Critical writing

How to help you take a more critical approach to your writing
Learning Outcomes

By the end of this workshop you should be able to:

• Identify the differences between descriptive and critical writing

• Identify how to improve your own writing to become more critical
What this workshop is like

• Follow-on from critical thinking and academic writing
• Practical workshop
• Not discipline-specific
Critical writing

• Not a form of writing like reports or essays, but an approach:
  • Thoughtful
  • Questioning
  • Focused

• Being critical in academic writing does not mean finding fault
  • You also need to justify when you agree
Descriptive writing

• Opposite of critical writing
• Descriptive writing is not bad writing
  • Often it’s what you’re asked to do
    • e.g. give definitions, summarise theories
  • Keep it in its place
  • Make space for being critical
Comparisons

Commentator vs pundit

Crimewatch vs Sherlock Holmes

...........be like a toddler.....always asking “why?”
Worksheet Exercise 1

• Critical or Descriptive?
• Indicate whether the approaches are characteristics of critical writing (C) or descriptive writing (D).
## Answer to Exercise 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Critical (C) or Descriptive (D)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lists the main elements of a theory</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluates information and draws conclusions</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes reasoned judgements</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outlines how something works</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States options</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies the significance</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Critical</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• States what has happened</td>
<td>• Identifies the significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Outlines</td>
<td>• Judges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lists</td>
<td>• Evaluates strengths and weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Instructs</td>
<td>• Shows why something is relevant or suitable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• States links</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Critical writing model

**Argument:**
- What is your main argument?
- Is the main argument clear and logical?

**Evidence:**
- What is your evidence?
- Is the evidence valid?
- Does your evidence support the conclusions?
Including different views

• Critical writing includes a range of opinions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Moreover</td>
<td>• However</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In addition</td>
<td>• In contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Furthermore</td>
<td>• Although</td>
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• Good critical writing concludes with where the author stands
Worksheet Exercise 2

• What does critical writing look like?
• Read the journal extract and pick out the phrases through which the authors present contrasting views
While the medical community generally considers depression to be an uncontested, routinely diagnosed condition, and antidepressants a safe and effective treatment, controversies about the diagnosis and treatment abound. Some argue that physicians fail to distinguish between normal sadness and major depressive disorder (e.g., Horwitz & Wakefield 2007; Wilson 2008). Also, since they rarely use the DSM to aid in the diagnosis (Thomas-MacLean et al. 2005), what is being diagnosed as depression is sometimes unclear. Parker (2007) stated that the reliability of the DSM criteria for depression and the threshold for reaching a diagnosis of depression are low; consequently, even with the use of the DSM criteria, normal emotional states are diagnosed as clinical depression. Others have heavily criticized psychiatry and the pharmaceutical industry for creating and extending the diagnostic category of depression (e.g., Greenburg 2010; Healy 1997; Shorter 1997; Valenstein 1988).

The diagnosis of depression is closely tied to its principal treatment, antidepressant medication, which is the subject of controversy with the recent attention to the publication bias of clinical trial data. Turner et al. (2008) acquired antidepressant clinical trial results from the American Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and found that about a third of the studies were not published and that the FDA considered the vast majority of these unpublished studies to have negative results (i.e., failing to demonstrate efficacy). In contrast, studies with positive results were almost always published. When Kirsch et al. (2008) used meta-analytic techniques that included unpublished antidepressant trials, they reported that the placebo effect accounted for 82% of the improvement seen with antidepressant drugs, which led them to conclude that “there seems little evidence to support the prescription of antidepressant medication to any but the most severely depressed patients, unless alternative treatments have failed to provide benefit” (p. 266).

Clearly, the diagnosis of depression and the use of antidepressants are contested domains in the academic literature. In addition, laypersons are exposed to these debates through public media such as newspapers. For example, a recent article published in a Canadian national newspaper with the headline “Is Depression a Disease?” (McLaren 2010) drew attention to the work of Greenburg (2010) and his contention that depression is a creation of the pharmaceutical industry in order to sell a remedy. The increasingly public nature of the controversies over diagnosing and treating depression provided the impetus for the present study.
Your writing

• Think about:
  • Your argument
    • What are you trying to say? Is it targeted?
    • Does it fit with the assignment brief?
  • Your structure
    • Is it in-depth?
    • Structuring your assignment workshop
  • Your paragraphs
• How to structure a paragraph
• Use WEED model (Godwin, 2014)
  • What - topic sentence
  • Examples and Evidence
  • Do - sum up – so what?
Worksheet Exercise 3

• Critical paragraphs
• Read the paragraph – is this a good example of a critical paragraph? If so, why?
Creating critical paragraphs

• **What** - topic sentence
  • Ensure that it highlights a significant issue
  • e.g. not: “there are many kinds of ...” (leads to a list)

• **Evidence**
  • Summarise and relate it to your argument
  • e.g. not just quoting

• **Do - sum up – so what?**
  • Essential, as this shows you understand the implications
  • The most critical part of the paragraph!
Worksheet Exercise 4

• Improving a critical paragraph
• Read the paragraph and consider how you could improve it to become more critical
Some phrases for ‘Do’

• These findings suggest several courses of action ....
• An implication of these findings is that ...
• The evidence from this research suggests ...
• There is, therefore, a need for ....
• In general, therefore, it seems that ....
• This information could be used to develop....
• A reasonable approach to tackle this issue could be to ....
• Taken together, these findings support ....
## Aspects of critical writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analyse</th>
<th>Pick out the key points of a topic. Consider those key points in depth, including how they relate to each other.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compare</td>
<td>Look at the similarities and differences between two aspects. Say if any are more important than others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesise</td>
<td>Bring together different sources of information to create a single idea or argument.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>Consider the strength of an idea, looking for both positives and negatives. Come to a conclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply</td>
<td>Transfer evidence from your reading to real life, or to a case study. How would the theory work in practice?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Justify</td>
<td>Make a case for a particular viewpoint. Provide an argument that takes into account the opposing view, and shows why it isn’t as significant.</td>
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Adapted from Williams (2014)
Other relevant workshops

• Structuring your assignment
• How to use references
• Critical thinking
• Critical appraisal - for SoH&SC students
Support Available

• Learning Hub
  • Website – [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/learning_hub](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/learning_hub)
    • Includes online tutorial on critical writing
  • One-to-one tutorials

• Royal Literary Fellows
  • [https://www.facebook.com/rlfteesside](https://www.facebook.com/rlfteesside)
Other resources


Questions?

http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/critical_writing