

# A Guide to Critical Writing

## Introduction

Critical writing is the process of drawing together other aspects of critical thinking in order to present a robust case to a 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.

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## Steps to critical thinking

The following eight steps progress from number 1 – low-level to number 8 – high-level critical thinking (Adapted from: The Open University, 2013 (cited in Williams, 2014)).

A student in level four (first year undergraduate) or level five (second year undergraduate) would typically demonstrate the following critical thinking steps in their writing:

<b>1) Process</b>	Take in information, i.e. what you have read, seen, heard or done.
<b>2) Understand</b>	Comprehend key points, assumptions, arguments and evidence being presented.
<b>3) Analysis</b>	Examine how key components are linked and relate to each other.
<b>4) Compare</b>	Explore differences and similarities between ideas.
<b>5) Synthesis</b>	Bring together a range of sources that have shaped and supported your ideas and the argument you are presenting.

A student in level five, six (final year of undergraduate) or seven (Masters) writing would typically also feature the following critical thinking steps in their writing:

<b>6) Evaluate</b>	Assess the relevance of the evidence in your own context and show links to other related ideas
<b>7) Apply</b>	Apply the understanding you have gained from critical evaluation and use it in response to assignments and practice.
<b>8) Justify</b>	Develop arguments, draw conclusions, make inferences and identify implications.

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
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## **Model to generate critical writing**

Critical writing involves progressive stages of description, analysis and evaluation. The following has been adapted from Hilsden (2010) and details questions to ask at each stage.

### **Description**

Descriptive writing introduces background information to contextualise a problem or topic. This involves asking ‘what?’, ‘where?’, ‘who?’ and ‘when?’ questions such as:

- What is this about?
- What is the context or situation?
- What is the main point, problem or topic to be explored?
- Where does it take place?
- Who is this by?
- Who is involved?
- Who is affected?
- Who might be interested?
- When does this occur?

### **Analysis**

“How” questions explore the relationship of parts to the whole, “Why” and “What if” questions provide possible situations and alternative responses. Such as:

- How does it work in theory? In practice or specific contexts?
- How does one factor affect another?
- How do the parts fit into the whole?
- How did this occur?
- Why did this occur?
- Why was that done?
- Why do you make this argument, theory, suggestion or solution?
- Why do you pick this over an alternative?
- What if this were wrong?
- What are the alternatives?
- What if there were a problem?
- What if a specific factor were added, removed or altered?

## Evaluation

Considers implications, solutions, conclusions and recommendations. This involves asking 'so what?' and 'what next?' type questions. Such as:

- What does this mean?
- Why is this significant?
- Is this convincing? Why or why not?
- What are the implications?
- Is it successful?
- How does it meet the criteria?
- Is it transferable?
- How and where else can it be applied?
- What can be learnt from it?
- What needs doing now?

## Critical thinking evidenced in writing: Example 1

The following text (adapted from Education for Health, 2013) has been broken down to illustrate critical thinking steps required at level 4.

<b>The author starts with process and understanding:</b>	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. <i>et al</i> , 2015).
<b>The author then demonstrates analysis:</b>	National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines (2018), 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.
<b>The author then shows comparison using synthesis:</b>	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, 2018), 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.
<b>The author concludes with evaluation:</b>	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.

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### Critical thinking evidenced in writing: Example 2

The following example (adapted from University of Bedfordshire Student A, 2015) has been broken down to illustrate critical thinking steps required at level 6.

<b>The author starts with process and understanding:</b>	The culture of a workplace and the skills of the individual members of staff are both significant factors to consider when discussing team working.
<b>The author then demonstrates evaluation through synthesis:</b>	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 <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>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 because of such diversity and advocate that leaders create a safe and positive work culture where people develop the ability to work together.</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...</p>
<p><b>The author then shows application:</b></p>	<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>
<p><b>The author concludes with justification:</b></p>	<p>Therefore, it is important that mentors advance their skills in giving feedback and recognise their vital contribution to developing student nurses.</p>

## References

Education for Health (2013) *Writing for success* available at: (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](https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/1/1713/Model_To_Generate_Critical_Thinking.pdf) (Accessed: 12 March 2014)

University of Bedfordshire Student A, 2015 'Reflective Essay' *NAD009-3 Contemporary Adult Nursing for Professional Practice* [supplied by lecturer 9 November 2016]

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

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## Further information

Study Hub@Library provides a range of opportunities for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information, visit the [Study Hub Website](#).

Other related Study Hub guides in the critical thinking series include:

- 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