



A guide to critical writing

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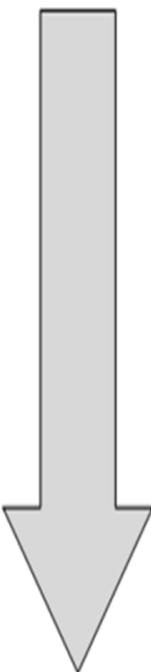
- Evaluating a source
- A guide to critical reading
- Themed notes method
- Showing analysis and evaluation in your writing
- Constructing an argument
- A guide to developing an argument map
- A guide to synthesis
- A guide to critical writing

Introduction

Critical writing is the process of drawing together other aspects of critical thinking (identified above) in order to present a robust case to the reader. Higher-level critical writing examines the evidence in depth, identifying main themes and sub-themes in a way that is clear and logical for the reader to understand. You will be assessed on clarity, accuracy, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance and fairness of the evidence selected, so signposting the reader between the themes is essential.

Start by including a well-structured introduction, setting out the purpose of the assignment. Within the main body, include an in-depth analysis of the main arguments and counter-arguments. Presenting alternative views or theories adds value to your work and demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of the key material. Synthesise different sources of literature such as research, policy, guidelines and practice in order to provide a robust case and support your academic voice. Consider whether there are any limitations in relation to your context and assess the overall relevance of the findings in relation to your assignment brief. Develop a well-structured conclusion, which draws your arguments together and applies any insights you have gained. Where relevant, identify the implications for future research or practice.

Steps to critical thinking

<p>Low level critical thinking</p>  <p>High level critical thinking</p>	<p>level 4 / 5 (first and second year of an undergraduate course)</p>	<p>process</p>	<p>Take in information, i.e. what you have read, seen, heard or done.</p>
		<p>understand</p>	<p>Comprehend key points, assumptions, arguments and evidence being presented.</p>
		<p>analysis</p>	<p>Examine how key components are linked and relate to each other.</p>
		<p>compare</p>	<p>Explore differences and similarities between the ideas you are reading about.</p>
		<p>synthesis</p>	<p>Bring together a range of sources that have shaped and supported your ideas and the argument you are presenting.</p>
	<p>Level 5 / 6 / 7 (second and third year of an undergraduate course and masters level)</p>	<p>evaluate</p>	<p>Assess the relevance of the evidence in your own context and show links to other related ideas.</p>
		<p>apply</p>	<p>Apply the understanding you have gained from critical evaluation and use it in response to assignments and practice.</p>
		<p>justify</p>	<p>Develop arguments, draw conclusions, make inferences and identify implications.</p>

(adapted from: The Open University, 2013 (cited in Williams, 2014))

By using a selection of the following approaches you will be able to develop higher-level critical writing within assignments.

Interpret according to a framework
e.g. a reflective or business model

Make links between theories,
research, policy and practice

Explore a claim and in-depth using
multiple sources of supporting
evidence rather than just one

Present counter claims from a
range of perspectives rather than
just one

Identify reoccurring themes / topics
that appear in the literature

Synthesise different types of
evidence e.g. reports, research
studies, policies

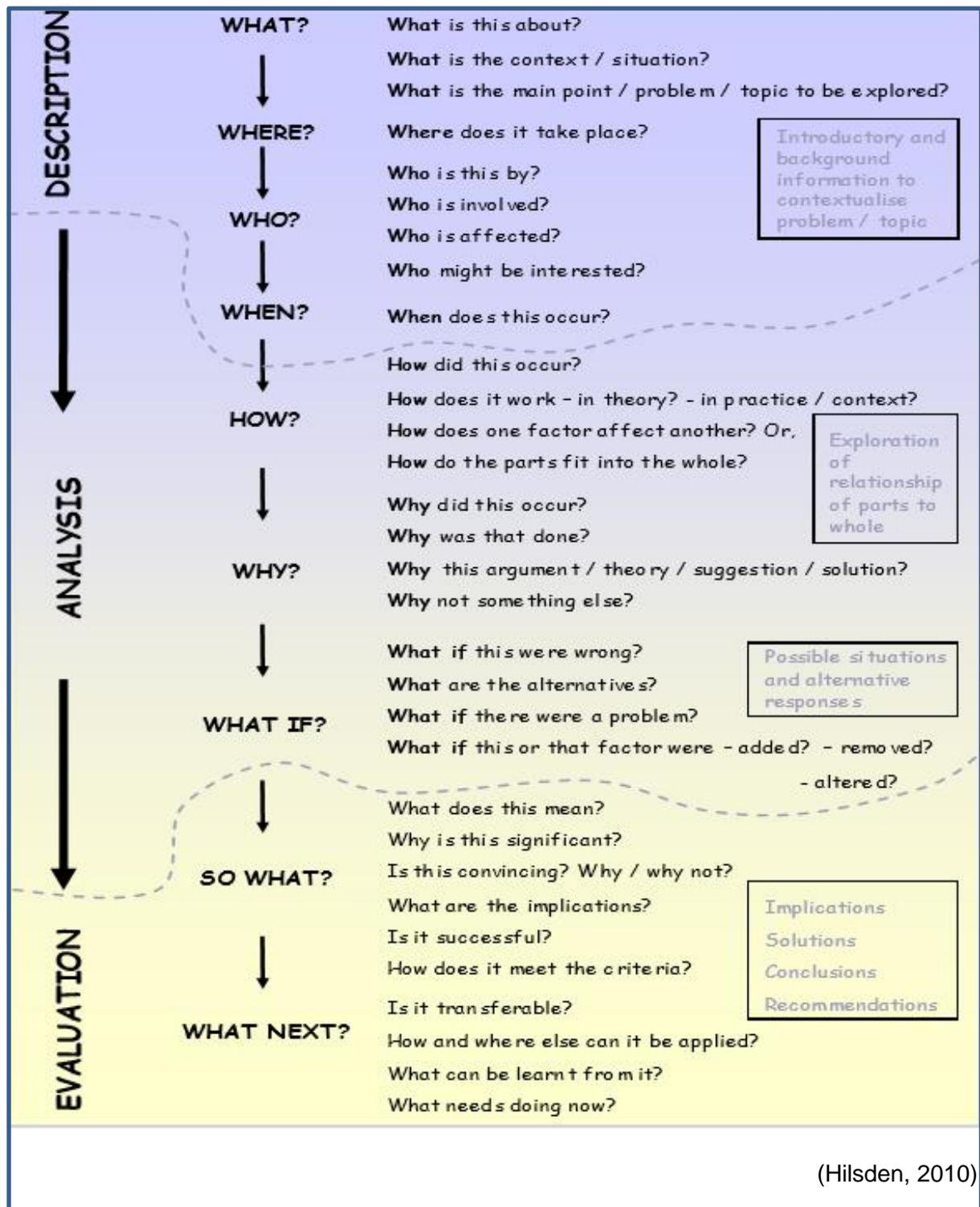
Use appropriate evidence from
your own practice

Discuss limitations in the literature
or policies being presented

Evaluate the significance of the
evidence you present

Identify possible or actual
problems and possible solutions

Model to generate critical writing



Example 1: Level 4 On pages 5 and 6 is an example of level 4 writing. It has been colour coded to illustrate the different steps to critical thinking required at level 4.

In heart failure, an increase in weight can indicate fluid retention and the need to increase diuretic therapy (While & Kiek, 2009). As a patient's condition advances, diuretic therapy can become ineffective resulting in hospital admission. In 2015, heart failure was responsible for 2% of all National Health Service (NHS), beds (British Heart Foundation, 2015). Mary was keen to avoid unnecessary hospital admission and participate in self-care management (Lee. *et al*, 2015). National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines (2009), recommend that heart failure is managed via a partnership between healthcare professionals and the patient. Mary's successful involvement in monitoring her condition would allow her to be cared for at home. The advice to Mary would normally have been to check daily weight and contact her doctor or heart failure nurse if her weight went up by more than 2kg over three days. However, due to mobility problems, Mary was not able to do this and alternative measures for monitoring her fluid load needed to be used. When using titrating diuretic therapy to relieve fluid retention (NICE, 2015), weighing is the preferred method for monitoring occurrences of fluid load (Local NHS Trust, 2016). In cases such as Mary's less objective measures such as monitoring oedema and level of breathlessness can be useful (Bell 2010). Lee. *et al*, (2015) indicate that for patients where symptoms were managed via either weight, lower limb oedema or both this was still likely to result in reduced rates of hospitalisation. Therefore, Mary was asked to monitor her condition by checking her ankles regularly for signs of swelling which included measures such as tightness of her shoes and to note if her activity was more limited by her breathing than normal. She was asked to use a symptoms diary to record the findings.

(adapted from Education for Health, 2013)

Example 1. Here the text has been analysed to identify where some of the critical thinking steps have been demonstrated (see page 2 for definitions).

Step to critical writing	Evidence in the text Y / N	Example from the text
process and understand	Y	“In heart failure, an increase in weight can indicate fluid retention and the need to increase diuretic therapy (While & Kiek, 2009)”.
analysis	Y “National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines (2009), recommend that heart failure is managed via a partnership between healthcare professionals and the patient. Mary’s successful involvement in monitoring her condition would allow her to be cared for at home”.
compares using synthesise	Y“ When using titrating diuretic therapy to relieve fluid retention (NICE, 2015), weighing is the preferred method for monitoring occurrences of fluid load (Local NHS Trust, 2016). In cases such as Mary’s less objective measures such as monitoring oedema and level of breathlessness can be useful (Bell 2010). Lee <i>et al</i> , (2015) indicate that for patients where symptoms were managed via either weight, lower limb oedema or both this was still likely to result in reduced rates of hospitalisation”.
evaluation	Y	Therefore, Mary was asked to monitor her condition by checking her ankles regularly for signs of swelling which included measures such as tightness of her shoes and to note if her activity was more limited by her breathing than normal. She was asked to use a symptoms diary to record the findings.

Example 2: Level 6 On pages 7 and 8 there is an example of level 6 writing. It has been colour coded to illustrate the different steps to critical thinking required at level 6.

The culture of a workplace and the skills of the individual members of staff are both significant factors to consider when discussing team working. Student nurses are expected to work cooperatively, to follow professional guidance and policy initiatives so as to meet the expectation of the National Health Service which is theoretically grounded in productive team working (Clemow and Goodman, 2008; Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2015). Weiss *et al.* (2010) claim that no group work is without conflict, and is weakened by conflict. As conflict arises, both compromise and collaboration are required to bring about resolve (Marriner-Tomey and Tomey, 2009). Health care usually brings a diverse group of people from different ethnic groups, educational levels and lifestyles together to meet the health needs of patients who are themselves diversified (Morrison and Bennett, 2012; Weiss, Whitehead and Tappen, 2010). Parnell and St Onge (2015) suggest that emotional intelligence is vital in managing conflict that arises as a result of such diversity and advocate that leaders create a safe and positive work culture where people develop the ability to work together. Parnell and St Onge (2015) confirm that emotional intelligence can be learned and although it is likely that not all student nurses are in possession of these skills when undertaking their first clinical placement, it would appear that the majority have gained this experience by the time they qualify. Mentor feedback and personal reflection are most likely to be key indicators by which student nurses can measure their progress when developing professional behaviours. Therefore, it is important that mentors advance their skills in giving feedback and recognise their vital contribution to developing student nurses.

(adapted from University of Bedfordshire Student A, 2015)

Example 2. Here the text has been analysed to identify where some of the critical thinking steps have been demonstrated (see page 2 for definitions).

Step to critical writing	Evidence in the text Y / N	Example from the text
evaluation through synthesis	Y	<p>.....Student nurses are expected to work cooperatively, to follow professional guidance and policy initiatives so as to meet the expectation of the NHS which is theoretically grounded in productive team working (Clemow and Goodman, 2008; NMC, 2015). Weiss <i>et al.</i> (2010) claim that no group work is without conflict, and is weakened by conflict. As conflict arises, both compromise and collaboration are required to bring about resolve (Marriner-Tomey and Tomey, 2009).</p> <p>..... Parnell and St Onge (2015) confirm that emotional intelligence can be learned and although it is likely that not all student nurses are in possession of these skills when undertaking their first clinical placement, it would appear that the majority have gained this experience by the time they qualify.</p>
apply	Y	<p>.... it would appear that the majority have gained this experience by the time they qualify. Mentor feedback and personal reflection are most likely to be key indicators by which student nurses can measure their progress when developing professional behaviours.</p>
justify	Y	<p>Therefore, it is important that mentors advance their skills in giving feedback and recognise their vital contribution to developing student nurses.</p>

Further information

The Learning Resources Study Hub provides a range of opportunities (such as online resources, workshops and drop-ins) for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information visit: lrweb.beds.ac.uk/studyhub



References

- Education for Health (2013) *Writing for success* available at: <https://elearning.educationforhealth.org> (Accessed: 28 February 2017)
- Hilsden, J. (2010) 'Critical Thinking', *Learning Development*, Available at: https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/1/1713/Model_To_Generate_Critical_Thinking.pdf (Accessed: 12 March 2014)
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- Wason, H. and Southall, J. (2016) *Critical Thinking Skills Toolkit Student Guide* [unpublished] (Available from: Kingston University)
- Williams, K. (2014) *Getting Critical*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan