



Critical reading, thinking and writing

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Critical reading plays a central role in university study, yet how to develop this skill is not often discussed or elaborated upon. The aim of this handout is to help you develop the skills to read, think and write more critically. It gives practical examples and exercises on how to evaluate and analyse what you read. This in turn will help you think critically and write critically. Through reading, thinking and writing critically you can improve the marks you get for assignments. But like any other skill, for example, learning to ride a bike or drive a car, it takes practice.

- **Academic writing**

Authors, especially those writing within academia, put forward and establish a certain point of view through their writing, often making it sound like it is a fact rather than their own interpretation. Therefore, what you read might at first seem very convincing, but you as the reader, need to evaluate just how valid their evidence and argument is.

All writers employ what are known as 'textual strategies' to convey meaning and establish credibility. In writing this handout I am also doing this. We all do it everyday in our day to day interaction with other people. For example, think about how you might tell a group of friends about a really good night out you had. What words would you use to convey how good it was? Besides using emotive words, such as 'great' or 'fabulous', you might also use body language and your voice to further convey just how great a time you had. In the same way, authors of academic text use strategies to make their work sound convincing.

Authors use strategies, such as -

- Quote or mention other academic authors
- Cite studies or research findings
- Quote statistics or provide graphs
- Use photographs or drawings
- Use historical facts
- Use emotive words

It is your task, as the reader, to evaluate the author's argument and uncover the strengths and weaknesses in their writing.

The section below, taken from the University of New South Wales web site, highlights the need for asking questions as you read, as a means to evaluate what is written.

EXERCISE 1. - Asking questions as you read

As you read a section of a book or article, look for information to help you answer the following questions.

The Author's Purpose

- Has a contemporary issue or a particular philosophy influenced the authors purpose?
- Is the author defending a particular point of view?
- For whom is the material intended? (e.g. other academics, students, the general public).
- How does the author's argument or perspective relate to other material in the field?


Content

- What is the main theme (thesis or argument) in the material?
- What main points are used to justify or support this theme?
- What explanation or evidence is used to support the main points?
- Does the evidence seem well researched and accurate?
- Which aspects of the topic has the author chosen to concentrate on or omit?
- Is there any evidence of deliberate bias, such as interpretation of material, choice of sources or factual information?
- How do the contents relate to what you know about the topic?
- In what style has the material been written? For example, is it formal or informal, simple or complex, didactic or persuasive, narrative or analytical?

www.lc.unsw.edu.au

EXERCISE 2 - Evaluating 3 statements

The exercise below, written by Marianne Cronin, asks you to examine three paragraphs. See how you get on practicing your analytical skills.

1.  **You may like to critically evaluate the following paragraphs:**
- a. Accountants are rarely stressed. At meetings with various accountants over the years I have always found them to be extremely relaxed. Perhaps working with numbers is a soothing occupation. Certainly they seem less stressed than teachers in a large secondary school.
 - b. Accountants are rarely stressed. A study by Numero in 1995 found that, of workers observed in 50 different occupations, accountants were seen to be most stress free(1996, p.45). The research involved watching 50 people for one day at their work and noting their moods. At the end of the day each person was given a questionnaire related to stress.
 - c. Accountancy appears to be a relatively stress free occupation. Research conducted by Boyd and Benn of Yale university revealed that pressures experienced at work by accountants were the least amongst employees from 80 different occupations. One of the reasons provided for the low stress was the solitary nature of the tasks (1921, p.34).

Now here are some aspects to consider:

- Which paragraph did you consider to be the best in an academic sense?
- What did you criticise in the first and second paragraph?
- What did you notice about the third paragraph?

Here are some ideas:

- Paragraph a) contains a generalisation. The observation, based on meetings with various accountants, does not necessarily indicate that the same low stress level applies to most accountants. There is no evidence provided that working with numbers is soothing. The comparison with teachers does not clarify the idea that accountants are rarely stressed. It is also irrelevant.
- Paragraph b) is better, in that an attempt is made to provide some evidence. But look at the evidence! Watching people for one day and then giving them a

questionnaire is not substantial enough to make the broad conclusion.

- If you didn't spot the date don't worry, nor did many of your fellow students at workshops! The date 1921 of course is totally out of date for a reference in this instance. However, note that such a date for a reference could be appropriate in a history or philosophy topic.

(Marianne Cronin 1998, www.ecu.edu.au)

Critical reading and analysis takes practice. How did you get on with the exercise? It does not matter if the exercises are not in your subject area, it is the practice which is important.

EXERCISE 3 - Critical evaluation

Below is the first page from an article written by Stella Newton, entitled 'Grecian fillets' in Palmer, J and Dodson, M (1996) *Design and Aesthetics*, London: Routledge. Read the text and try and answer the questions below.

Questions

- What type of audience is the author targeting her article at?
- What are the central claims in her argument?
- What evidence does she use to back up the points she is making?
- Does the author make any claims that are not backed up by evidence?
- Do you think that the evidence is sufficient, for an article in an academic text book?
- Does the author use any emotive words or statements? (If so, highlight any that you identify)

At the time of its demise in 1868, the crinoline was thought of as ugly. Its rapid and complete disappearance was a sign that it had lasted too long and outlived its period. Its replacement, very temporarily, by a straight skirt with a long train, and then almost immediately by what *Woman's World* and others quite irrationally called the 'Watteau toilette', involved one of those major changes of fashion that produce a new aesthetic composition and which demand, in consequence, a change in behaviour of the wearer.

The dome-shaped skirt of the 1840s, enlarged in the 1850s by a crinoline sub-structure, because it was symmetrical, had looked the same from whatever side it was viewed. By the middle of the 1860s, this all-round appearance was modified a little by a slight extension at

the back, but this did not really make much difference. Manufacturers of the various supports designed to hold out the skirt did their best to give some variety to a basic shape that had become a bore. For instance, just before the crinoline's disappearance the 'Ondine', made in large flutes, was intended, as its name implies, to produce in the skirt a gracefully wavy effect, and the same firm's 'Ebonite', composed of light and very flexible India-rubber hoops, was advertised, like the 'Ondine', not only in women's magazines but also in the masculine Owl. Both the undulating shape and the extreme flexibility were certainly aimed at destroying the uncompromisingly stable appearance of the basic dome, in the centre of which each female wearer was unapproachably planted.

The sudden jettisoning of this symmetrical design for one of complete asymmetry was dramatic. In contrast to the crinoline, the new fashion possessed, for instance, a 'most favourable viewpoint'; for while the frontal elevation of the 'Watteau toilette' had little character to commend it, its side elevation was very striking indeed.

I would argue that the authors' argument is not very convincing for the following reasons:

- It fails to draw on the evidence of others in the field of study
- It gives the impression that it is the authors' point of view, rather than what was actually current thinking at the time.
- Although 'Women's World' is cited, no quotes are contextualised and the author states that publications at the time make irrational comments, yet this is not elaborated on or substantiated.
- The reader is expected to understand what 'Watteau toilette' is and it is also assumed that the reader already has a background knowledge of the subject area.
- The author uses a number of emotive words and phrases, such as 'jettisoning', 'dramatic' 'striking' and 'each female wearer was unapproachably planted.' These seem to reflect the authors own values and judgements.

These are my thoughts on the section, but you may have identified other points as well.

EXERCISE 4 - Critical analysis

In this section I have re-produced two paragraphs of an analysis I wrote as a student. I have done this for two reasons. Firstly, as students we don't often get the opportunity to read other students work, but we can actually learn a lot by seeing how others construct their analysis. Especially how other students do this, rather than academics. Secondly, it demonstrates how a critical analysis needs to :

- Highlight the point the author is making

- Contextualise the argument
- Provide a counter argument
- Weigh up what has been said

The assignment itself was to write a critical review of 'Angry Writing: (re)presenting the unethical world of the ethnographer' by Michael Keith (1992) in *Society and Space*, Vol 10, pp 551-568

I have re-produced the third and fourth paragraph of my analysis which focuses on research issues.

Keith's opening comment that 'Power lies at the heart of all social research' (1992:551) alerts us to the problem which researchers have of adequately reflecting the reality of the social world. Keith points out that the researchers' construction of reality can have far reaching implications. He uses as an example, the work of Michael Banton, whose studies on the black community, constructs a picture of a troublesome community in which there is a likelihood of violence and crime. Keith states, 'Such notions are racist and dangerous but they are derived from an ostensibly benign social science' (1992:552). Keith describes how the ideas of social researchers, such as Banton, have been taken up to inform the practices of institutions, in this case the police. Keith's aim is to establish the links between theory, practice and politics, emphasising how so called 'objective accounts' produced by social researchers are used to legitimate certain strategies and policies.

One can sense the anger in Keith's account, which is at times overt. An example of this can be seen when Keith states 'Banton was not responsible for reproducing police racism. Not single-handedly at least' (1992:553). Clearly Keith holds Banton and other social researchers responsible for the messages which their texts construct concerning the reality of the social world. Later in the article Keith develops this theme when discussing the position some post-structuralist writers adopt in denying their own authority as authors of particular text. Keith asks the question, 'Do we really want a situation where writers bear no responsibility at all for the effects of their texts?' (1992:566). Perhaps Keith naively believes that the author of a text instinctively knows, or is able to predict, the impact a certain study will have. Yet this is clearly not always the case. As May points out, 'political circumstances can take over regardless of the good will or intentions of the researcher. The research results may then be used for purposes for which they were not intended' (1993:37).

This analysis

- Defines the issue by highlighting the authors viewpoint – the power of the researcher to construct their own version of the social world.
- Places the issue in the context in which it was written – in relation to police racism
- Develops a key issue – how research findings can inform practice and policy
- Focuses on 'the anger' in Keith's attack on researchers

- Provides a counter argument
- Backs up the counter argument with a quote from another author

It is important when you are writing to explain issues and problems to your reader. It may be useful, when writing academic essays, to think of your reader as if they were another student rather than a tutor or lecturer. This way you are less likely to assume your reader knows the subject in detail, as it is important to provide a logical, well structured argument.

By completing the exercises in this handout I hope they have been useful in helping you develop your critical reading, thinking and writing skills.

[Further information and guidance on study skills.](#)

Barnes, R (1992) *Successful Study for Degrees*, London: Routledge

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Cottrell, S (2000) *The Study Skills Handbook*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Marshall, L and Rowland, F (1998) *A Guide to Learning Independently*, 3rd ed, Buckingham: Open University Press.

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