



Prifysgol Cymru
Dinod Ddiw Sert
University of Wales
Ynny Sallt David

Writing at Masters Level: So What's the Difference?

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Transforming Education; Transforming Lives





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Aims of the Session

- To help you understand what is 'different' (and the same!) about writing at Masters level as opposed to undergraduate level
- To revise some of the key concepts that are central to good academic writing
- To help you identify where to get support to help you develop your writing skills further.

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So what do you think are the differences between writing at Masters level and writing at degree level?

- Masters level = level 7
- Degree level = level 6

- In Small groups discuss....

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Masters Level: Academic Views

In your groups---consider what each of the below means in practice

'Using high quality information to show in depth knowledge and understanding'

'Examining issues in depth'

'Always looking at things from different perspectives'

'High level critical discussion'

'Ability to deconstruct problems'

'Problem solving using evidence'



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Masters Level: Academic Views

(cont.)

Clear,
concise
writing'

Taking nothing at face value'

Critical analysis and synthesis

The 'so what?' factor

Challenging assumptions

Balanced, thorough judgments and conclusions'

Constructing an argument



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Academic Levels

Level	What does it look like?
Level 4	Description - Opinion and research findings used to illustrate points but taken 'at face value' - Theories and experiences described
Level 5	Discussion Compare and contrast different research findings, opinions and experiences
Level 6	Critical analysis - View different research findings, opinions and experiences critically - Emphasis on importance of 'good' evidence as a basis for drawing conclusions
Level 7	Critical analysis, synthesis and evaluation - In depth critical analysis of research findings, opinions and experiences used to construct an argument - Justifying a particular viewpoint or conclusion as a result of 'weighing up' the evidence

Key concepts within the level descriptors

- Describe
- Discuss
- Evidence and 'good evidence'
- Critical analysis
- Synthesis
- Argument
- Conclusion



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Description - – keep to a minimum!

- To state the characteristics or appearance of
- A representation in words....
- Something that tells you what someone or something is like....

Thomson (1995), Cambridge Dictionary (2010)



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Stepping it up

- 1. write a short account as a group that describes an event in the news at present. (You can look at your mobile devices for inspiration).
- 2. then re-write that event with more of a critical lens : critically analyse and synthesise it.
- 3. note the key differences...



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Description

- “Humans need oxygen in order to survive. In total, about 20% of the air we inhale contains oxygen, with just 0.4% of air being carbon dioxide (Marieb 2008). In contrast, Marieb goes on to explain that the air we exhale is made up of 4% carbon dioxide and around 16% oxygen. The 3.5% to 4% difference in the amount of oxygen inhaled and exhaled is what our bodies, ultimately our cells, use in order to function.....”



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Discussion – still key but not enough on its own

- When people talk about something and tell each other their ideas or opinions..
- Articulation of different points of view..
- To consider or examine...

Cambridge Dictionary (2010),



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Discussion – still key but not enough on its own

- “Piaget’s (1930) theory of child development was centred on children’s limited ability to understand other people’s point of view until they were at least seven years of age. In contrast Vygotsky (1964) challenged Piaget’s views, arguing that younger children are capable of far greater understanding than Piaget gave them credit for.
- With regard to language, other experts.....”



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Critical Thinking - Analysis

- 'Detailed examination of elements' (OED)
- Critiquing different viewpoints – other people's positions, arguments and conclusions
- Evaluating the reliability and validity of the literature/evidence
- Viewing everything you read critically – not taking anything at face value
- Weighing up opposing arguments
- Structured reflection on personal experience (Cottrell 2005, Thomson 1995, Fowler 2007)



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**Analysis is
 sometimes seen as
 'taking things apart'
 'breaking them down'
 or 'deconstructing'
 them**



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You could write...

- There are a number of seminal studies in the field of education. Greenhalgh (2009) demonstrated comparable performance by teaching assistants and teachers, and later Lattimer et al (2012) found that teaching assistants could replace teachers in many day to day tasks. In contrast Vine (2012) found teaching assistant led sessions often took longer and were not well planned, and parents expressed a preference for qualified teachers.



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But you could have said this...

- Greenhalgh (2009), in their seminal study exploring replacing teachers in expanded roles concluded that 'teaching assistants / teacher' substitution was effective. However closer examination of the study detail reveals that the sole outcome measures considered was from a teachers only perspective.



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And this...

- In contrast Lattimer et.al (2011) conducted a large scale equivalence study to determine whether it was effective for teaching assistants to replace teachers for some activities. This was the first study of its kind to use a sufficiently large sample size, consequently their conclusions that teaching assistant led sessions were effective safe have become a widely respected seminal study in the field of education.



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Due to word limits, in depth critique might mean you have fewer references in your essay than you might have done previously – but if you have greater DEPTH and good ANALYSIS this is not necessarily a bad thing....



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Critical Thinking - Synthesis

- 'Combining elements into a whole' (OED 1995)
- Drawing conclusions about whether arguments put forward are valid, evidence based and justifiable
- Consider whether arguments are realistic
- Deciding based on the argument, the evidence and the practice context what your point of view is or what you will recommend
- Present your point of view in a clear, well reasoned way *with justification* (from Cottrell 2005)



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Synthesis
 reconstructs things –
 puts things together
 to reach a conclusion
 and make a clearer
 picture



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...and sometimes you will be able to
 use your analysis of the evidence
 and your practice experience to
 synthesize a new way of looking at
 things...

This is what we
 mean by 'original
 thought'



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Analysis and Synthesis

Growing evidence from research (Jones 2009; Brown 2009) suggests that violent video games cause young people to act aggressively. In contrast a study by Richards and Thompson (2010) identified that video games can be an important outlet for aggression (Richards and Thompson, 2010). However Smith (2015) argues that we do not have sufficient knowledge from neurological changes in young people brains to argue whether there is a positive or negative impact on young people playing violent video game.

Furthermore, a qualitative study by James (2008) of 20 young people who played video games for different amount of time each day suggested young people were reporting feelings of aggression but also physical conditions of stiffness and lethargy.

Personal experience reinforces this point; in my practice as a youth worker when young people play video games on the computers their interaction with others seems aggressive, and they also seem tired and irritable, as well complain about hand and neck ache.

Thus while at the present time there is it would seem arguably insufficient evidence to support the fact that video games cause young people to be violent or the causes, I do believe that it effects them physical and this needs to be further researched alongside the neurological impacts.



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So what you are doing is using
discussion, analysis and synthesis
to construct an ARGUMENT....



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Characteristics of an Argument

- **Position** – author has a position that they want the audience to accept (may or may not be stated at the beginning)
- **Reasons** (propositions) are given to support (justify) the author's position
- **Line of reasoning** is the logical 'unpacking' of the reasons why 'on balance', considering everything, this argument (viewpoint) is justifiable
- **Conclusions** – not just a summary of the essay but makes the author's position clear. You will often have several smaller arguments/conclusions, leading to one overall conclusion

Adapted from Cottrell (2005:47) and Fowler (2007)



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What is good evidence????

- Contemporary research evidence – valid and reliable
- Seminal research evidence
- Published in peer reviewed journals
- Primary research as opposed to secondary citation
- But don't overlook the value of other forms of evidence.....



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Evidence is more than research....

- Expert opinion – so some 'opinion pieces' may be 'good evidence'
- Perspectives from people in a specific context...
- Your practice experiences
 - ...are also important provided they are used judiciously
- The notion of the 'hierarchy of evidence' is key here.



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Practice Experience

- Always valuable if used to help you make sense of an argument or a discussion point.
- Practice experience may help to further support your argument...
- ...or it may lead you to challenge a theoretical perspective – the 'theory – practice gap'
- But either way it enables you to link literature/ theory and experience



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Fowler (2007)

- Smith and Brown (2010), and Evans (2011), both conducted large scale RCTs which show the benefits to healing time of leaving paediatric surgical wounds exposed rather than covered following surgery. However, personal experience of children's distress at seeing their wounds and wanting 'a plaster on it' or it 'taken away' suggest that from a psychological perspective this approach may be less ideal. Personal preference is thus an important factor to consider, particularly as in both studies the difference in speed of wound healing is modest, and infection rates do not differ.

What are the Barriers to Critical Thinking??

- Reluctance to critique experts
- Mistaking critical analysis for 'just commenting on the bad points'
- Assuming teachers and experts always 'have the answers'. Critical thinking means pursuing your own answers.
- Our own assumptions, preconceptions, biases, experiences, beliefs etc.

From Cottrell (2005) Chapter 1

Where to get support

- If you require advice please ask module tutors and or personal tutors...
 - Support is available from the library and student services
 - Read/ buy : Cottrell, S. (2005) *Critical Thinking Skills*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan
 - **SUPPORT EACH OTHER : Talk about your work, your theories...this will help develop your critical thinking skills...**

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