraph should have a unique purpose, so that each one is an essential part of the wider argument or discussion.
- The main idea
 - Focus on one argument, idea or theme in detail in each paragraph.
- Make sure that your reader understands the purpose of your paragraphs by setting out the main idea clearly (usually in the first one or two sentences).
- For example:

“Developments in food technology have led to an increase in the availability of convenience foods in the UK over the last 30 years.”

More than one Paragraph on a theme

- You might have more than one paragraph on a similar theme. If so, make sure that they don't repeat the same point. Ensure that each paragraph contributes logically and coherently to the overall purpose or argument of your piece of writing. One way to check this is to highlight the first and last sentences of every paragraph and look at whether they represent a fair overview of the points that you want to make.
- Show the reader how the key idea of a paragraph contributes towards the overall argument by including sentences which guide or lead the reader through this part of the argument, idea or theme. Your paragraphs should connect to each other and follow on in a logical order.



- For example, as part of a theme in an essay about the role of sugar in convenience foods, this sentence at the end of a paragraph on how sugar affects tooth decay moves the reader onto the next paragraph about sugar tax:

“The connection between a diet high in sugar and tooth decay is clear, but the impact of a tax on sugar is less well researched.”

- This sentence moves the argument forward by advancing the discussion.

Appropriate Writing Styles

- Writing good paragraphs takes practice and the commitment to actively respond to feedback to improve your work. The overall style and use of language differs between disciplines, but there are two basic aspects of writing style that are common to many disciplines: paragraph length and when to start a new paragraph.



(Cottrell, 2003)

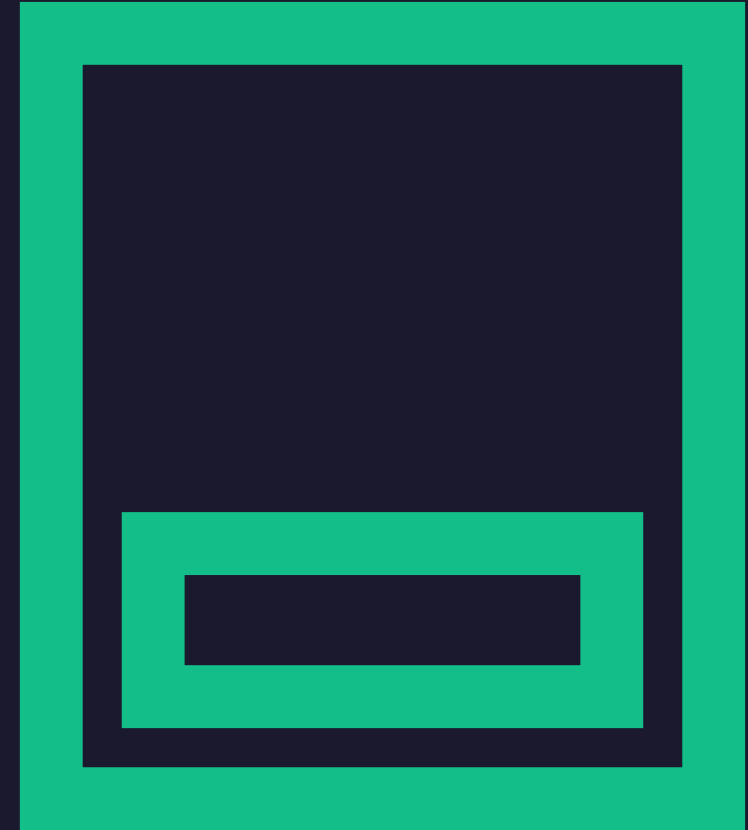
Length Of Paragraphs

- There is no perfect length for a paragraph because this will vary between disciplines and types of assessments.
- Long paragraphs can be difficult for a reader to follow and may prevent them from fully grasping the points that you want to make. To identify whether your paragraphs are too long, read through them and notice whether you are sticking to the original point as set out in the first one or two sentences. If you find that the content is deviating from the point, then you may need to re-think.
- Very short paragraphs of less than three or four sentences might look as though you don't have enough to say about that topic. Ask yourself whether the point that you want to make is genuinely important, which may indicate that you need to do more research to understand it and therefore explore it in more depth. Remember that the person reading your work is expecting each paragraph to be directly relevant to the overall piece.

(Cottrell, 2003)

When to Start a New Paragraph

- One way to look at paragraphs is to think of them as a mini exploration of one aspect of a topic. If you were writing about how to build a house for example, you might include individual paragraphs about designing the building, choosing materials, considering outside space etc. A new paragraph is needed for each new aspect of the topic.
- Generally, you should not start a paragraph by reiterating what you have just talked about. Your first sentence of a paragraph should alert the reader to a change of focus, and each paragraph should build to show how your ideas are progressing.



(Cottrell, 2003)

Criticality

- Most of your written work needs to show much more than just the ability to repeat information and facts. Critical writing is important to demonstrate the depth of your knowledge and understanding of different arguments, theories and ideas.



(Cottrell, 2003)

To show criticality in your paragraphs:



- explore the significance of an idea, principle, innovation or evidence
- tell the reader more than just what happened, what this is, how this works, and explore the causes, consequences, effects and implications of what you are writing about
- use appropriate evidence to support any claims or lines of reasoning
- evaluate the evidence, showing how it links to the overall argument
- compare, contrast or comment on how different pieces of evidence relate to one another and to your wider argument.

(Cottrell, 2003)

Balance

- The boundaries of knowledge are constantly moving and at any one time there may be a wide number of different ideas or perspectives about your subject area. Over time and in different contexts, some of these ideas or perspectives may become more dominant than others.
- When you are writing and researching, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that what we “know” today may change tomorrow, or that what could be “true” in one context is not true in another. This is where balance in your writing becomes important.



(Cottrell, 2003)



- To demonstrate balance you can explicitly or implicitly acknowledge that there may be alternative viewpoints on the subject, for example by citing relevant arguments and literature.
- You can also show that you understand that knowledge may be ambiguous and rarely definitive by using language which adds caution to your claims, for example:
- “High levels of intrinsic motivation in students may be linked to greater satisfaction with their courses.”

(Cottrell, 2003)

Building your Argument

- The most important voice to get across in your writing is your own; it is how you can show the reader what you are thinking, what your views are and how you have engaged critically with the topic being discussed. You can do this by building an effective and persuasive argument for your reader.



(Cottrell, 2003)

Make An Argument

- Your argument is how you express your viewpoint and answer the question you have been set, using evidence.
- Your argument can help you plan the structure of your work and guide you to find the evidence you need to support it.
- Make sure that your argument runs throughout your writing and that everything you include is relevant to it.
- Try to sum up your argument in a few words before you start writing and keep checking that it remains the focus as you research and write your work.



(Cottrell, 2003)

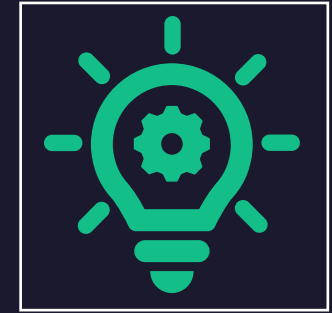
Structure your Argument



Guide your reader through your argument in a logical way. Think about what questions your reader might have. If you can answer these questions through your argument, it will seem more convincing.



Present the different sides of a debate, along with your thoughts, linking together different elements.



You can then work towards a conclusion by weighing the evidence and showing how certain ideas are accepted and others are rejected. Your conclusion should make clear where you stand.

(Cottrell, 2003)

Develop Your Argument

- Develop your argument by considering the evidence and drawing your own conclusions.
- If you are considering a range of opinions, try to group them together under different headings.
- Look at the strengths and weaknesses of the different sets of evidence and present these clearly and in a critical way. This will help to show you understand what you have read.
- Take the evidence into account when you develop your own argument and make clear what your viewpoint is. Perhaps your argument has strengths and weaknesses as well – it is fine to acknowledge these.



(Cottrell, 2003)

Constructing an argument (an example)

Argument

Evidence (academic sources)

There is evidence to suggest that eating a Mars bar each day will give you a much-needed burst of energy or a “sugar rush”, especially in the afternoons when blood sugar levels are said to drop. Some studies have researched this effect on the human body (author, year). However, it is also clear that there are many negative effects on health from eating such sugary snacks on a daily basis (author, year). These effects include...

Compare &
contrast ideas

Elaborate on or explain
ideas



The Conclusion

- The conclusion provides a way of neatly ending the discussion and providing a clear answer to the question or task set out in the introduction. It also allows you to relate your discussion back to the wider context, for example by identifying gaps in our current knowledge and suggesting a direction for future study.

(Cottrell, 2003)

What should be in the Conclusion?

- Just as there isn't one way to write an introduction, there isn't one way to write a conclusion. However, your conclusion should not be a surprise to your reader. You must not include any new information or evidence in your conclusion.
- You should present the main message or argument that you want your reader to take away.
- You should also summarise the key themes that were raised in the main body.
- Highlight any gaps or limitations you have identified in your assignment, and indicate a direction for future study. You might wish to briefly describe the implications or consequences of your findings or recommendations.



(Cottrell, 2003)

Final Points

Assignment Titles – Definition of Terms

Use your assignment titles to find the focus of the essay. Analysis essays are looking for a balanced written debate, where each aspect of the topic is considered systematically. In an evaluation essay, there is the additional task of reaching a decision, and assessing how far something is effective/useful/significant.

- **Discuss** - Identify the important issues related to a subject and then examine broadly and in detail. Explore as many sides as possible.
- **Assess** - Measure one or more aspects of something (for example the effectiveness, significance or 'truth' of something); show in detail the outcomes of this measuring
- **Critically Assess** - As per 'assess' but emphasising the scrutiny from different perspectives of arguments made by others about the assessed quality; often means making the whole essay an objective, reasoned argument (an overall case), based on your assessment

- **Analyse** - Divide something into parts and examine each part in detail.
- **Critically analyse** - As per 'analyse', but questioning and testing the strength of your and others' analyses from different perspectives; often means using the process of analysis to make the whole essay an objective, reasoned argument (an overall case)
- **Evaluate** - Assess the value, or otherwise, of something. Discuss strengths and weaknesses and give your opinion.
- **Critically evaluate** - As per 'evaluate' but showing how judgements vary from different perspectives and how some judgements are stronger than others; often means creating an objective, reasoned argument (an overall case) based on the evaluation from different perspectives.



Helpful Resources

- The Study Skills Handbook by Stella Cottrell
 - Cottrell, S. (2019) *The Study Skills Handbook* London: Macmillan
- Critical Reading and Writing in the Digital Age: An introductory Coursebook by Preet Hiaradhar and Andrew Goatly
 - Hiaradhar, P. and Goatly, A. (2016) *Critical Reading and Writing in the Digital Age: An introductory Coursebook* Oxon: Routledge



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