

Examples of descriptive vs. critical writing

The following table gives some examples to show the difference between descriptive and critical writing. The verbs in bold are key verbs according to Bloom's taxonomy, considered next.

Descriptive writing	Critical writing
Reports what happened	Evaluates the significance of what happened
	Hypothesises why something happened
Outlines what something is like	Evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of something
States evidence	Argues, using evidence
Explains what a theory says	Determines why a theory is relevant
Explains an experimental method	Justifies the use of a particular method over another
Quotes, summarises or paraphrases information from different writers	Compares and contrasts the views of different writers
	Considers the relevance or validity of information from different writers
Gives examples of different items	Differentiates between items, possibly using examples
States the findings of an experiment	Distinguishes between important and less important findings of an experiment
Lists details	Evaluates the relative significance of details
Lists information	Organises information in order of importance
Lists options	Critiques the options in order to select the best one

Relationship to Bloom's Taxonomy

Bloom's Taxonomy was developed in 1956 by Benjamin Bloom, an educational psychologist working at the University of Chicago. It classifies the thinking behaviours that are believed to be important in the processes of learning. It was developed in three domains, with the cognitive domain, i.e. the knowledge based domain, consisting of six levels. The taxonomy was revised in 2001 by Anderson and Krathwohl, to reflect more recent understanding of educational processes. Their revised taxonomy also consists of six levels, arranged in order from lower order thinking skills to higher order thinking skills, namely: remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating.

Bloom's revised taxonomy is relevant since analysing and evaluating, which form the basis of critical writing, are two of the higher order thinking skills in the taxonomy. Descriptive writing, by contrast, is the product of remembering and understanding, the two lowest order thinking skills. The fact that critical writing uses higher order thinking skills is one of the main reasons this kind of writing is expected at university.

The table below gives more details about each of the levels, including a description and some key verbs associated with each level. Although the verbs are intended for the design of learning outcomes, they are nonetheless representative of the kind of work involved at each level, and are therefore relevant to academic writing.

Descriptive writing		Critical writing				
Bloom's level	Remembering	Understanding	Applying	Analysing	Evaluating	Creating
Description	Recognising or recalling knowledge from memory (definitions, facts, lists, previously learned information).	Constructing meaning from different types of functions (written or graphic), or activities e.g. interpreting, exemplifying, classifying.	Carrying out or using a procedure through executing or implementing, for example using models, presentations, interviews or simulations.	Breaking materials or concepts into parts, determining how the parts relate to one another or to an overall structure or purpose.	Making judgments based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing.	Putting the elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganising elements into a new pattern or structure.
Key verbs	cite define describe draw enumerate	characterise clarify comprehend contrast convert	adapt apply calculate change compute	analyse associate attribute break down categorise	appraise argue assess check conclude	arrange assemble build combine compile

	find identify index indicate label list match name outline quote recall recite recognise record repeat report reproduce retrieve review select show state tabulate tell trace write	describe discuss distinguish elaborate estimate explain express extend extrapolate generalise give an example infer interpolate paraphrase restate rewrite summarise translate	construct customise demonstrate determine discover employ graph illustrate investigate manipulate model modify operate perform personalise practise predict prepare present produce relate show simulate solve use	classify compare contrast criticise critique deconstruct diagram differentiate discriminate distinguish examine illustrate infer integrate link organise outline relate select separate simplify	consider convince criticise critique decide defend detect determine evaluate experiment grade hypothesise interpret judge justify measure monitor rank rate recommend reflect relate review score standardise support test validate	compose constitute construct create derive design develop devise formulate generate hypothesise integrate invent make manage organise plan prepare produce propose publish rearrange reconstruct reorganise revise rewrite synthesise write
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Checklist

Below is a checklist for critical writing. Use it to check your own writing, or get a peer (another student) to help you.

	Item	OK?	Comment
Critical vs. descriptive writing	Is there a good balance between critical and descriptive writing (generally more critical writing than description)?		
Arguments	Are the arguments supported using evidence from other sources (not just the writer's own ideas)?		
	Is more than one source used?		

Analysis and Evaluation	Does the writer analyse the evidence from other sources, e.g. by breaking it down, comparing or contrasting, categorising, organising?		
	Does the writing evaluate the evidence from other sources, e.g. by identifying strengths and weaknesses, critiquing, criticising, making judgements?		
Conclusions	Are the writer's conclusions justified? Is there a clear line of reasoning leading up to the conclusions?		