

Reading and Writing Critically

Reading and writing is a core part of university study. You can be sure that each author whose work you read is attempting to introduce a new perspective, theory or idea, or argue that their position on an issue is of value. Your job is to make a judgement on the soundness of such arguments. To do this, you need to develop your own powers of analysis, and your ability to write about them.

What is critical thinking?

We say someone demonstrates critical thinking when they are able to evaluate an issue objectively to form a judgement. This includes the capacity to determine the strengths and weaknesses of an argument by:

- asking questions about what might be missing, and what assumptions the author is making
- setting aside one's own biases to consider the evidence
- exploring all sides of an argument or position
- not simply accepting all conclusions, i.e. not assuming that an argument or position is 'true'

Critically examining ideas and arguments

At university, you are required to use arguments from other authors to back up your judgements, unless you are advised otherwise. As you read, examine the text by considering the following questions:

- What is the purpose of the writing?
- What is the writer's perspective?
- What arguments does the writer put forward to support this perspective?
- Do I agree? Why? Why not?
- What evidence does the writer use to support their idea/perspective/argument?
- What do other writers say about this idea?
- What are the strengths of this idea/perspective/argument?
- What are the gaps in this idea/perspective/argument?
- What assumptions has the writer made?

By asking questions of the text, it is possible to see shortcomings in, or relationships between, others' perspectives. You may need to read more widely than the specific work you are analysing to be able to answer them. In all cases, your conclusions or recommendations must be supported by evidence.

How to write critically

Often, the most common writing students have done before commencing university study was descriptive rather than critical. This is not a fault; we all develop the language best suited to our needs. To learn to write critically, it is helpful to know the difference between **descriptive** and **critical** writing styles. Descriptive writing tends to:

- answer the 'what', 'when', 'where' and 'who' questions
- involve identifying, describing or listing, with a focus on the 'facts'
- be most useful for describing situations, reporting data and findings, outlining aims or backgrounds
- be neutral and 'objective', that is, the author's 'voice' is removed from the content

Descriptive writing **does not allow** interpretation, justification, analysis, argument, explanations, reflections or hypotheses, all of which are necessary to demonstrate critical thinking. Moving from descriptive to critical writing means asking questions, such as those listed over the page.

Further, analysing and interpreting others' ideas and arguments uses a different sort of language than would be used in descriptive writing. Using certain words and phrases in your writing will enable you to demonstrate relationships and perspectives, for example:

- X's argument that... is not convincing because...
- a difficulty with this position is...
- a shortcoming of this argument is...
- the strength of this stance is...
- this stance demonstrates that...
- this perspective does not take account of ...

Such language enables the writer to make judgements and to challenge the arguments put forward by others. It is likely that your assessors will be influenced by the way you use language to determine whether you are thinking critically. Another indicator of writing critically is that the author has a distinctive 'voice' in the writing, one that is *synthesising, interpreting, judging and concluding*.

To illustrate, following are brief examples of descriptive and critical writing.¹

Example 1: description/reporting

Common knowledge/fact

Description of someone's (Singleton et al.) opinion/research

Australia has a political system based on the principles of federalism where sovereignty is divided between the national (federal) government and state, territory and local governments. While the powers of the states were well established through the Constitution at the time of federation in 1901, these powers have diminished as states have had to be more and more reliant on the federal government for funds as its sphere of influence has expanded (Singleton et al., 2000).

Notice that the voice used above is neutral, making no comment or judgement on the facts stated. The writer is telling the reader what they know *about* the topic.

Example 2: critique

Topic sentence/Contention

Phrases/words that indicate a critical voice

The debate about the relative merits of federalism and its suitability as a political system for Australia has engaged political theorists and politicians since federation. For example, Galligan (1996, p.35) puts forward the view that Australian federalism is essentially democratic, suggesting that devolution of power to the states ensures government is 'close to the people', avoiding centralisation of power. However, this position does not take account of arguments by those such as Patience (1997) who suggests that more representation at different levels of government does not mean better democracy. It would seem that what is at stake here is how democracy is understood in the Australian context and how the history of the federal compact is interpreted.

Notice the appearance of the writer's voice. The writer has synthesised the positions in the literature and made comments on these differing positions, which leads to an interpretation of the issue. The underlined words and phrases demonstrate the kind of language that indicates a critical voice is being used. For more examples of phrases that can enhance your academic writing, refer to the helpsheet *University Speak*.

Other helpsheets available

- Writing in an Academic Style
- University Speak
- Reading Strategies: Questioning

¹ Text adapted from University of Sydney. (n.d.). Writing in the discipline of accounting: Information for students. Retrieved November 12th, 2013 from sydney.edu.au/business/_data/assets/word_doc/.../accounting.doc