

Critical Writing in Psychology

Descriptive versus Critical writing

Descriptive writing

- Being descriptive shows what you know about a topic and provides the evidence to support your arguments.
- It uses simpler processes like **remembering, understanding and applying**.
- You might summarise previous research, explain concepts or describe processes.

Critical writing

- Being critical pulls evidence together to build your arguments; what does it all mean together?
- It uses more complex processes: **analysing, evaluating and creating**.
- You might make comparisons, consider reasons and implications, justify choices or consider strengths and weaknesses.

Critical writing needs Critical Reading

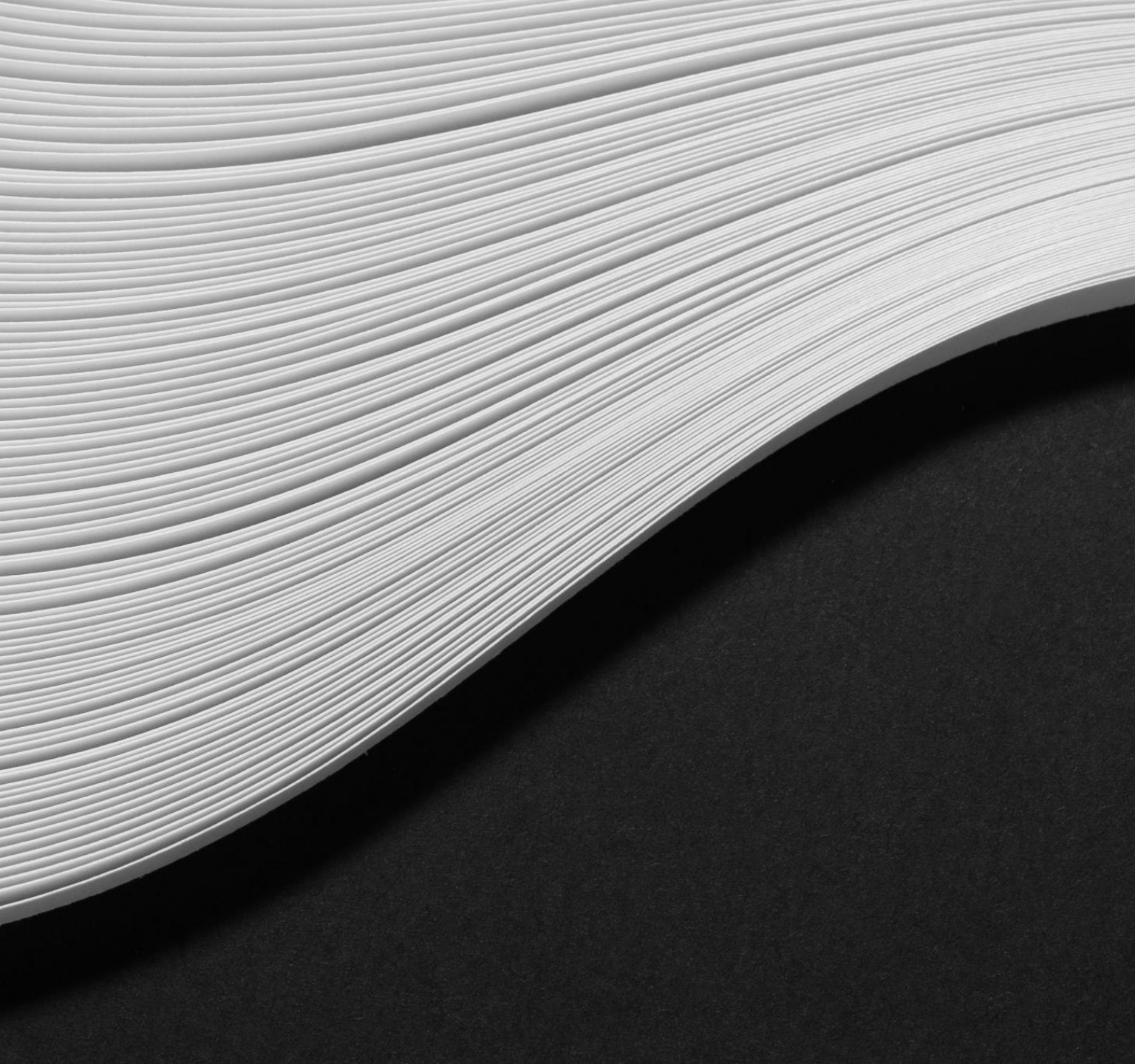
- Don't just read everything you find! Think about:
 - What is your purpose for reading this text?
 - Is the source appropriate for your work?
 - Is the content relevant to your work?
 - What evidence can you use from this source?
 - This will help you select appropriate and relevant evidence for your writing.
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What is Critical Reading?

- Knowing your purpose - Why are you reading? What do you want to get out of a source? Where does it fit into your assignment process?
 - Focusing on the things you need - Only read things that are relevant and suitable for your needs.
 - Choosing appropriate reading strategies - The way you read depends on why you're reading.
 - Thinking critically about what you read - What does it all mean?
 - You've read loads of sources and made notes, but what are you going to do with what you've found out?
 - In critical reading, you don't just collect information, you also think critically about the information to help you build your own arguments:
 - What are the strengths and weaknesses of a study or argument?
 - What are the reasons for doing something, or its implications?
 - How does the information connect together?
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How to read critically

- Identify a purpose for reading
 - The first step in critical reading is to identify your purpose for reading: Why are you reading today, and what do you want to find out?
 - Identify suitable and relevant sources
 - One of the most important aspects of critical reading is deciding whether a source is suitable and relevant to your needs - you don't want to waste your time reading irrelevant sources!
 - A source might be suitable for one purpose, but not another. In general, there are three key questions to ask:
 - Is it relevant?
 - Is it recent?
 - Is it academic?
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Effective Reading Strategies

Skimming - Reading quickly to get an idea of the general meaning of a text.

Scanning - Looking for specific information and ignoring the rest of the text.

Close reading - Reading carefully to understand the details of a text.

Section-hopping - Choosing specific sections of a paper to focus on.



Thinking critically about what you've read

Critical reading isn't just collecting information - it's also thinking critically about what you find.

What does it all mean?

To figure that out, ask questions about what you read:

what, why, when, who, how, why?

so what, what if?

can/is/does? etc.

Asking critical questions about a text

- Describe - Understanding the source and its wider context.
 - Analyse - Exploring reasons, relationships and possible alternatives.
 - Evaluate - Considering implications, solutions, conclusions and recommendations.
 - Synthesise - Putting it all together - making connections to other ideas and forming your arguments.
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Language to use for critique

When producing academic writing, it is almost always necessary to show criticality. In plain English this means using your writing to show that you have thought in a critical way.

- Language choices for introducing problems
- Language choices for evaluating a particular paper
- Language choices for synthesising ideas from multiple sources
- Language choices for showing the strengths and weaknesses of particular ideas

Language choices for introducing problems

- A principal weakness is...
- Theory A is not applicable in this scenario because...
- It is difficult to support Framework B due to... (lack of literature?)
- In considering the efficacy of... (an equation, a theory, a practice)
- This approach is relatively new, thus there is a lack of evidence to support it...
- Empirical studies do not support the theory when it is put into practice...
- Many writers have criticised the ideas of X, because...
- A key question to be asked of idea X is...
- This is a complex area, specifically...
- A consensus is that.... however... (perhaps challenge using more recent research?)

Language choices for evaluating a particular paper

- The conclusions of this paper are supported by... (other papers perhaps?)
 - This paper is methodologically sound, particularly...
 - This paper builds upon the work of X and thus continues to develop...
 - The results of this paper are not generally accepted because...
 - Smith's conclusions are generally accepted as they agree with...
 - Smith's conclusions are challenged due to the fact they don't include/adhere to...
 - The findings of this paper should be treated with caution... (due to the methodological approach, being in disagreement with other papers...)
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Language choices for synthesising ideas from multiple sources

- There is a consensus in the literature that theory A works...
 - Over time Framework A has become more applicable due to greater levels of empirical support...
 - Theorists A, B and C all agree that...
 - Theory A can be applied to scenario B using the method of Smith...
 - A comprehensive theory of X is found by combining...
 - A convincing explanation can be found by considering the ideas of...
 - A minor, but important consideration when applying X to Y is...
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Language choices for showing the strengths and weaknesses of particular ideas

- Sources strongly support... (a particular viewpoint perhaps?)
- Sources offer limited support for... (a particular theory perhaps?)
- A key limitation of...
- On balance, when considering the evidence...
- When assumption A is in place, it is possible that...
- In scenario A the evidence for theory B being usable is strong, but is much weaker in scenario, specifically...
- A problem with idea B is that it fails to take into account... (could be studies, other ideas, findings...)
- In considering the efficacy of theory A, it is important to pay attention to...