

Critical Literacy

Developing your critical literacy skills

What is critical literacy?

Critical literacy is a central thinking skill that a tertiary education seeks to develop in students. It involves the questioning and examination of ideas, and requires you to synthesise, analyse, interpret, evaluate and respond to the texts you read or listen to.

How do I start this process?

Critical literacy starts with reading or listening. For the purposes of critical literacy in academic writing, we are generally talking about your work with reading texts. There are two parts to engaging with academic research or texts: a **reporting** element where you describe what it is you're engaging with; and a **reaction** or response element where you then respond to and **interpret** the text.

The critique starts with the reading

So, as you engage with a reading, the first thing you need to do is to identify key elements of the text. To do that, you need to ask questions and make notes.

Reporting / Describing questions:

- Who are the authors/researchers? What did they do?*
- What is the main position or argument or themes of the text?*
- How did they do the research? Where was it done? With who?*
- What did they find? What do they conclude or recommend?*

Then you need to ask some deeper level questions.

Critical / Interpretive questions:

- What are the researchers claiming? Is it in scope with the study? Do the findings support the aims?*
- What are the strengths of the study? Limitations? Weaknesses? What makes you think so?*
- Are any biases evident? Is the source reliable?*
- Is the research pivotal? Important? Why?*
- Is there other research that supports or contradicts it?*
- Is it replicable? Is it applicable to your study?*

Tip: the key to recording these thoughts and responses to text is to make organised notes as you read.

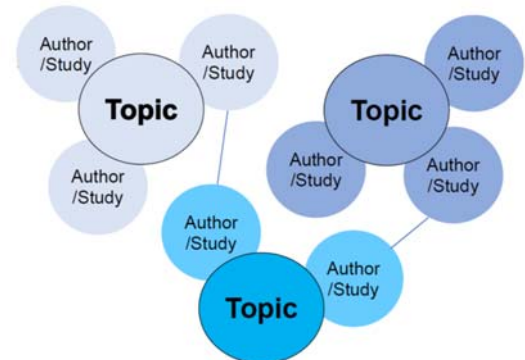
Making notes

Try to group notes by some sort of organising principle. This may be **topical** as determined by the sections of an assignment (e.g. section 1 of the paper might be the research that examines *causes* of something, while section 2 looks at *effects*, 3 at *solutions*); it could be **thematic** so research is grouped by larger themes; by **author**, grouping together authors/studies by similarity or difference; or you may group by more generic themes, such as **major studies** or **chronology** – ordering by time. It depends on your work.

Tip: as you read, make reference notes of the sources, at least author name(s), year and title of the publication.

Next consider the connections or ideas emerging from the groupings and how they fit with the work you are doing. It can be a useful exercise at this stage to create a mindmap or flowchart of the notes as a visual representation can give a fresh perspective on how studies relate to each other.

E.g.:



Critical writing: reporting

Again, there are two parts to the process; the first is descriptive. When you are reporting on what you have read, you are describing the study.

If the idea is clearly finished, use **simple past**, e.g.

*Evans (2010) **found** that...*

If the idea still has currency now or is a still-held belief, use **simple present**, e.g. *Wright (2011) **maintains** that ...*

If there needs to be a link made from past to now, use **present perfect**, e.g. *Wang and Lu (2015) **have shown** ...*

But, you can't stop there, you need to move on to critical engagement.

Critical writing: interpreting

There are a range of elements to critically engaging with text. On one level, you might **interpret** or highlight the significance or importance of the ideas you are reading. E.g.:

*Evans (2010) found that the method was successful and **this was significant because** it represented a major shift from prior research.*

*Wright (2011) maintains that the true focus should be on the method not the outcome, and **this is crucial as it highlights** a renewed focus on the process of development.*

This type of interpretive language, therefore, is powerful as it shifts your writing from the descriptive to the critical and it also shows **your voice** – it is you reacting to the ideas in the text.

Other examples of this type of language are:

This is important because... This tells us that...

This shows that... (*suggests / implies / gives the impression / means that...)*

This is worth noting as / because it...

This calls attention to... highlights the need for...

This can be illustrated by...

What this means is... (*shows / tells us / reveals / highlights / points to / implies)*

... importantly suggests that... (*crucially, significantly)*

... which points to / suggests the need for...

... which is vital / crucial / significant / illustrative as it...

... which shows / illustrates that...

... meaning that ...

... illustrating / pointing to the need for...

In doing so, it points to... / In so doing, tells us that ...

Again, use this language in your writing to show clearly that you are engaging critically with ideas.

Critical writing: critiquing

Another key element to critical literacy is to form opinion or response to the value of the text or the research; in other words, to evaluate it. Perhaps one of the most important things to realise as a student is that you *can* be critical – you are *expected* to be. You can do this in a range of ways.

The impulse when attempting to be *critical* is to look for the negative, however, critique is inherently evaluative and as such can be **positive** (strengths-based), and/or **negative** (limitations-based).

An extra layer to critique is to offer, when appropriate, **solutions** (action/recommendation-based)

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A layered approach

One way to approach the writing of critique is to layer the ideas by reporting, critiquing and offering a response. E.g.:

Brent (2010) **found that** students created highly homogeneous peer groups, based on familial likeness and similarity in social and cultural background. The study, however, **was limited in its application** as Brent chose to collect data over a short time period at a single site. **It may have been more illustrative** to broaden the scope of the study to track students' peer groups over a longer period of time at a range of sites.

Reporting

Critique
Neg: Limitation

Solution:
from you

Another example, focusing on the critique:

One of the limitations of the research of Manning and Ng (2014) is that it focused solely on student attitudes using a large-scale likert-scale survey. Consideration of how these attitudinal measures relate to the real-life social and cultural context of the school **was not explored** in this research. James, in her **pivotal** 2011 study, however, **did exactly that** when she studied attitudes towards learning combining a school-wide survey with focused research on 10 key students.

Critique
Neg: limitation

Critique
Elaboration

Solution:
from another
author (pos
critique)

Functional language of critique

Some examples of the language and phrases you can use.

Limitations – negative critique

*One of the **limitations** with his explanation is that it ...*

*The key **problem** with this position is that ...*

*The study **fails to take into account** the importance of ...*

Strengths – positive critique

*This was **significant / influential** in that it ...*

*This **landmark / pivotal / thorough** study proposed that ...*

*She **correctly** points out that ...*

Constructive suggestions

*The study would have been more **useful** if it had ...*

*The findings may have been more **applicable** if ...*

*The paper may have been more **convincing** if it ...*

Similarity / Difference

*Bond (2001) found... **Similarly**, Bennet (2003) **also** argued that ... Evans (2010) **supports** these ideas saying that ...*

***Unlike** Bradley (2001), **however**, Bennet (2003) maintained that it was more about... **while** Lee (2004) argued ...*

Further Resources

Functional language for critique can be found at the **Academic Phrasebank** by John Morley at the University of Manchester. Particularly useful is the 'Being Critical' page:

<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/being-critical/>

Andy Gillet's **English for Academic Purposes** page also has very useful language:

<http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm>