

Critical Analysis Explained

This brief document seeks to explain the difference between critical analysis and description. It is a generic, non-subject specific series of explanations; readers should bear in mind that there are subtle differences in each subject discipline: a nurse writes very differently to a historian etc. Your tutor is the subject specific expert in academic writing to whom ultimately you should defer. However, this document seeks to explain in simple terms:

- The difference in writing for school and university.
- When a Tutor says you are being “too descriptive” what do they mean.
- What Critical analysis actually is.
- When the term ‘argument’ is used what does this mean.

It is also important to consider some basic technical issues of writing that assist in the communicating of your critical analysis.

- What should be contained in simple generic terms within an introduction or conclusion.
- What is meant by structure, paragraphing and linking sentences or ‘signposting’.

Descriptive Writing

One of the fundamental differences between universities and schools is that schools focus, generally speaking, on what is known and agreed on. Universities may use what is known and agreed on as their starting point, however, they are principally concerned with what is not known and not agreed on. What is known and agreed on can be thought of as ‘description’: $5 \times 5 = 25$ and the Battle of Hastings was in 1066 are both ‘descriptions’ in the sense that they restate facts. If your academic writing spends too long reciting facts, figures and statements of what is non-contentious your tutor may criticise your work as being “too descriptive”. Likewise, if they say your work is “not critical or analytical enough” this broadly means the same thing.

Critical and Analytical Writing

In contrast to the descriptive writing style used in school based study university study demands ‘Critical’ or ‘Analytical’ writing; sometimes just referred to as ‘critical analysis’. University study is principally concerned with what is not known and not agreed on: i.e. why something happened, why is it important, what should now be done and why should it be done. That an event happened, such as a patient has developed diabetes, or a pupil has poor results is not at issue; the discussion is about how you interpret this. This means that an essay requires a strong argument running throughout for one interpretation as against other possible interpretations. It should have a **principal argument**, clearly set out in your introduction, which runs throughout your essay. This is what you are arguing for; you will have subsidiary arguments that support this argument or criticise counter arguments. The term ‘counter argument’ means any reasonable, evidence based argument that could be used to criticise or refute your principal argument. However, there is a danger in abstracting critical analysis from real life we in fact do think critically and analytically all the time.

Consider the below as an example of everyday ‘critical analysis’ and then consider how this relates to academic writing. Two friends are sitting in a Pub arguing about a football match: whether a tackle and subsequent goal was fairly refereed. Peter puts forward an argument that it was not (think of this as the **principal argument**), however his friend Tom disagrees and gives numerous reasons why this is so

(think of this as the **counter arguments**). Then Peter acknowledges each of Tom's counter arguments in turn and points out why Tom is incorrect and why his original argument was correct. Notice that in this scenario you would not expect either of them to describe what football is, they both agree on that. It is the specific case that they do not agree on and hence are arguing about. This is a form of everyday critical analysis: now however, consider how one might view **writing** a critical analysis.

To write academic critical analysis first you must be clear what your principal argument is and why it is significant. (The equivalent from the above scenario would be Peter arguing that the referee made a mistake and his football team lost the match and the League because of it.) You also need to reference where you read or acquired your information. Then you need to think of reasonable and evidenced arguments (Tom's counter arguments). Then you need to think about how you will argue against each of these counter arguments in turn to demonstrate that your principal argument is convincing. In the course of writing your essay you may find that actually your starting position was wrong and you have been convinced by a counter argument. This is perfectly acceptable however, you just need to redraft and rework your essay so the new principal argument is evident from the beginning and follows a similar process to the above. Clarity within introductions and conclusions is also important and may need several drafts to get right.

Introductions and Conclusions

It is often useful to draft your introduction first and then rework it several times during the writing of the essay. There is often confusion about what introductions and conclusion should contain. Therefore, it is important to consider the structure of a good introduction; which to a certain extent should contain three things a **What**, **Why** and **How**.

- **What**: i.e. what is your focus ('This essay will focus on....) and what is your principal argument ('It will argue that....).
- **Why**: i.e. the significance and importance of the thing that you are discussing e.g. why is it important for patient care or methods of teaching.
- **How**: what is the structure in brief; e.g. 'First the essay will discuss....then it will examine....etc.

Conclusions should to a certain extent replicate the introduction's **What** and **Why**, rewritten into the past tense: in other words 'This essay has argued that....' etc. It should not contain any new information and just restate the principal argument and its significance.

Structure, Paragraphing and Signposting

Each paragraph should forward your principal argument in some way or refute a possible counter argument. It should not be two lines nor should it be a whole page. It should have a sentence at the beginning that gives an indication to the reader what the paragraph will do: i.e. 'It is important to consider the relationship between poverty and poor diet...' if that is what your paragraph does. Your last sentence of your paragraph should make a link between that paragraph and the next. These are called signposts or linking sentences: sometimes your tutor may criticise a lack of 'signposting' or that you do not have 'linking sentences': this is often what they are referring to.