Critical analysis

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Study Skills
Different perspectives on learning

- Student: “I want you, the expert, to give me the answers to the questions – I want to know the right answer.”

- Lecturers: “I want you to become critical thinkers, which means I want you to challenge experts’ answers and pursue your own analysis.”
Critical thinking in everyday life
Why should I analyse?

• Critical thinking is a key part of university study – using it will lead to higher marks!

• Look at marking grids / grade descriptors

• Many students receive comments such as “not analytical enough” or “too descriptive” on assignments.

• At university you are expected to be critical of your sources, using evidence that has been well researched rather than just your own opinion.
How do you analyse?

• The word ‘critical’ can sound unpleasant, and there’s a danger that it can be misinterpreted as having to be negative or unkind.

• Critical analysis can be perceived as ‘difficult’, and anxiety about this can stop students from tackling the critical elements in their assignments.
Describe and Analyse
You need some description…

There are a number of important things that description can achieve in academic writing. For example:

– the setting of the research (or description of the event in reflective writing)
– a general description of a study
– a definition of a theory or idea
– an account of the biographical details of a key figure in the discipline
– a brief summary of the history leading up to an event, piece of research or decision

…but not too much!
Selecting sources critically

• Read through the newspaper article.

• Would you use it as a source for an assignment about youth crime?

• Why / why not?
Critical Reading

• An essential part of reading for academic purposes is responding to what you read – don't just 'take it as read'.

• You need to judge the validity of the information or views presented.

• Arguments may be based on inaccurate, unreliable or obsolete evidence, and may ignore any evidence with an alternative view.
What is critical reading?

The most characteristic features of critical reading are that you will:

1. Examine the evidence or arguments presented
2. Look for any influences on the evidence or arguments
3. Look at the limitations of study design or focus
4. Examine the interpretations made
5. Decide to what extent you are prepared to accept arguments, opinions, or conclusions
Reading critically

Read ‘actively’:

- Think about **who wrote this**; why they wrote it; what the historical/cultural context to them writing it is.

- **Annotate**: don’t just highlight information, but make notes on what you think about it. If you think it is worth highlighting, why?

- **Summarise**: try and sum up overall arguments and condense the information for yourself
Reading critically cont.

- **Compare** the ideas with other texts. How do they differ/agree? Do you agree? Why?

- **Question your own reaction**: do you agree or disagree with the texts? Why is this? Can you support your reaction with any evidence or argument?

- You will notice both **positive** and **negative** things about the sources you are reading. Being critical is not just about the negatives!
The C.R.A.P. Test

• A way of deciding whether an article is worth reading to begin with or forewarning yourself of bias.

• **Currency**: How recent?
• **Reliability**: Referenced? Clear, fair methodology?
• **Authority**: Who wrote this? Where are they employed? Where is it published?
• **Purpose/Point of view**: Is this trying to persuade you? Might the author be biased? Do they have a vested interest?
Don’t assume…

…that something is good / true just because it is published.

But equally, don’t assume it is bad if you have been asked to analyse or critique it.

Look at the evidence and decide!
Results can be misleading

Is the author using the results inaccurately, e.g. to prove their theory?

Do they explain them clearly and interpret them correctly?

Are they being influenced by a certain viewpoint or sponsor?
Misleading graphs

Where-inspiration-happens.blogspot.co.uk
What is this graph trying to make you believe? Why?
Showing critical analysis in your work

• If you’ve been reading your sources critically, you need to show this in your writing
Quoting and paraphrasing

• Don’t string lots of quotes together – this is not evidence!
• Show you have understood authors’ arguments by paraphrasing
• Use quotations sparingly and always explain them
Hedging...

...creates distance between the writer and the opinion, showing that the writer knows there may be people who have other opinions.

“It is likely/probable/possible that students will become literate in new ways with advances in technology.”
Phrasebank

http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/index.htm

However
Therefore
Furthermore
Evaluating 3 statements

Activity 2

Based on an activity created by Marianne Cronin (1998), see www.ecu.edu.au
An example of a ‘critical’ paragraph

You need to discuss possible treatment options for an elderly patient called Mavis, who has severe eczema
Studies into the effects of ambiprocin have shown that it helps the vast majority of patients to control the symptoms of their eczema.
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Showing critical analysis in your work

• Show your tutor that you have looked for evidence to back up your points
• Show that you have looked at opposing arguments and weighed them up
• Apply your analysis, e.g. therefore this could mean that…
The PEA paragraph

• Point

• Evidence

• Analysis

• You need to plan your work in order to show this in your writing!
For example...choosing a suitable treatment for a patient

- Why have you chosen this treatment?
- What evidence is there that this is a good choice?
- What other treatments could you have chosen, and why didn’t you?
- Do any authors suggest this wouldn’t be a good choice and why?
- What might your decision mean for your patient? (or for you, or for the hospital...?)
Sometimes connecting words make all the difference:

- Reinforcement e.g. Desktop computers are cheaper and more reliable than laptops; *furthermore*, they are more flexible, because…

- Result / consequence e.g. Prices fell by more than 20% last year. *As a result*, sales increased by 15%

- Generalising e.g. On the whole, his speech was well received, *despite* some complaints from new members
Evidence

For every statement or argument you make, check that you have:

1. an example of evidence, i.e. a reference to your reading.

2. some analysis, interpretation or criticism. Consider what YOU think of the statement or argument. Do you agree or disagree? What makes you agree or disagree – something you’ve read? Something from your own experience? A counter-argument?

Remember: You can get your academic opinion across without using “I”
Evidence

Technical and scientific evidence may include: measurements, timing, equipment, control of extraneous factors, and careful following of standard procedures.

At the other end of the spectrum is research where there is scope for personal interpretation, for example: analysis of individuals’ experiences of healthcare; the translation of a text from a foreign language; the identification and analysis of themes in a novel. In these cases the evidence may include quotes from interviews, extracts of text.

EXPLAIN HOW THE EVIDENCE RELATES TO THE ARGUMENT YOU ARE MAKING
Task

Read the excerpts which are using evidence.

Which seems more critical? Why?
In summary…

• Approach your reading in a critical manner
• Always look beneath the surface…has the author offered real proof, made assumptions, given biased results etc?
• Make sure your writing shows critical and analytical skills – evidence, comparisons, ‘why’, relationship to other work in the subject area etc…
Any questions?

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