How to write critically

Critical writing is questioning; it involves looking at why something is the case or why it is significant. Critical writing is not a particular format like report writing, but instead it’s an approach, a way of thinking. It’s about being thoughtful – asking yourself lots of questions about what you’re writing about. In order to write critically, you need to take a step back from what you’re discussing. Try looking at the topic as an outsider asking yourself why would something be done in that way? That way you avoid just describing how something is done and concentrate on why it is being done like that. It’s also about being focused on your topic.

One common misconception about being critical in academic writing is that it’s just about finding fault because this is how we use the term in everyday language. That’s not what it’s about. Sometimes, you might want to point out the flaws in an argument, but you might also agree with a point of view, and if you provide evidence to point out why that’s valid, that would also be being critical.

You may have received feedback saying that your work is too descriptive. Descriptive writing isn’t bad, but it should be kept to a minimum.

So what are the differences between descriptive writing and critical writing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive writing</th>
<th>Critical writing</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>States what has happened</td>
<td>Identifies the significance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outlines</td>
<td>Judges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lists</td>
<td>Evaluates strengths and weaknesses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructs</td>
<td>Show why something is relevant or suitable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States links</td>
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WEED model for writing critical paragraphs
This is a model for writing critical paragraphs. It’s taken from Godwin’s book called ‘Planning your Essay’. Each paragraph should be on a single topic, making a single point. A paragraph is usually around a third of a page.

W is for What.
You should begin your paragraph with the topic or point that you’re making, so that it’s clear to your lecturer. Everything in the paragraph should fit in with this opening sentence.

E is for Evidence
The middle of your paragraph should be full of evidence – this is where all your references should be incorporated. Make sure that your evidence fits in with your topic.

E is for Examples
Sometimes it’s useful to expand on your evidence. If you’re talking about a case study, the example might be how your point relates to the particular scenario being discussed.

D is for Do
You should conclude your paragraph with the implications of your discussion. This gives you the opportunity to add your commentary, which is very important in assignments which require you to use critical analysis.

So, in effect, each paragraph is like a mini-essay, with an introduction, main body and conclusion.

Some phrases for ‘Do’
Here are some phrases you could use to start the ‘Do’ part of your paragraphs. These show that you are concluding your paragraph, but basing that conclusion on the evidence you’ve presented.

- 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 …

More possible phrases are available in the ‘Writing Conclusions’ section of Academic Phrasebank:
http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/writing-conclusions/
Example of a descriptive paragraph

The key to a healthy diet is to eat the right amount of calories for the activities being undertaken so that the energy consumed balances with the energy used. Eating or drinking too much will cause weight gain whereas eating and drinking too little will cause weight loss. In order to ensure a balanced diet it is important to eat a wide range of foods and nutrients. It is recommended that men have around 2,500 calories a day (10,500 kilojoules) and that women should have around 2,000 calories a day (8,400 kilojoules). Most adults eat more calories than they need so should eat fewer calories. Starchy carbohydrates, including potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and cereals, should make up just over one third of the food eaten. Wholegrains, such as potatoes with their skins on, contain more fibre, and can help the feeling of being full last longer. It is advised that people include at least one starchy food with each main meal. Some people think starchy foods are fattening, but gram for gram the carbohydrate they contain provides fewer than half the calories of fat. However, it is important to keep an eye on the fats used when cooking starchy carbohydrates because that is what increases the calorie content, for example oil on chips, butter on bread and creamy sauces on pasta. (NHS Choices, 2016)

Why this is descriptive

- There is a topic sentence (a What) but the paragraph only has one reference, so there isn’t enough evidence to support what is being said. By putting in several references, it can show if there is agreement or disagreement on the topic.
- There is no commentary on the information, so there is no Do.
- The paragraph is just a list of facts. It doesn’t show the significance of the subject.
Example of a good critical paragraph
The characteristics of individuals who choose healthy lifestyles are extremely important to the overall understanding of positive health behaviours. A variety of protective factors have been associated with positive health behaviours and practices, including connectedness to family, school and peers, as well as higher self-esteem (Ghassemi and Mansour, 1990; Yarcheski, Mahon and Yarcheski, 1997; Zeitlin, Anteghini et al., 2001). Additionally, recent studies have demonstrated the co-occurrence of health-promoting behaviours (Kulbok and Cox, 2002). Understanding health behaviours of teens requires consideration of many personal and social environmental factors, including the family and school context as well as individual characteristics (Battistich and Hom, 1997; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1998; Neumark-Sztainer, 1999). It may be possible to identify both youth who choose positive health behaviours and the correlates to such activities. Identifying characteristics of adolescents who make positive health choices could improve the ability of health professionals to target at-risk youth, develop innovative preventive strategies, support inherent strengths, and ultimately, modify negative health behaviours.


Why is it critical

- It has a topic sentence (a What?) which then goes on to discuss that topic with a variety of evidence.
- The final two sentences are the Do. They are a commentary on the significance of the topic. They explain why this subject is important.
- Remember, it is not always necessary to have an Example.

References