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Critical Thinking and Writing

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Outline

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1. What is critical thinking and analysis?
2. Using critical thinking to:
 - a. Select texts
 - b. Read texts
 - c. Write about texts

This will help you prepare assignments such as literature reviews, research reports, case studies, case study analysis and essays



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'Insufficiently critical'

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Many lecturers often state student work is 'insufficiently critical'.

They often state:

- The work is merely ***descriptive***
- The arguments are ***insufficient***
- The arguments are ***flawed***



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'Insufficiently critical'

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Students are often reminded that they are expected NOT just to:

- Show they have read and understood the key texts
- Show evidence of as much reading as possible
- Represent the lecturer's opinions

Critical Thinking and Analysis

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Rather, they are expected to demonstrate:

'An ability to engage in critical thinking and analysis'

But, what does this mean?



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Language Associated with Critical Thinking

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Account for
Advocate
Analyse
Argue
Categorise
Classify
Compare
Conclude

Criticise
Define
Determine
Discuss
Distinguish
Estimate
Examine
Explain

Evaluate
Identify
Illustrate
Interpret
Judge
Justify
Outline
Persuade

Predict
Question
Refine
Reflect
Select
Suggest
Summarise
Trace

Critical Thinking: Two Definitions

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Critical thinking has been defined as:

“Making careful or exact judgements. The critical thinker therefore is someone who approaches material with the ultimate intention of judging its worth or value, and who arrives at this point through systematic analysis and questioning.” (Ballard and Clanchy 1988: 65)

“Making sense of our world by carefully examining the thinking process in order to clarify and improve our understanding.” (Chaffee 1991:33)



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What does a Critical Thinker do?

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On Wikipedia*, a critical thinker is described as someone who:

- raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely
- gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively
- comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards
- thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences
- communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

*not always the most reliable source!

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Analysis of a text has been defined as:

“Distinguishing between the different elements in a text and being both able to study them separately and to ascertain the relationships between them.” (Martin, 2006)

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As a postgraduate, you must demonstrate ability to use critical thinking to select texts. You know that:

Research usually begins with general texts such as your lecture notes and text books

Then, you move to other reference books on your reading list

Researching, brainstorming and planning are related activities

Reading with a Purpose 1

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You use your research question and proposed thesis statement to guide reading

By analysing the question and thesis statement, you identify key terms and concepts

These help you create a 'search string'

Literature that is unrelated to your thesis statement is discarded

Your reading also helps you to develop and revise your thesis statement

Reading with a Purpose 2

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Develop a sense what you need to read for, eg:

- arguments that support your thesis
- arguments that oppose your thesis
- examples
- exemplary cases
- statistics
- definitions
- explanations
- quotes

Consider Text Types

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Consider what text types will be appropriate the task and your Purposes.

These might be:

- Scholarly
- Specialised periodicals
- Popular
- Internet

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- **Scholarly:**
Journals, textbooks, edited collections and scholarly book publications are all written for the purpose of presenting and disseminating research
- **Specialised periodicals:**
eg., Time, The Bulletin, Australian Book Review, the Wall Street Journal, or the Financial Review. These are topical and rarely push issues further than a shallow level of analysis

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- **Popular:**
commercial books and magazines, newspapers etc. intended for the general public
- **Internet:**
scholarly journals, whole books, news, specialised periodicals or magazines, advertising, exploitative material, blogs (personal chat) and gossip



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Primary Sources

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Primary sources are original pieces of evidence, including:

- **First hand accounts**
Diaries, letters, memoirs, autobiographies, speeches, newspaper reports, interviews, photographs etc.
- **Official records**
Government documents, census data, company records etc.
- **Creative works**
Poetry, prose, music, painting, sculpture, film etc.
- **Material culture**
Clothing, tools, buildings, toys, vehicles, monuments etc.



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Secondary Sources

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Secondary sources are written about (or are an interpretation of) eg. a primary source, another secondary source, event, experience, or individual

They are usually based on primary sources as well as other secondary sources

Secondary sources can take such forms as books, theses, and journal articles

Relevance and Reliability

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Many sources will be inappropriate in terms of relevance and reliability

Once you have determined the text is related to your thesis statement (relevant), consider its reliability by taking into account:

1. Authority
2. Currency
3. Objectivity
4. Coverage

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The authority of an academic source is related to its rigour as research. Ask yourself:

Is the author a key figure in the field?

What are the author's qualifications for writing on this topic?

Is the material published to academic standards?
(has it been reviewed by publishers, peers, editors etc.)

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Is the content of the work up to date?

If the source is not recent, is it still relevant and valid?

How do other authors rate this piece of work?

Is it seen as a seminal piece of work in the field or on the topic?

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Does the author take into account a range of perspectives and approaches to the topic?

Is the author trying to push a hidden agenda?

Are there any racial, class, gender or political biases?

Are fair and reasonable methods of analysis and observation used?

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What topics are covered in the work?

What is the breadth of the coverage? (Are all aspects explored?)

What is the depth (level of detail) of the coverage?

What time period is covered by the work?

Slides 19-22 adapted from University of Melbourne Library resources www.lib.unimelb.edu.au

Critical Reading: Asking Questions

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What are the author's main arguments?

What kinds of evidence or examples does the writer use to support his/her arguments?

How reliable and useful is this evidence?

Does the evidence really support the argument – i.e. is it 'strong' enough?

Are there any 'problems' in the study or argument – ie. Is a particular bias apparent? Are there any gaps in the research? Is the data up-to-date? etc.

Critical Reading: Asking More Questions

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How does the author structure his or her argument? Can you 'deconstruct' the flow of the argument to analyse if or where it breaks down?

What is the author's research orientation (e.g., interpretive, critical science?)

What is the author's theoretical framework (e.g., developmental, feminist)?

What connections do you see between this article and the other texts?

What are the differences in argument, approach, logic etc.?

Critical Reading: Asking Even More Questions

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Could the problem have been approached more effectively from another perspective?

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the author?

See the TLU Helpsheets 'Writing a Literature Review' for further questions

Taking Notes: The Yes-No Strategy 1

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You may wish to take notes using the yes-no strategy discussed earlier.

Take notes on a page with 4 columns marked:

1. YES: the writer completely agrees with my thesis
2. YES, but: the writer mainly agrees
3. Yes, BUT: the writer agrees in part but mainly disagrees
4. NO: the writer completely disagrees

Taking Notes: The Yes-No Strategy 2

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In favour of my thesis

- Foster (2006)
- Miller (2008)
- Coopers (1999)

Note their arguments and evidence

Against my thesis

- Daniels (2002)
- Walker (1989)
- Jameson (2007)

Note their arguments and evidence



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Remember

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This is not just a linear process.

You are likely to revise your thesis statement and your approach as you continue.

You may experience a seemingly endless feeling of being 'lost'



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Your Argument 1

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Your lecturer is not expecting a 'completely original' argument.

This is difficult.

It is likely that you did not have strong understandings of the topic or reasoned opinions about the topic before you took the course.

Your Argument 2

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You are expected, however, to propose a clear, coherent argument

This argument must be supported by relevant and reliable sources

It must show your ability to analyse and synthesise ideas from texts

It is also important that you show awareness of counter-arguments
(to prove the strength of your argument)

Making Your 'Voice' Clear

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Once you have developed an outline for your text:

You must consider how you will present your argument in relation to the arguments and counter-arguments you have encountered.

One common mistake students make is they do not use make their voice sufficiently clear in relation to voices of other writers.

Making Your 'Voice' Clear

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Two ways to make your voice clear are:

1. Using a range of reporting verbs
2. Using a range of critical review language



Reporting Verbs 1

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Author's surname The article He / she	discusses examines explores investigates questions undermines refers to attacks supports presents dismisses	+ noun phrase
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Reporting Verbs 2

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Author's surname	states	+ that + clause
The article	asserts	
He / she	argues	
	claims	
	implies	
	assumes	
	accepts	
	acknowledges	
	agrees	
	denies	
	predicts	

Reporting Verbs 3

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Using a range of reporting verbs can add variety and 'colour'

Importantly, it suggests you can analyse texts from a critical distance

The habit of using these will also help you approach texts critically

You must be aware, of course, of the significant differences in meaning between the different reporting verbs

Critical Review Language

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Use a range of introductory phrases that indicate your ability to refer to the work of others in a critical manner, ie, to:

1. State the views of others
2. State views tentatively
3. Identify assumptions
4. Make conclusions
5. Agree
6. Disagree

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- According to Smith...
- From Smith's point of view...
- Some theorists, such as Smith (1989) think that...
- It is thought by some theorists, for example, Jones (1980) and Smith (1989) that...

Stating Tentatively

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- Smith's claim seems to be that...
- Smith seems to be claiming that...
- Smith's argument seems to be that...
- Smith's conclusion seems to be that...

Identifying Assumptions

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- Smith assumes that...
- Smith's assumption is that...
- The assumption on which this depends is ...
- The assumption behind this view is



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Making Conclusions

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- The conclusion of [all] this is that...
- The result of [all] this is that...
- An outcome of this is that...
- A consequence of this is that...

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- As Smith says...
- Here I am following the work of Smith...
- Following from Smith's point...
- Not unlike Smith (1980), I am suggesting/proposing/arguing...

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- I will argue/shall be arguing against Smith's view that...
- Smith's argument[s] do not seem to work for the reason that...
- In contrast to Smith's view/argument/data...
- Problems arise in Smith's work [when it is seen that]...



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Questions?

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Acknowledgement

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