A short guide to critical writing for post graduate students

Offered as guidance to

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A short guide to critical writing for Postgraduate Taught students

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Critical writing

Introduction

Has a tutor ever put a comment on one of your essays suggesting that your writing is 'too descriptive', or 'not critical enough'? It is a very common experience, but the difference between these two kinds of writing is not always clear.

You will almost certainly already be expert at writing descriptively. However, sooner rather than later in your course, you may want to develop skills for writing in both descriptive and critical ways. Generally speaking, it is critical thinking and critical writing that tends to attract positive comments and higher marks from your tutors.

Characteristics

What is descriptive writing?
Descriptive writing is fact-based. Examples include:

- Facts and figures about a particular issue
- Description of a background to a case study
- Details of an organisation
- An account of how research was undertaken
- A summary of a sequence of events
- Descriptions of what happened in an experiment.

'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' (University of Leicester. Learning Development Centre, 2013).

On the next page is a short example of descriptive writing from an essay on film history and a specific exhibition.

The first juxtaposition is between One Week and Gordon Matta-Clark's Splitting (1974) One Week tells the story of a newly married couple making their first home, and Buster Keaton plays the husband who builds the flat packed house. The twenty-five minutes flows with a series of predictable accidents, such as Keaton sawing a piece of wood on the roof whilst sitting on the end he is cutting away, he falls and simply carries on. There are two key moments of destruction: firstly the storm which causes the completed house to spin out of control, whilst the couple and their guests are in it; and secondly a train running through the house (when the couple try to move it to its correct plot).

(Postgraduate student. Essay, 2014. Very slightly adapted, and used with permission).

Example 1 Descriptive writing

The paragraph describes some incidents in a film. That's fine, but to carry much weight and to satisfy the marker, the essay will also need some critical writing. Now here is a short example of critical writing from the same essay.

Some caution is required when using slapstick as an interpretive method. Keaton engineered films for comic effect, and as alluded to earlier, it is unlikely that he was seeking to intentionally challenge convention, or leave his audiences with thoughts of failure and the futility of life. As Bal and Bryson (1991) state, an evaluation of context can reveal what the work is supposed to be. Keaton's films were not intended as art, nor as a lens through which to view contemporary art. Further, it is unknown whether all of the artists' works exhibited are directly influenced by any of the Keaton films shown. However, O'Doherty's notion that 'ideas are more interesting than art' is useful to articulate the idea that Keaton's processes have generated ideas for the curators (O'Doherty, 1999). Slapstick's historical context should not prevent its processes from being used as an interpretative approach; and as Dillon's theses suggests (2007), there is much to be gained from applying them.

(Postgraduate student. Essay, 2014. Used with permission).

Example 2 Critical writing

In this paragraph, by contrast with Example 1, the writer suggests their own interpretation, relates the filmmaker's work to critical theorists, and clearly presents herself as being a member of an academic community. See for instance the phrases 'slapstick's historical context' and 'there is much to be gained by applying it.' Both these indicate a level of academic confidence and of comfort within the subject discipline of film studies.

What is critical writing?

As Example 2 suggests, critical writing is more complex, and involves more discussion, analysis and evaluation than does descriptive writing. Examples of critical writing activities include:

- Engaging with evidence
- Open minded and objective enquiry
- Presenting reasons to dispute a particular finding
- Providing an alternative approach
- Recognising the limitations of evidence: either your evidence or the evidence provided by others
- Thinking around a specific problem
- Applying caution and humility when challenging established positions. Critical writers might tentatively suggest an independent point of view, using such phrases as 'It could be argued that...'; or 'An alternative viewpoint might suggest that...'.

Critical writing is an involvement in an academic debate. It requires 'a refusal to accept the conclusions of other writers without evaluating the arguments and evidence they provide' (University of Leicester. Learning Development Centre, 2013).

TOP TIP

For postgraduates, thinking and writing critically is an expected part of your studies. So demonstrate your critical writing skills by exploring academic theories, discussing evidence, and using excellent referencing techniques.

Differences in subject disciplines

When do you use these different kinds of writing?

Descriptive writing – when you need to:	Critical writing – when you need to:
Introduce	**Organise** and evaluate evidence
Present facts eg, a case study	**Make** comparisons between materials
Describe how an experiment was carried out	**Analyse** why something did not work
List details eg, resources used	**Apply** your own judgements
Outline areas of knowledge	**Make** links between areas of knowledge
Quote from writers in the field	**Weigh** up alternatives
Provide information or data	**Evaluate**/argue/contest
Summarise	**Draw** conclusions

Critical writing depends on the subject with which you are engaging. For instance, compare the following.

Discipline	Film studies	Geography	Business studies
Topic	Can Tarantino really be described as an auteur?	Is it possible to contain coastal erosion along the Norfolk shoreline?	What lessons has the NHS learned from hospital PFI contracts thus far?

Each of the three disciplines has its own discourse and its own mode of critical writing. Critical writing, like all the rest of academic writing, exists in particular subject context. You can only learn to write critically within a given context or discipline. Consequently, this guide simply provides a brief overview.

Getting the balance right

Academic writing often requires some element of both descriptive and critical writing in the same document. The descriptive writing helps provides the structure for critical thought.

It is usually the level of critical analysis in your essay that markers seek, and it is critical analysis that will gain you more marks. Consequently it is so important to be clear about the way in which the marks will be allocated.

How can you improve your critical writing?

Figure 1 on the next page, from the University of Plymouth, provides you with some very simple questions to ask yourself as you are writing each assignment.

At postgraduate level, it is extremely important to seek feedback from your tutors, so that with each assignment, you become progressively able to engage with the subject discipline.

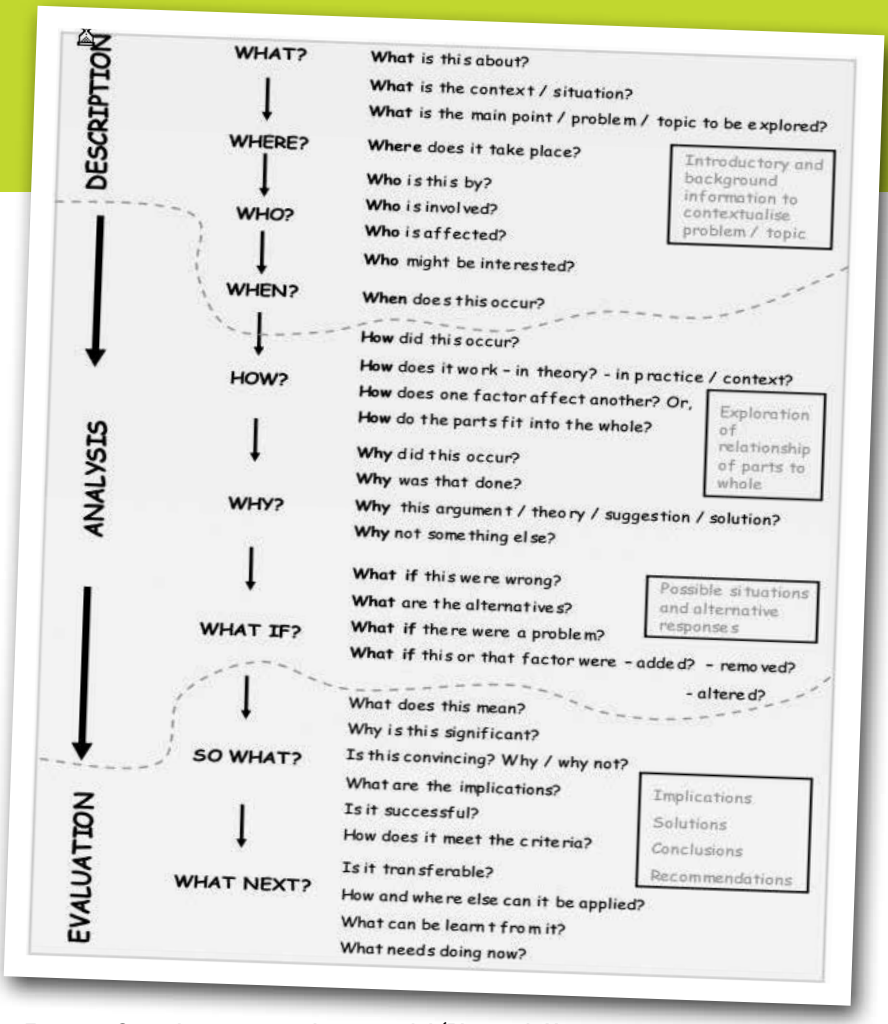

Figure 1. Critical questions: a linear model (Plymouth University. Learning Development Unit, 2010)

USEFUL REFERENCES ON CRITICAL WRITING

- Cottrell, Stella. (2011) **Critical thinking skills: Developing effective analysis and argument.** 2nd ed. London: Palgrave.
- University of Leicester. Learning Development Centre. (2013) **What is critical writing?** [online]. Available from: http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/critical-writing [Accessed 15 March 2015]

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