CRITICAL WRITING

Many assignments require both description and analysis. Your assignment questions will include words that indicate you need to put your 'critical thinking hat' on. Look for words such as analyse, compare, contrast, critique, discuss, describe, evaluate and examine.

Most academic texts include both descriptive and analytical writing. The first step in developing your critical thinking is to recognise which sections of text are descriptive and which are analytical. The following table highlights these differences.

Descriptive Writing	Critical / Analytical Writing
• states what happened	• identifies the significance of what happened
• states what something is like	• evaluates the strengths and weaknesses
• gives information	• weighs one piece of information against another and draws conclusions
• explains what a theory says	• shows why a theory is suitable or relevant
• notes the skills used	• identifies whether the skills used are appropriate or suitable
• states the different components	• weighs up the importance of component parts
• states options	• gives reasons for selecting each option
• lists information	• structures information in order of importance
• states links between information	• shows the relevance of links between pieces of information

Self-assessment guide

How will you know whether you are writing critically rather than descriptively? During the planning and writing stage of your assignment, you could check your thinking against the table on the previous page. You could also consider the questions below.

Where will I/Where have I:

- ☐ defined the problem?
- ☐ defined the task?
- ☐ identified and refined the thesis?
- ☐ analysed the concepts and arguments?
- ☐ synthesised ideas and evidence from a variety of sources?
- ☐ constructed consistent and well-supported arguments?
- ☐ discussed the issue in a balanced way?
- ☐ evaluated the ideas and arguments of others?

Using evaluative language

The style of language used to discuss sources is often evaluative and demonstrates your perspectives of the literature. Evaluative language can be positive/endorsing or negative/less endorsing.

Examples of words with positive evaluative meaning include *important, significant, necessary, crucial* and *effective*.

You might also use positive/endorsing phrases such as *There is strong evidence that…; Johnson's (2014) study demonstrated…. ; This concept is central to…; This study is consistent with….*

Examples of words with negative evaluative meaning include *inconclusive, questionable, insignificant, unclear* and *weak*.

Examples of negative/dis-endorsing phrases include *There is little evidence in support of…; Johnson (2014) claims that…, yet… This argument does not take into account… ; It is unclear whether….*

Other types of evaluative language include hedges boosters and attitude markers.

Hedges can be used to withhold your full commitment to a statement. Examples of hedges include *may, might, possibly, likely, seemed to*, and *appeared to*.

Boosters reveal your certainty about a statement. Examples of boosters include *clearly*, *definitely*, and *without doubt*.

Attitude markers reveal your attitude towards a statement. Examples include *interestingly, surprisingly, and unfortunately.*

Critical thinking when writing

Critical writing requires critical thinking before and during the writing process. Thinking informs the writing, and the writing informs the thinking in an ongoing dance between the two activities. This dance involves synthesising what the experts say - the more you synthesise the information, the more likely you are to arrive at an evidence-based view of the subject matter. In other words, as you rigorously process the information, you are more able to express an informed view.

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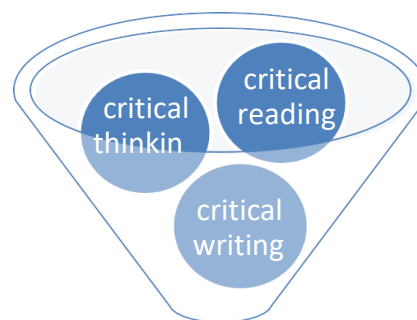
Your assignment

Tip

Remember that evidence is central to establishing a critical line of thinking and writing about the subject. Review the course readings as a starting point and record the evidence you will work with.