

## **Critical analysis**

*“Be more critical! More analysis needed! That’s what my tutors say about my essays. I’m not really sure what they mean.”*

*“I thought I had written a really good assignment this time. I did so much reading and preparation for it, but my tutor’s feedback is ‘not enough argument.’ I’m not sure what to do now. I mean, I’m not an argumentative person - and I don’t really want to be.”*

One of the most important skills you will need to learn as a student, whatever your discipline is the ability to think critically and objectively about an issue and to present a well-constructed argument. Critical and analytical-thinking skills such as these will be essential to most aspects of your study, whether you are listening to lectures, contributing to seminars, or reading about your subject. Here, we will be focusing mainly on critical analysis for written work, as nothing gains or loses marks more for most student assignments than the quality of your written argument.

Argument here doesn’t mean disagreement or unpleasantness. It simply means presenting a strong case to support a point of view. You don’t have to be an argumentative person to do this: on the contrary, good critical writing means using reasons and evidence to support your stand point.

### **The first rule is: Identify the focus of the assignment**

Good critical analysis isn’t simply about writing. Before you start any assignment, you need to be clear about your focus. At university, this usually means thinking critically about the requirements of the essay, report, or of the seminar or workshop topic.

*“I always ask myself why the lecturers have set this particular essay? Why this particular wording? What is it that they are expecting us to read? Usually,*

*there is an underlying set of ideas or theories or problems or texts that they expect us to cover as part of our background reading for the essay.”*

The essay title or assignment brief will have been written with certain expectations in mind. You can try asking your lecturers about these expectations- and they may even give you some clues. However, at this level of study, you are usually expected to demonstrate that you can think these through for yourself.

*“For me, critical analysis begins with the essay title. I try to work out which key debates or conflicts of opinion it refers to. I check through the main journals for my subject for any relevant academic debates that have been running over the last few years. That way I know I am up to date.”*

### **The second rule is: Identify your own point of view**

The second consideration for critical analysis, and which is especially important for preparing student assignments, is to be clear about your own perspective. What exactly is your own position on the subject? This may change as you work through the assignment, but you should keep asking yourself this question as you study for the assignment, to help clarify your thinking and direct your research.

It may take some time to arrive at your final position. Along the way, it may seem that there is good evidence to support many alternative points of view. You may feel that everything you read sounds right – or that nothing sounds right. However, at some point, you have to decide what position you are going to take up for yourself. If this isn't clear in your mind, then your writing will lack clarity and direction.

*“I imagine I have only fifteen seconds to state my argument for a radio audience. If I can't say it clearly without rambling, then I'm not ready to start writing.”*

*“The best trick for me is to sum up my main argument in a single sentence. I find this clears my head. I print out the sentence and tape it to the front of my computer where I can see it all the time I am writing that assignment. If I can’t sum up what I want to say clearly and simply, it usually means I haven’t really worked out my position clearly enough.”*

*“I always used to sit on the fence and concluded my essays by saying that there were ‘some positive and some negative points about each school of thought’. My essays ended up being vague because I wouldn’t make a decision one way or the other. Now, I imagine I’m like a lawyer– I decide which theory or point of view I would prefer to defend in court, and why, and take that as my own position for the purpose of the essay.”*

### **The third rule is: Consider how you’ll persuade other people of your point of view**

From the point of view of critical thinking, the aim of an argument is to persuade your reader of your position, your conclusion. Your point of view needs to be presented as a well-reasoned argument that leads to a conclusion based on evidence. Critical writing is really a line of reasoning, a set of reasons, presented in the most convincing and logical order, to support a conclusion.

The third consideration in producing an assignment based on good critical analysis is to identify convincing reasons to support your conclusion – reasons that would persuade your readers or listeners- whether these are your tutors, fellow students or other people.

*“I tend to work out my reasons in writing. It’s like arguing with myself. Before I start my final draft, I go back over what I have written, and draw up a list of the reasons that support my conclusion, and those that undermine it. Then I mull it all over for a while, seeing whether the reasons are good enough. Do they really support my conclusion? Would they convince anyone else but me?”*

## **The fourth rule? Find the proof**

You may be able to list lots of reasons that support your conclusion - but are those reasons well founded? A good argument is based on solid evidence. So the fourth consideration is to identify and evaluate the available evidence to see if it really does support your point of view.

Although it is good to start out with an idea of what you want to say, you will not be able to finalise your position until you have done some research. You will need to read around the subject, using reputable sources, such as articles from the best-known journals for your subject. Don't just use general textbooks - make sure the authors you read are the leading ones for your field of study. Find out what they think about the subject- what are their theories? Whose views are they attacking? What research has been done on the subject? Are there different schools of thought about this subject? If so, what makes any of these convincing?

You need to make sure that you have evidence that supports your conclusion. You also need to know of any arguments against your point of view. What evidence are these based on? Why are these alternative arguments less convincing?

Clearly, good critical writing also depends upon good critical reading skills. Even if an author presents an argument that seems compelling, it is important not to accept what is said without making a few checks first. Don't take the results of research at face value.

*“When I'm reading for my college work, it's as if I'm having a discussion with someone – I'm always asking questions:*

*- how do I know that's true - isn't that just an opinion?*

*Or: that's interesting. I wonder if this would still be true if the survey was bigger?*

*Or: what if he'd used a different sample of people?*

*Or even: so what?”*

*“I’ve always enjoyed looking for where there may be gaps in the evidence, a bit like trying to work out the plot in a crime thriller, but for some reason, I always did this in my head, as you would if you were just reading a novel. When it came to writing the essay, I just described what each theorist said, or what was in each book, to prove I’d read them, I suppose. Now I realise I had missed out all the best bits! My lecturers didn’t want to know much about what other theorists said, they wanted to know what I thought of them – in other words, all the evaluation I had done in my head.”*

This evaluation of the evidence is exactly the kind of thing your tutor will be looking for as part of your critical analysis - so don't just do it in your head - write it down. For example, if you think that a piece of research is based on interviews with too narrow a range of people, write that down. If you think the results of a piece of research might have been very different if they had taken a broader range of conditions into consideration, note down a few examples of what you mean.

### **The fifth rule is: Engage in debate**

The fifth consideration for critical analysis is to engage actively in debate with different points of view- both those that adopt a similar to your position to yours and those that are different. Most essays, reports, and seminar sessions are designed to enable you to engage in such a dialogue – or debate - with well-known schools of thought, major theories or leading pieces of research in your subject. These are opportunities for you to read, reflect, question, and evaluate; to weigh up the arguments and identify their strengths and weaknesses. The books and articles you are recommended are likely to point out some of the major issues to help you, and you can refer to these within your own argument.

*“By the time I’ve read three or four articles, I can be totally confused. I might think the first thing I read is absolutely spot on; then I read an article that says the first article was flawed, and I agree with the reasons they give. Then the*

*third article argues that the second person was wrong in the way they criticised the first – and that sounds convincing too, and so on. In the end, I'm not sure what I think."*

Many students say they find that it is hard to decide between conflicting theories, arguments and evidence, and that they don't have a clear conclusion for their own essay. It is important to remember that academic debates aren't usually clear-cut about right or wrong, and that new research leads to a continually changing picture. As a student, you need to weigh up the evidence to date – and make a decision about which seems the most convincing for now – or the circumstances in which a particular argument would be true.

It may seem frustrating when there are many points of view and when these are based on different types of evidence. However, it is often easier to produce a better assignment when there is an opportunity to address complex issues or subjects that are hotly disputed.

*"I like it when we are given subjects that are contentious, because then you can really sound out different ways of looking at the issues, and show how you have evaluated one person's views against another. If the subject is too easy, there is nothing to get your teeth into."*

### **The sixth rule is: Structure your argument**

*"Apparently, I had all the right arguments and evidence, but the way I presented it, hopping from point to point, nobody could tell."*

*"If you organise your argument clearly for seminars, people listen. If it jumps about and sounds muddled, then people just switch off."*

Once you have engaged in critical debate with the issues, you have finalised your position, you've identified good reasons based to support your conclusion, then the next step is to consider how you will organise your reasons and evidence into a clear

structure. You want your argument to persuade your reader or listener. The aim is to do this through the strength of your argument, by the way you present your position, your reasons, your evidence, in a clear and logical way, and not through resorting to forceful or emotive language.

Student assignments usually include critical analysis of complex material at some depth- so some thought needs to be given about how to present that material in a way that helps the reader to see the point and to follow the argument. You need to think through your argument from the point of view of your reader or listener – what order will make most sense for them? Is each point clearly linked to the one that came before? Does everything you are saying build towards your final conclusion, helping your reader or listener to understand the position you have adopted for the assignment?

*“I usually sort out my ideas by writing them out first. When I am sure of the key argument, I cut and paste my text until I think I have a logical order. Then I print it out and highlight all the key reasons in yellow, and my conclusion in red. If I can't find the key reasons to highlight, which does happen (!) then I know I need to write these out more clearly.”*

The assignment you hand in will be the last stage of a process of critical analysis. Remember that your tutor will be looking for evidence of your active engagement with the topic. Make sure that your final version captures something of your process of critical dialogue with the subject.