Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Critical Academic writing



Year 3: Personal Tutor Session
03.12.21

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives

www.uwtsd.ac.uk

Would that more of the youthful populace were so moved as to indulge in the daily pursuit of informative literary inut such as might raise the accuracy of their perceptions regarding their health.

Studies by World Youth (2019) reveal that young people benefit from reading about their health.

So basically, you need to go read more man!

*There is no single style that can be used in all academic writing. Each discipline has developed its own particular styles, e.g. third person for literature review and first person for reflective writing.

Use formal English

- Academic language is more formal than the language used in everyday conversations, emails, social media or magazines
- It shouldn't sound 'chatty'
- It also avoids slang and colloquialisms e.g 'the argument was a bit over the top.'
- Copy the style of academic papers to adapt to this language



Aim for clarity

- Write so that your reader can easily follow what you are trying to say; take your reader by the hand and guide him/her
- Do not use long words and technical jargon simply in order to sound impressive
- Check whether your sentences are so long and complicated that they are hard to follow
- Avoid antiquated language, convoluted sentences or mannerisms – they can use up your word limit and obscure your argument

Please refer to the marking criteria – Assessment Specification, e.g. coherence; written accuracy; developing an argument.



Learn how to you specialist terminology

- If you are not familiar with specialist terms, look for explanations of these in introductory textbooks or glossaries
- Pay attention to how such terms are introduced in books and articles – note the different forms used, such as noun and verb forms, and past tenses
- Do not litter your writing with terms that you yourself do not understand – it is better to write them in your own words than to sound as though you do not understand what you are saying

Avoid abbreviations and contractions

For assignments, write words out in full:

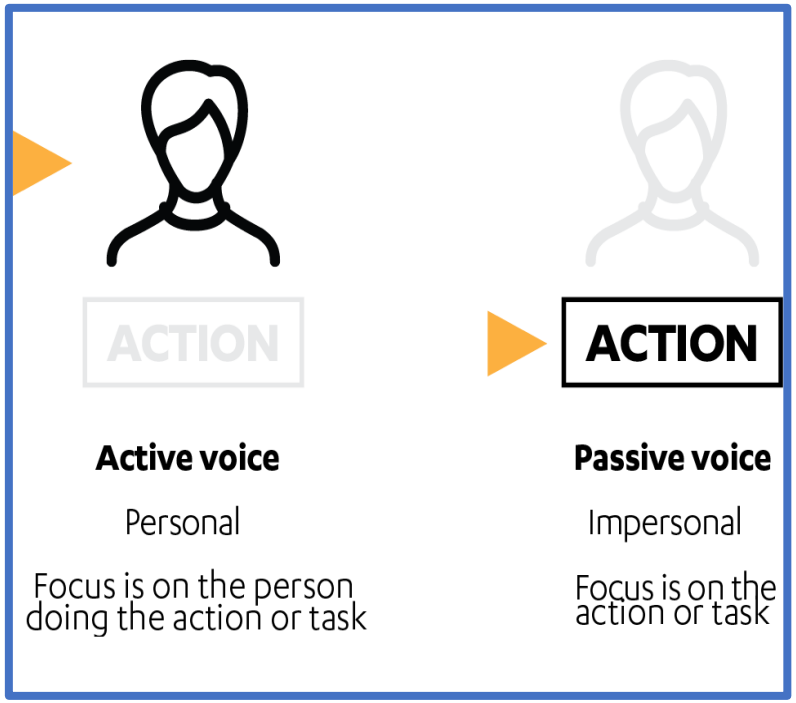
- ‘dept.’ as ‘department’
- ‘e.g.’ as ‘for example’
- ‘didn’t’ as ‘did not’
- ‘they’re’ as ‘they are’
- ‘isn’t’ as ‘is not’



Keep your language impersonal and passive

Most courses prefer you to avoid personal pronouns such as ‘I/we’ and ‘you’. Instead sentences begin in impersonal ways such as:

- It can be seen that…
- There are a number of…
- It has been found that…
- It can be argued that…



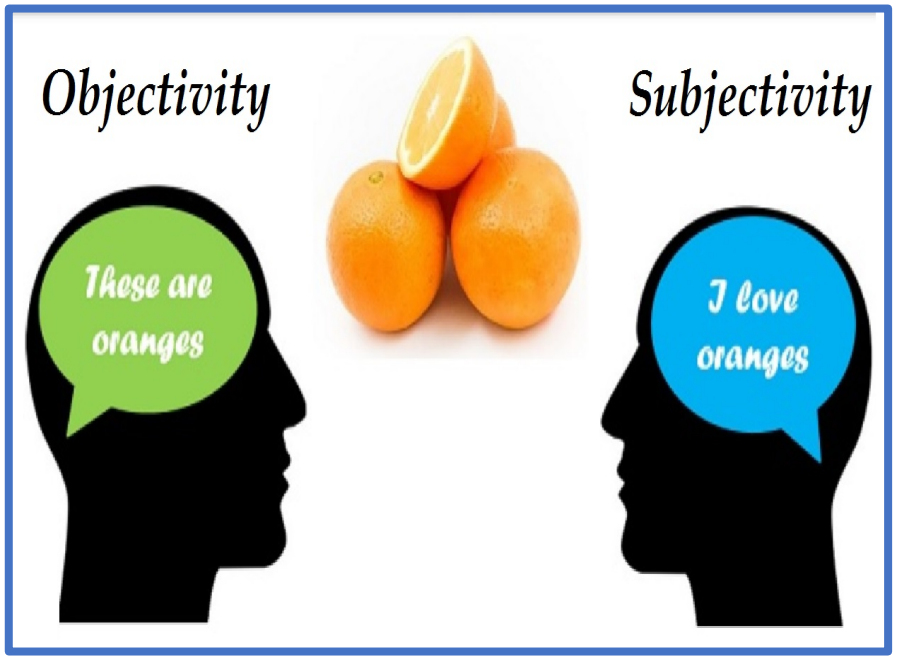
This is also an example of hedging – not committing to a single position

However, please note that the use of the 1st person pronoun ‘I’ is appropriate in reflective writing.

Be impersonal

- It is important that your personal involvement with the topic does not overshadow what you are saying
- The use of the passive voice helps to maintain an element of objectivity
- ‘We distributed worksheets to the pupils.’ (active)
- ‘Worksheets were distributed to the pupils’ (passive)





Be tentative



Academic writing generally sounds cautious. Writers indicate that they are aware that nothing is completely certain as further research could challenge what is currently understood. The use words that appear to express this lack of certainty, such as:

- Appears to; seems to; tends to; may; might; seemingly.

They use phrases such as:

- In some cases, this…
- The evidence suggests that…

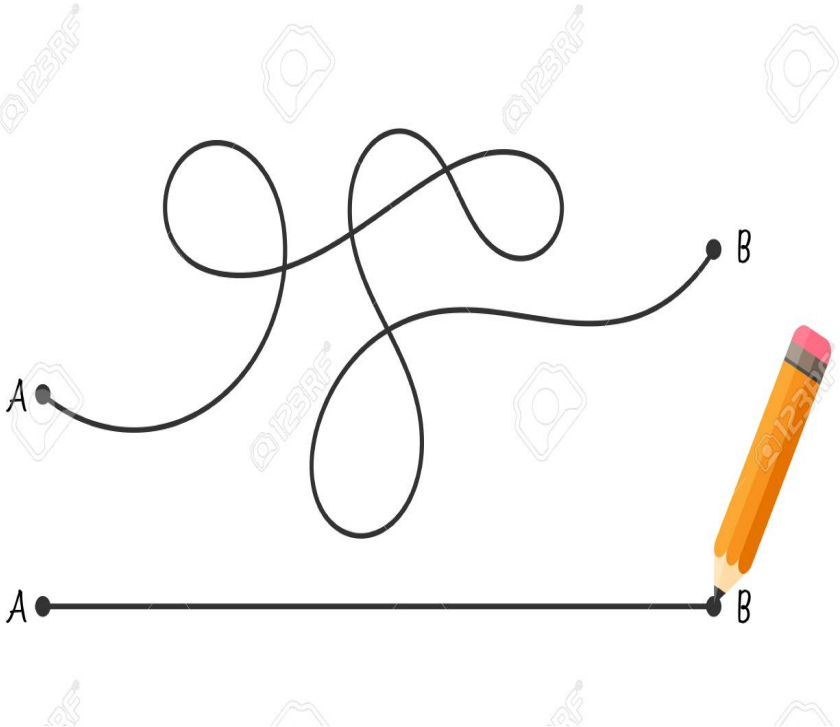
Be objective



- Academic writing avoids subjective judgements so also avoids words such as ‘nice’, ‘wonderful’, ‘worthwhile’, ‘usual’, ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ if used in a potentially subjective or culturally specific way – the reader’s understanding of these words may be different to your own
- Accept that there is no truth
- Avoid sweeping generalisations
- Keep questioning yourself whether your work could be interpreted as biased

Be concise

- Edit out unnecessary words and phrases
- Go straight to the point i.e. what do you want to say?
- Make your point clearly



Be precise

Example of a vague sentence:

Some people did not like the idea at the time and made the politicians stop it but then he attacked him publicly.

TASK:
Why do you think this sentence is vague?
How could you adapt it to make it more precise?



Why is it vague?

- ‘some people’ – who exactly?
- ‘the idea’ – which idea?
- ‘at the time’ – when? date?
- ‘the politicians’ – all politicians? or a certain group? or a political party?
- ‘made the politicians’ – how did they ‘make’ them
- ‘stop it’ – stop what? how was it stopped?
- ‘people did not like the idea’ – why not?
- ‘he’ and ‘him’ – who exactly?

Be confident

This assignment tries to analyse/ hopes to demonstrate/ attempts to argue…

When you are doing this you are implying that you may not be able to do what you have set out to do

You are inviting the reader to pass judgement on the success or otherwise of your attempt

It is better to state confidently that ‘This assignment will critically analyse competing perspective on…’



Avoid apologies

Don’t apologise to the reasons for any weaknesses you think there might be in your work, such as you found the subject difficult or had not time to write a conclusion.

Write with confidence, even if you don’t feel it.





Addressing the reader

Avoid asking readers questions and telling them what to think or do. Don't use rhetorical questions.



Quotations

- Avoid over reliance on quotations
- Do not copy large chunks of text; either use them as appropriate in quotation form or paraphrase
- Don’t overuse quotations – they should be used in support of your argument not instead of your writing



Avoid misplaced conjunctions

Except in creative writing, the following words are not used at the start of sentences:

- or
- and
- but
- yet



Numbers

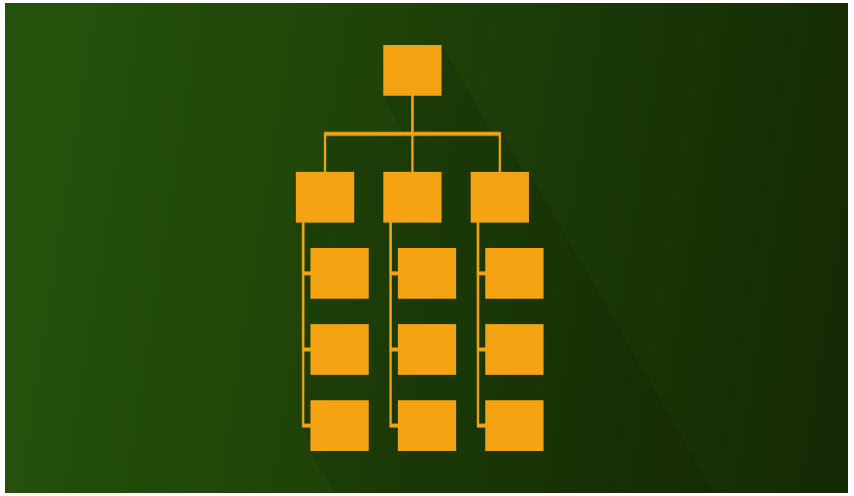
- Numbers below a hundred are usually written in full in non-scientific writing:
- Thirty one percent
- Nineteen numbers
- However, figures are retained in statistical and scientific work:
- 31 per cent
- 7.3 newtons
- O.54 mg



Structured

- Academic writing should be in a logical order
- The introduction should preview the work, the conclusion summarise it
- Paragraphs should be used to organise ideas/paragraphs
- Time is needed to plan the writing so that you can work out the structure in advance of writing

Structured



Introduction (10%)

- engage the reader by introducing your topic
- identify the issues you are about to explore
- preview how you plan to answer the question

Main text (80%)

- divided into paragraph: one paragraph = one argument
- Structure set out by introduction and the approach to the question
- must cover everything you said you would cover in the introduction

Conclusion (10%)

- summarise your argument and the main themes
- Do not present new arguments

**Please see Module Assignment Specification, e.g. suggested structure

Paragraphs

Paragraphs give your writing structure:

- They cover one main idea
- They are several sentences long
- They are formatted consistently
- They have an internal structure

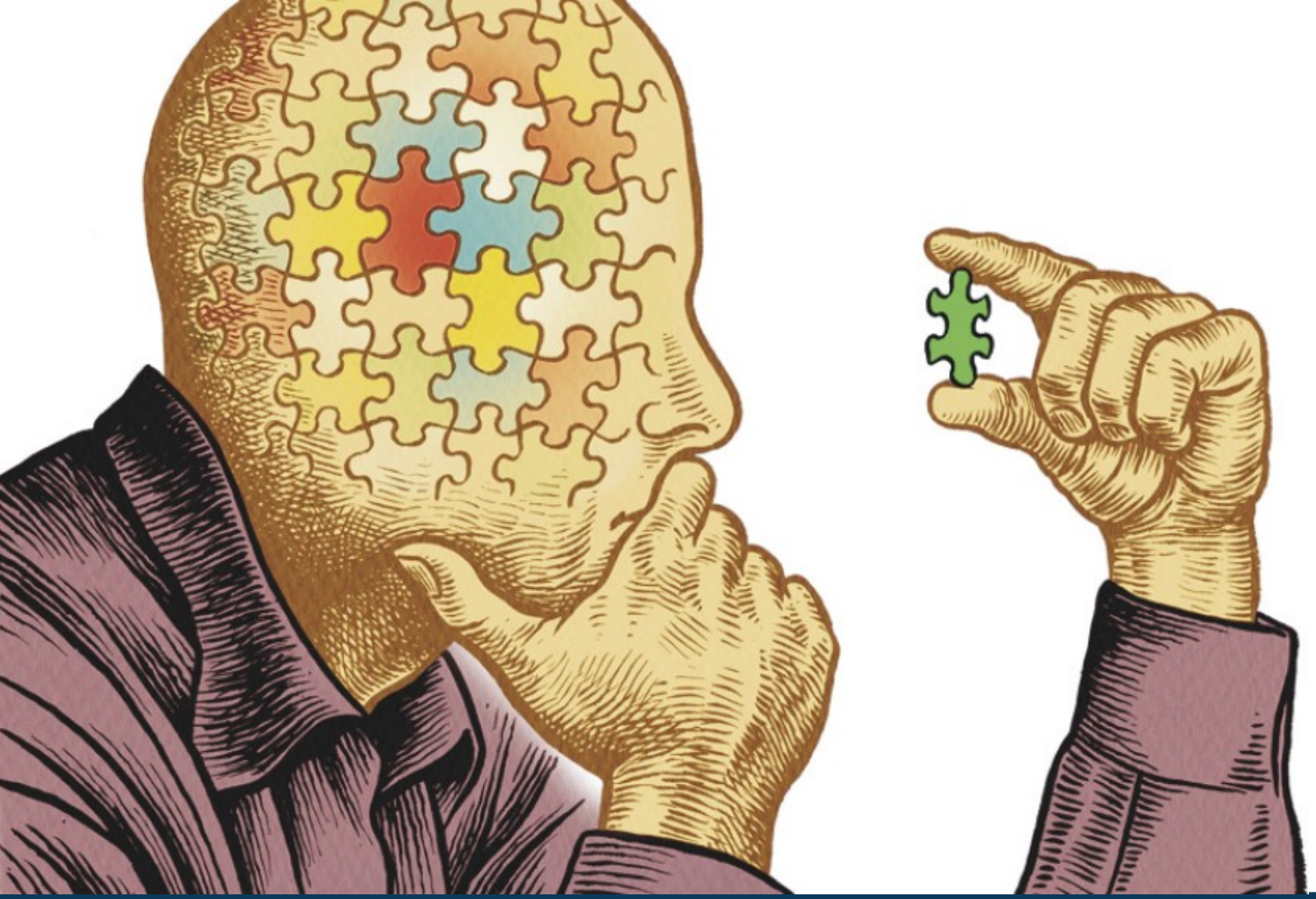

The Topic sentence
States the main idea – a general statement
Explanation or Definition (optional)
Clarifies any difficult or unclear terms in the Topic sentence
Alternatively: introduces the evidence
Supporting statements
Evidence
Supports or develops the main idea with facts, examples, experiments, studies, arguments, quotes etc.
Comment
• Explains what the evidence means, & how it relates to your point.
• Supports or develops the evidence with analysis or further info e.g. opposing or contrasting points to broaden or develop the discussion
• If appropriate, mention other evidence (examples/studies/ experiments/interpretations) to widen the discussion
Concluding sentence
• States the implications or consequences of the paragraph
• Shows the development of the argument
• Links back to the Topic sentence (may use same or similar key words from the Topic sentence)
• Links forwards to the main idea of the next paragraph

Signposted

- Differences between your arguments and examples given
- Links between sentences to do with the same point
- Links between paragraphs in the same section of the essay
- How sections lead to a conclusion or answer



Be critical



Critical versus descriptive writing



<u>Descriptions</u>: they report information about something, but they don't perform any kind of reasoning - and nor do they pass judgement on or analyse the information they contain.

Tom Chatfield, *Critical Thinking*

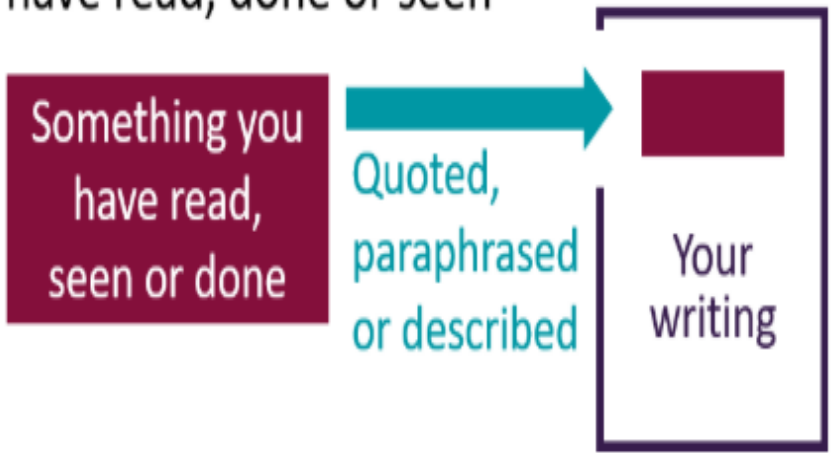
Many students are told that their writing is too descriptive and not critical enough. But what does this actually mean? The next few slides describe both sorts of writing so that you can see the difference and gives examples of how to make your writing less descriptive and more critical.

You should avoid being solely descriptive.

Descriptive writing

This is an essential element of academic writing but it is used to **set the background** and to **provide evidence** rather than to develop argument. When writing descriptively you are **informing** your reader of things that they need to know to understand and follow your argument but you are **not transforming** that information in any way. This is usually writing about things you have read, done (often as part of **reflective writing**) or observed.

Descriptive writing = informing of what you have read, done or seen



Critical writing

When writing critically, you are **developing a reasoned argument** and participating in academic debate. Essentially you are **persuading** your reader of your position on the topic at hand. This is about taking the information you have described and **using it** in some way. This could be writing things like:

- why it is relevant to your argument,
- how it relates to other literature,
- how it relates to the focus of your assignment
- how a theory can be put into practice,
- why it is significant,
- why you are not persuaded by it,
- how it leads you to reach your conclusion.

Critical writing = using something you have read, done or seen to **persuade** the reader of your position

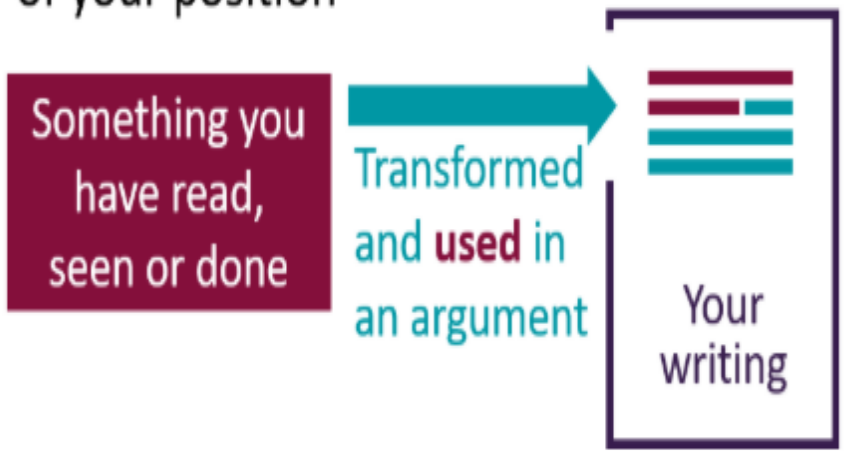


Table comparing functions of descriptive and critical writing

The table below gives more examples of the difference between descriptive and critical writing

Adapted from Cottrell 2008:286

Descriptive writing	Critical writing
States what happened	Identifies the significance of what happened
States what something is like	Evaluates the strengths and weakness of something
Gives the story so far	Analyses how the story so far impacts on the current state
Says how to do something	Analyses why things are done a certain way
Explains what a theory says	Shows why a theory is relevant. Identifies the strengths and weaknesses of a theory in practice.
Explains how something works	Indicates why something will work (best)
Notes the method used	Identifies whether a method was suitable or appropriate
Says when something occured	Identifies why the timing is of importance
Identifies the different components of something	Weighs up the importance of component parts
States options	Gives reasons for selecting each option
Lists details	Evaluates the relative significance of details
Lists in any order	Structures information in order of importance
States links between items	Shows the relevance of links between pieces of information
Gives evidence	Argues a case according to the evidence
Provides information for comparison	Makes a reasoned judgement on provided information
Gives information	Draws conclusions

Critical thinking when writing

- Students' writing is often weakened because their THINKING IS NOT CLEAR before they START to write the FINAL draft

- 6 Top Tips - CRITICAL ANALYSIS





1. Aim for CLARITY

- Be CLEAR about your POSITION on the issue, including hypotheses and conclusions.

2a. Be clear about your conclusions

- It is not unusual for students to hand in work which shows, although they have done the necessary reading and even given their work considerable thought, they are NOT SURE of their conclusions.
- The WHOLE of the piece of writing should lead to its conclusions: if these are vague, understand or poorly formulated, ALL of the writing loses its focus.



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2b.Be clear about your conclusions

- As soon as you are given an assignment, write out your initial position on the issue and what you think your conclusion will be: what is it that you are trying to prove? Put this where you can see it.

- Whenever you find something that requires or fine-tune your conclusion, write out a new one. It may be paradoxical (or back to front), but your writing will be clearer if you write your conclusion first. If you are testing a hypothesis, keep clear records of evidence that either supports or does not support that hypothesis.

3. Construct a clear line of reasoning

- Students' writing is often weakened because their THINKING IS NOT CLEAR before they START to write the FINAL draft.
- Time spent in such CRITICAL ANALYSIS is equivalent to 'elaborating the problem', i.e. one way in which those who achieved good marks differed from those with poor marks.


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4. Use evidence to support your reasoning

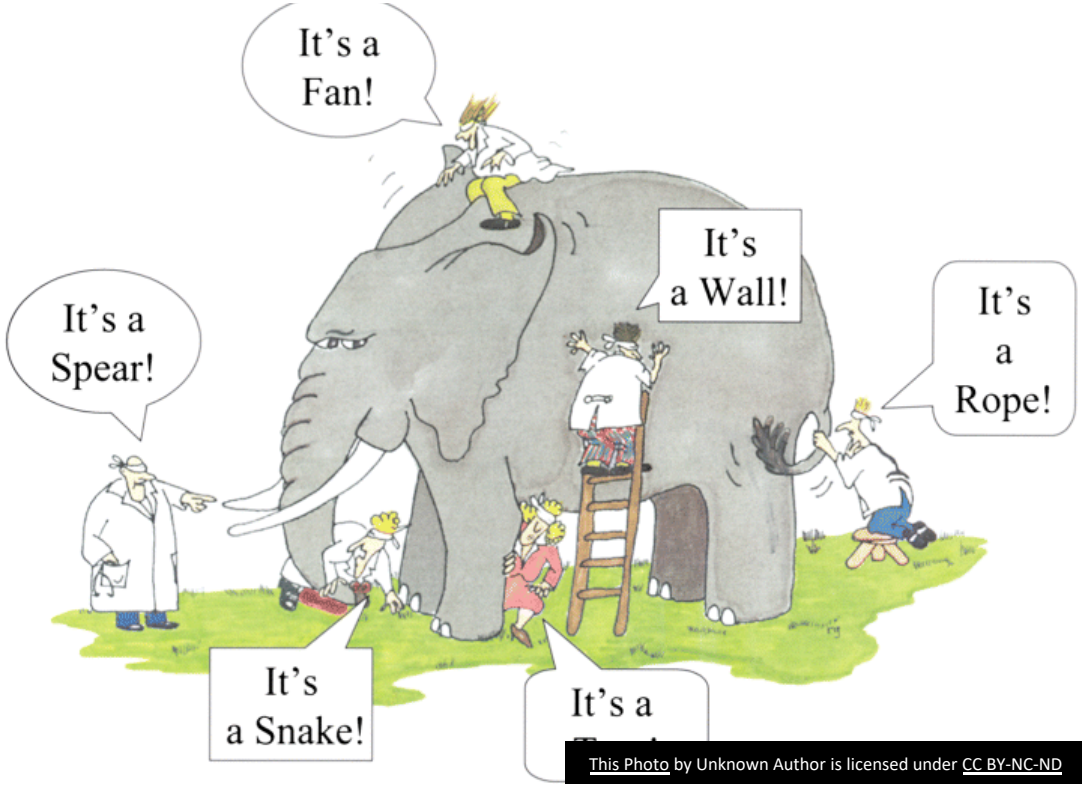
- A large part of your assignment will consist of evaluating and presenting the best evidence to support your case.



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5. Take multiple perspectives

- The best answers identify how and why various expert agree or disagree on an issue, and demonstrate how the evidence supports, or does not support, their positions.
- This means considering strengths and weaknesses, and grey areas.
- The answer is seldom a straightforward one of right or wrong. Usually there are many contradictory pieces of evidence to weigh up and evaluate against each other.
- Your final position or conclusions may be a synthesis of these.



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6. Analyse your own work critically

- Your tutors will take a critical reading approach when marking your work.
- Before submitting your assignment, analyse it critically as you would with materials you read.
- Be a fierce critic of your own work so that you can spot weaknesses and address them, and ensure that you are clear about the strengths of your own argument.

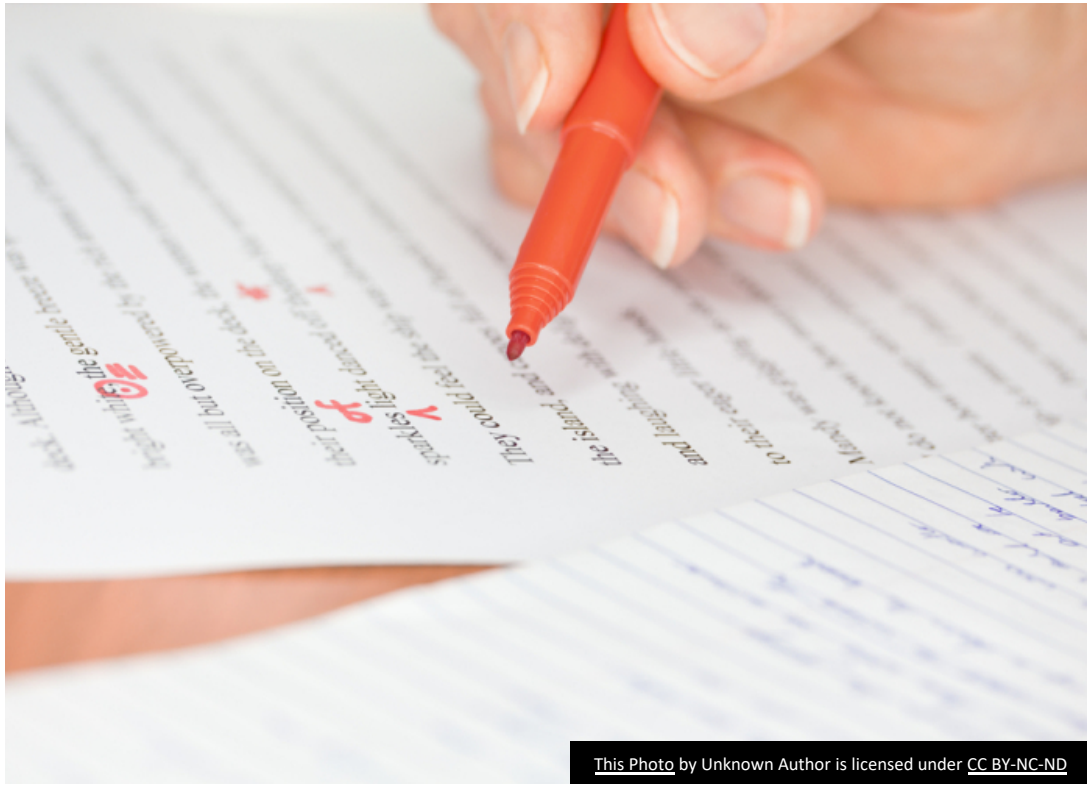


Descriptive writing: an example

- My name is John. I live at 33 Acacia Drive. I have five sisters and brothers. I am good at team games, and enjoy football, cricket and baseball. Teams were encouraged by both my parents. All of my family took part in sport. Our teachers at Brightful School was interested in sports sciences. We were encouraged to drink lots of water to improve our performance. Our team always did well, so it seems to have worked. I also like to go running. I live in the beautiful Welsh borders, so it is a pleasure to take a healthy run each day.

Why?

- *Almost all of this passage consists of statements and descriptions. There is an evaluative comment ('our team always did well') and this is linked to possible reasons (drinking lots of water).*
- *However, this link is **not analysed** in depth. The passage is overall is descriptive.*



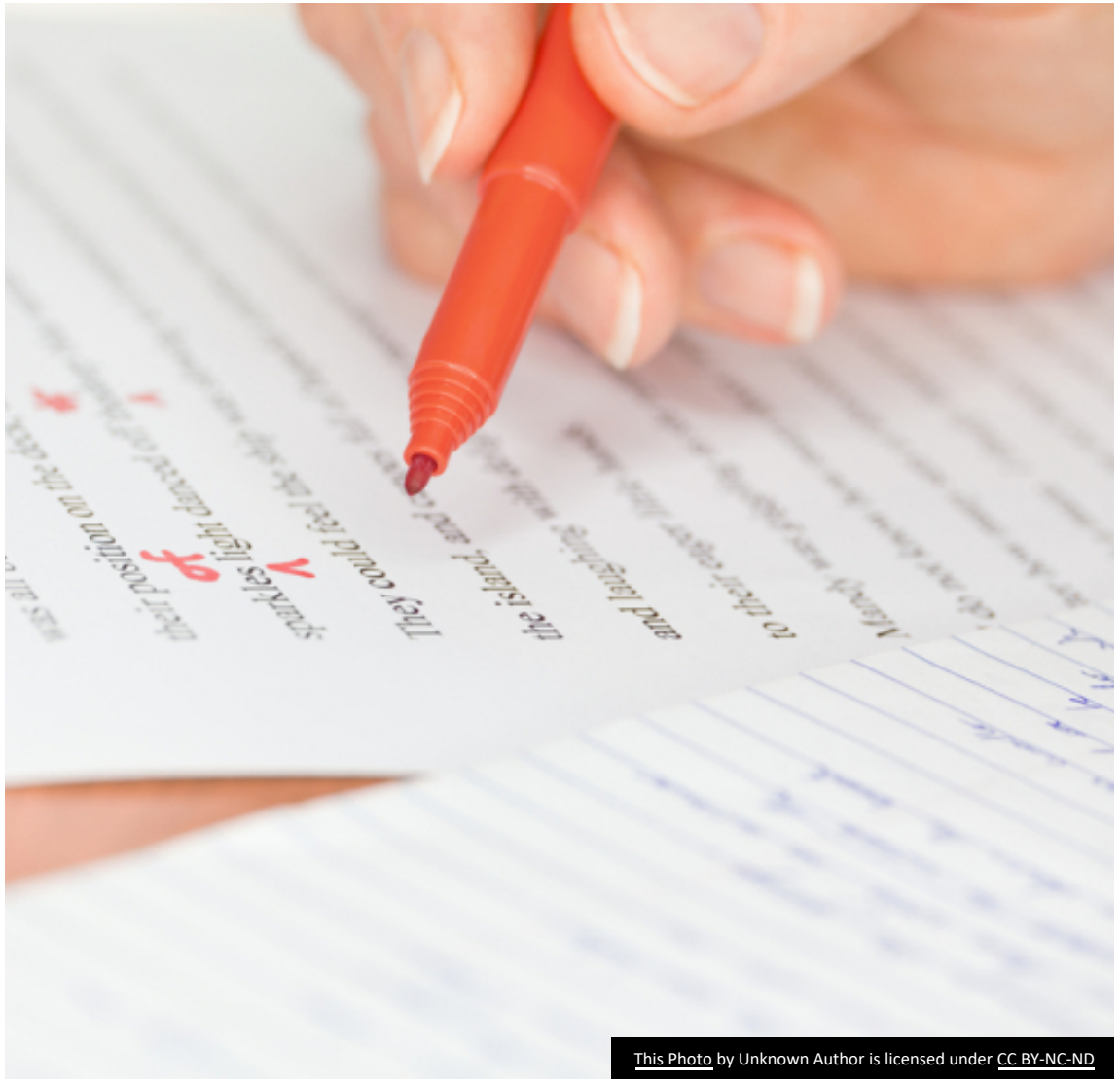
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Critical analytical writing: an example

- At Brightful School, teachers took a scientific approach to school sports over a ten-year period. In particular, pupils were encouraged to monitor their intake of liquids. All pupils were required to drink a minimum of eight glasses of tap water a day. The school did consistently well in sports competitions over this period, and the teachers claimed that this was proof of importance of liquid intake to good performance. However, it is not clear that the school's sport performance can be attributed to water intake. Brightful School's claims were investigated by an independent researcher, Martinez (2013). Martinez argued that although Brightful's performance was good, its performance in competitions was consistent with what would be expected of a school of its size. In addition, interviews with pupils showed that most had not followed the school regulations in drinking water a day. Most pupils stated that they drank less that one glass of tap water a day. Although other research does suggest that water intake benefits performance (Fredo, 2010; Mitsuki, 2020), Brightful School's claims about the benefits of tap water in its sports success have not been proved.

Why?

- This passage does contain descriptive writing which gives background detail, such as the first four sentences. Although the passage contains many statements of fact, such as ‘most pupils stated that they drank less than one glass of tap water a day’, these statements are ordered in such a way that they build up the argument. They are also supported by sentences that introduce the argument, such as ‘However, it is not clear that the school’s sport performance, can be attributed to water intake.’


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Crticial thinking when writing

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Passage 1

- In the West, all life forms are divided into one or two categories: plant or animal. Animals move and take in food. Plants are rooted into the earth in some way and lack locomotion. They photosynthesise their food. Zoologist study animals, and botanists study plants. Bacteria are classified as plants because many kinds of bacteria photosynthesise their food. However, they also have locomotion. Recent research has shown that there is an enormous variety of bacteria. Some are able to survive at extreme temperatures and in the absence of oxygen. Most plants cannot usually survive in those conditions. Therefore, even though bacteria photosynthesise, they are not now regarded as plants.

Passage 1

- This is mainly descriptive writing. The writer describes the way that the living world was divided between animals and plants, and gives information about recent research. The passage consists mostly of statements. The statements are not linked and ordered in such a way that they build up clearly towards the conclusion. There is little weighing od the evidence in the build-up to the conclusion. The significance of the conclusion itself is not very clear.

Passage 5

- Bowlby's Attachment Theory argues that child development is affected by the closeness of the bond between mother and child. Bowlby claimed that even short spells away from the mother during infancy could have a profound effect upon a person later in life. This became known as 'maternal deprivation theory'. According to this theory, the relationship with the mother during an early 'critical period' gives the developing child an 'internal working model'. This model then forms the foundation of all future relationships.

Editing

- Leave some time in between writing and editing
- Put yourself in the position of the reader:

 - Has everything been defined?

 - Can the reader follow your thinking?

- Can you summarise the key point of each paragraph and why it is relevant to your essay title?
- Read your essay aloud and let it be read by your peers



Proof reading

What are you looking for?

- Spelling
- Grammar
- Missing words
- Spacing
- Punctuation
- Words used inappropriately or out of context

Print your assignment off to proof read it.
Let others read over it.



Go for it and try your best!



