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How to Critically Think, Read & Write in an Academic Context

Workshop objectives

- To understand the **relevance** of critical thinking
- To understand the **necessary elements for critical writing** at university
- To review the **language** of critical writing

Discussion Questions

- What is your definition of the word “critical” in the context of academic writing?
- Why is it important to consciously evaluate the quality of evidence in academic texts?

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Watch this HELPS screencast:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PsLktb7HTA>

How to Think Critically

- **Present** a point of view in a structured, clear & rational way
- **Reflect** on issues in a methodical way, using logic & insight
- Draw **conclusions** about arguments based on **evidence**
- **Identify** others' positions, assertions & claims
- **Evaluate** evidence from alternative points of view
- Weigh up arguments & evidence in a **balanced way**
- **Recognise** false logic & other persuasive devices
- Read between the lines – **understand** subtext

Activity

What (critically analytical) questions would you ask about the following statement?

“In the reading test, the five children who were taught to read using phonics performed better overall than the five children taught using the whole word method. This shows that the phonics method is a better choice for schools.”

What defines Critical Writing?

The main features of critical writing are:

- **Evaluation of evidence and arguments**
- **A balanced piece of writing**
- **Your own conclusion**
- **A recognition of limitations**

Critical Reading

- What are the author's credentials? (e.g. area of expertise; number of citations; institutional connections)
- When was the text published? How recent is it? When was the website updated?
- How much of the content is fact and how much opinion? Is the language objective or emotive?
- Is the argument supported by evidence? What kind of evidence? How is the argument developed?
- Do you agree with the opinions stated?

The C.R.A.P. Test

Currency

- *How recent is the information?*
- *How recently has the website been updated?*
- *Is it current enough for your topic?*

Reliability

- *What kind of information is included in the resource?*
- *Is content of the resource primarily opinion? Is it balanced?*
- *Does the creator provide references or sources for data or quotations?*

Authority

- *Who is the creator or author?*
- *What are the credentials?*
- *Who is the publisher or sponsor?*
- *Are they reputable?*
- *What is the publisher's interest (if any) in this information?*
- *Are there advertisements on the website?*

Purpose/Point of View

- *Is this fact or opinion? Is it biased?*
- *What's the intent of the website (to persuade, to sell you something, etc.)?*
- *What is the domain (.edu, .org, .com, etc.)? How might that influence the purpose/point of view?*

Now watch a video of the C.R.A.P. Test in action:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhwB4zQD4XA>

Always ask yourself:

- Concrete fact?
- Generalisation?
- Assumption?
- Expert Opinion?

Descriptive Writing

Descriptive writing describes something, but usually does not go beyond an account of what appears to be there.

What's the difference?

With **critical writing** you are participating in the academic debate. This can be more challenging and risky. You need to weigh up the evidence and arguments of others, and to contribute your own.

Critical Writing

To write critically you will need to:

- consider the **quality of the evidence** and argument you have read;
- identify key **positive and negative aspects** you can comment upon;
- assess their **relevance and usefulness** to the debate that you are engaging in for your assignment;
- identify how best they can be woven into the argument that **you** are developing – this is **your academic voice**.

Finding your academic voice

When you engage in critical writing you are developing your own academic voice within your subject. Wellington et al. (2005, p. 84) offer some suggestions for distinguishing between the academic and the non-academic voice:

- “healthy scepticism ... but not cynicism;
- confidence ... but not ‘cockiness’ or arrogance;
- judgement which is critical ... but not dismissive;
- opinions ... without being opinionated;
- careful evaluation of published work ... not serial shooting at random targets;
- being ‘fair’: assessing fairly the strengths and weaknesses of other people’s ideas and writing ... without prejudice; and
- making judgements on the basis of considerable thought and all the available evidence ... as opposed to assertions without reason.”

Avoid stringing together quotes

You may feel that the more quotes you include, the stronger your argument. However, it is important to **interpret** the quotes to the reader, explain their relevance, discuss their validity, and show how they relate to other evidence.

Strategically use paragraphs

You may wish to consider each paragraph almost as a micro essay. Within each paragraph you would:

- introduce the point you want to make;
- make the point, with supporting evidence;
- reflect critically on the point.



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Always remember

If it's worth including, it's worth telling your reader why!

What is the balance between descriptive and critical writing?

While a certain amount of description is necessary to set the context for your analysis, the main characteristic of academic writing is its **critical element**.

Why should the reader be convinced by what I've just written?

Remember to **ask yourself** 'Why should I believe what I've just read?', the readers of your work will be asking the same question.

Is my conclusion supported by my preceding analysis and argument?

Check the conclusions that you have drawn, then locate and confirm the supporting evidence you provide earlier on. Check that the **conclusions make sense**, rather than being a surprise or unconvincing.

Have I included any unsubstantiated statements?

There are three main ways of dealing with such statements:

- present the evidence to support the statement;
- re-phrase the statement to sound more cautious e.g. ‘it could be argued ...’ or ‘this suggests that ...’;
- remove the statement.

Activity

- **Read the article** in your handout and apply the C.R.A.P. Test.
- **Discuss your impressions** with your partner/group.
- What is **your conclusion**?
- Would this article be acceptable to include in **YOUR** academic writing?
Why/why not?

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