Alternative Format: Being Critical

Landing Page

Welcome and thank you for accessing this toolkit which has been designed to help support you with your academic skills development during your time at Edge Hill.

Click 'Start Course' to start the toolkit from the beginning or alternatively select the most relevant heading(s) from the contents below.

We recommend completing the below sections in order, but you are welcome to work through this toolkit in a way that suits you best.

Accessibility

Our commitment to accessibility

As an Edge Hill student you are part of an incredibly diverse learning community. As part of our ongoing commitment to ensure an equitable and inclusive learning experience for all students, we have placed accessibility at the heart of UniSkills support, which enables all students to participate.

Alternative Formats

This is an alternative format for the Being Critical toolkit.

Welcome from UniSkills

Hello, we are the Student Engagement team – otherwise known as UniSkills! We are the people you'll meet (in real life and online) through various support channels, as we help you develop your academic skills while studying at Edge Hill University. Later in the toolkit you will have the opportunity to explore our wider support, but this is your chance to [find out more about the team](#).

Access the video below to hear more about UniSkills and how to use this toolkit from our friendly Student Advisor. Alternatively, you are welcome to access the transcript as a [Word version](#) or [PDF version.](#)

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

How this Toolkit can Help

Being critical is a crucial skill at university and beyond. This toolkit will take you through the meaning of criticality, and help you develop the skills to be a critical thinker, reader, writer, and practitioner - in short, a critical learner!

Access this short video, featuring one of our friendly academic skills advisors, who will tell you more about why being critical is important. Alternatively, you are welcome to access the transcript as a [Word version](#) or [PDF](#) version.

Top tip: Already received some assignment feedback or wish to jump to a specific word or phrase within this toolkit? You can click on the magnifying glass in the top left-hand corner of the navigation panel to access a search box, search for key terms and learn more about that skill. Depending on the device you are using to access the toolkit, and whether you are in portrait or landscape mode, you might need to click on the 3 lines '≡' in the top left-hand corner of your device to access this search feature.

Upon completion of this toolkit you will have developed the skills to:

- Comprehend the meaning of criticality.
- Think, read, and write critically.
- Become a lifelong critical learner.

Completing this toolkit supports the following [graduate attributes](#):

1. Digital Proficiency
2. Critical Thinking
3. Adaptability/Flexibility
4. Ethics, Diversity, and Sustainability

Being a Critical Learner

Criticality is not a fixed trait – it is a skill that develops and deepens over time. Rather than a straight path, the journey to becoming a critical learner often involves cycles of learning, unlearning, and relearning. Being a critical learner means engaging actively with ideas, questioning assumptions, and

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

making informed judgments. It involves approaching information with curiosity; recognising complexity; and being open to multiple perspectives.

Reflecting On Our Biases

A key element of this can include thinking critically about our biases. This is something to be mindful of in all stages of the criticality process: in our thinking, our reading, and our writing. Whether conscious or unconscious, it is likely that we hold a number of biases. Being a critical learner means knowing how your own perspective, and potential biases, shape what you see.

You need to consider whether your approach is subjective (personal and shaped by your experiences) or objective (aiming to be neutral and fact-based). Remember, though - even objectivity is not 'perfect'. Your background, and the wider contexts and structures you exist within, still influence what you notice, question, or value.

Different subjects treat this differently. In science, you step back. In the arts or social sciences, your viewpoint might be part of the work. Regardless, however, you should ask yourself: what assumptions am I making? What might I be missing?

Activity: Explore NHS England's resource on [Understanding Different Types of Bias](). Are any of these familiar to you? Take time to reflect on how this makes you feel.

Activity: Now take a moment to engage with this video on [Unconscious Bias]() from The Ethics Centre. Additionally, or alternatively, you can explore this summary:

- It is part of our evolutionary design to make unconscious, often biased, decisions.
- Admitting and noticing our biases can make us more open to different perspectives - this is crucial in critical thinking.
- Unconscious bias means that people are excluded from opportunities, conversations, experiences and other arenas bases on their ethnicity, sex/uality, dis/ability and other attributes.
- Whilst we may have evolved to hold unconscious biases, and these may have helped us once, they are often no longer useful and can even be harmful. In order to be critical thinkers, we need to be honest about, anticipate, and question our biases.

Unconscious Bias or Conscious Inclusion?

Once you become conscious of your biases, you can work proactively at addressing them. This is crucial in any academic work, as it means you practise an openness to other perspectives - this is the crux of being a critical learner.

Activity: Take a moment to consider the table below. Do any of these approaches sound familiar? How does that make you feel?

Unconscious Bias	Conscious Inclusion
Deciding on the outcome of a project before undertaking research.	Noticing your desired outcome, but being honest about research results.
Only reading sources that support your perspective (confirmation bias).	Reading a variety of sources, even if they are challenging.
Assuming that the most famous voices in your field are also the most important.	Being open to a variety of different, even marginal, voices.
Centering your own experience(s).	Acknowledging your experience(s), but noticing that others may be different.
Presuming to know a student, patient, or client based on appearances.	Recognising an individual's uniqueness and being open to learning from them.
Accepting the usual, popular, or 'normal' ways of knowing or doing research.	Appreciating that 'norms' are often power-laden; seeking multiple approaches.
Assuming causation from correlation, as it fits your hypothesis.	Thinking carefully before claiming that one thing causes another.
Presenting statistics or results in a way that confirms your hypothesis.	Presenting results honestly, even if they challenge your hypothesis.

Critical Thinking

Criticality: What and Why?

There is a common misconception that criticality means to criticise. For example, to say that a piece of art lacks imagination, or that a song is forgettable.

However, in an academic context, the meaning is slightly different. Here, criticality relates to displaying an openness to different perspectives; an ability to question them; and it can include making a reasoned judgement on these perspectives.

It is an important skill to develop as it signifies your commitment to in-depth learning. It is also a beneficial life skill, as it fosters appreciation of different experiences, attitudes, and contexts that can lead to strengthened empathy and communication skills.

Thinking Critically

Before it is possible to read and write critically, you must become familiar with what it means to think critically. Whilst this might seem like new territory, you may be surprised to learn that critical thinking is a skill you regularly employ in your day-to-day lives. The challenge arises when you apply this to academic skills - but this is where this toolkit can help!

Criticality in Everyday Life

Whilst critical thinking may feel like a new skill, you might be surprised to learn that it is something you practise more regularly than you think.

Activity: Explore the examples below to become familiar with criticality in your everyday life.

- Travel: When booking a holiday, your first critical question might be, where do you want to stay? You might then consider what reviews say; how close it is to an airport; what facilities are offered.
- Social Media: We use critical thinking to identify 'fake news' on social media. This is because information is sometimes shared for its popularity rather than its accuracy. Think about how you currently decide what information is credible.
- Sport: Whilst we may be influenced by family ties to favour a particular sportsperson or team, we can also engage our critical thinking to consider which is the most successful, sportingly, and deserving of our support.

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

- Purchases: When buying a mobile phone, you are likely to critically compare features, contracts, different providers, price, and camera quality amongst other aspects.
- Cooking and baking: Even baking a cake requires critical decisions to be made about the quantity and quality of ingredients, the style of decoration, and how it will be served.

How Does This Relate to Academic Criticality?

Although you may be more familiar with critical thinking than you initially believed, academic criticality does make slightly different, arguably more challenging, demands on you than baking a cake or choosing a mobile phone. For instance, it requires a substantial amount of reading and then asks that you do something with that reading (that is, to write critically). More of this later on in the toolkit, though.

For now, it is valuable to highlight some similarities. Note the emboldened words in the previous activity - these apply to academic critical thinking too: critical thinking asks questions, reviews, compares, and makes decisions about the quality, accuracy, and credibility of sources, results, and even ourselves.

Blocks to Criticality

Nevertheless, critical thinking can still feel daunting. Explore the different scenarios below to determine how you might best navigate them.

- Doubting Yourself: "I just accept what I'm told. I'm not good at thinking of questions to ask".
  - We have all felt like this! Remember, though, that academic criticality might be a new pursuit and that everyone has to start somewhere. It will feel easier the more you do it. The best place to start, if you are feeling like this, is with your reading. In order to ask questions of a topic, it is necessary first to understand that topic. The next section of this toolkit will help here.
- Feeling Overwhelmed: "There is just too much to read. I don't know where to start".
  - A good idea if you are feeling like this is to try and narrow your focus. Your Reading Lists are a great place to start, as sources are often categorised as 'essential' and 'recommended' reading. You can also discuss with your tutor if you need help with directing your reading.

- You could also try chunking and prioritising your reading. Think: what do you already know? What do you need to build your knowledge on? Can you find some alternative views?
- Remember - you cannot read everything! But don't let the sheer volume of sources prevent you from engaging with any.

- Respecting Authority: "All of these books have been written by experts – who am I to question them?"
  - Although it is right and proper to appreciate the experience that comes with years of study, remember that even 'experts' can be challenged and critiqued! Moreover, those who are considered authorities on topics have only achieved that status through engaging in the process of critical questioning - a process that you are now embarking upon.
  - You are now a member of an academic community, so it is right and proper also to critically consider everything you read and hear. After all, knowledge can only develop if people have the courage to question that knowledge.

- Seeking an 'Answer': "I'm not sure which opinion is right. Where can I find the answer?"
  - Thinking in this way can limit your ability to think critically. In academic work, there is often no right or wrong opinion. Whilst this can feel frustrating, remember that your tutors are not necessarily looking for you to 'answer' a question. Rather, they are wanting you to acknowledge the complexity of a topic. This includes looking at different perspectives, and developing your own, informed opinion.

- Procrastination: "I'll do all of the critical stuff later. It won't take me long".
  - It is often tempting to leave difficult tasks until the end. However, doing so only hampers your response and, ultimately, your success. Whilst you certainly need to read and understand in order then to think critically, you should approach all of your reading with a critical lens. And remember, this takes time. This toolkit's next section on critical reading will help here.

- Perfectionism: "I still have more work to do to show that I understand this topic and all of the different perspectives on it".
  - The tricky thing about critical thinking is that the more you know, the more you know about what you don't know! As such, it is easy to get stuck in the reading phase of researching a topic, especially if it is one that you are really interested in! However, being critical also requires making critical decisions about the scope of your research. Consequently, this should impact the scope of your writing. Remember that you are not

necessarily looking for answers here and that a 'perfect answer' is sometimes that there is no answer!

- Time Pressures: "Isn't just showing my knowledge enough? I don't have time for all of this thinking!"
  - We live in a society that is increasingly time-poor, and it is understandable that allowing time for critical thinking may not feel necessary or like a productive use of your time. However, if you want to be an effective and, ultimately, a successful learner it is crucial that you take time to think about what you know. After all, tutors also know what has been said about a topic - they want to know what you think about what has been said.

Critical Reading

Now that you've explored critical thinking, it's time to apply this to your academic reading. In this section we will examine what critical reading is, why it is important, and how you can engage with texts critically for your assignments.

At university, wide and active reading is essential for assignments. While it may be challenging, engaging deeply with texts helps you build strong arguments and succeed in your studies.

Before you work on reading critically in more depth, you may want to visit our [Academic Reading toolkit](#) first.

Activity: Now explore the table below to help you determine the difference between critical and non-critical reading.

Critical Reading	Not Critical Reading
Focussing on reading what is relevant to your assignment.	Reading everything on a topic.
Evaluating evidence.	Focussing solely on limitations.
Knowing why you have chosen to read something.	Sticking to sources referenced by your tutor.

Making links between what you read.	Reading an article's abstract.
Exploring different perspectives.	Only choosing sources that support your point of view.
Keeping notes relevant to your assignment.	Making extensive notes about everything on a topic.
Considering both strengths and weaknesses.	

Top Tip: Whilst it is impossible to read everything, or to make notes on everything you read, strategic note-making is actually really good practice. For more support with note-making, visit your Academic Writing toolkit.

What is Critical Reading?

So, what is critical reading and how is it different to reading normally?

It's easy to get lost in a good book when reading for pleasure. You might choose a familiar author, an interesting title or blurb, or simply a cover that catches your attention. Many people read as a way to relax or explore new worlds and stories.

When you read critically, you are actively engaging with a text to interpret, evaluate and question what you're reading. You're not just trying to glean the surface information; you're reading to go deeper into a subject to get a clear understanding of a topic or concept.

Critical reading helps you:

- Understand why you are reading something, what you want to get out of reading these texts, and how these fit into your assignment.
- Only read what is relevant to your assignment so you can make the most of the time you have before you have to submit a piece of work.
- Understand how to read a text as your approach will be different depending on what you want to get out of a specific text.
- Bring together all of the research and reading you have done and understand what it means in the context of your assignment.

Why is it Important?

Critical reading is at the heart of academic study and is really important, particularly if you want to achieve higher marks. It can help make your work more efficient and more effective, and can ultimately help you to achieve higher marks:

- More efficient: Critical reading means you won't waste time reading or making notes on something that isn't relevant and saves time for writing and proofreading.
- More effective: Critical reading ensures you focus on reading the most important texts and sections, allowing you to learn more deeply.
- Higher marks: Refer to your marking rubric. To get the highest marks, you will need to include some form of criticality, and critical reading is the first step in critical analysis.

Choosing Sources to Read

Before you start reading critically, you need to critically choose which sources you need to read from your search results. Your reading lists and any module bibliographies are great places to start, but you need to go further than these. Remember, though - you won't be able to read everything on a topic, so you need a process to choose only what is key for your piece of work. So how do you do this?

Remember the acronym CORE which stands for: Currency, Origin, Relevance and Evidence.

- Currency: When was it published?
  - Make sure that your evidence is current! You may also want to consider whether it still reflects the state of the research field or has research in this area moved on? Many tutors will expect sources to be within the last 5 or 10 years so do check your module handbook or assignment guidance so you know what is expected.
- Origin: Is the author a subject expert?
  - Research whether the author has other publications in the area and what their role is in the academic community - are they a lecturer or professor for example? Also check who they have referenced - are there other authors or articles here that are useful to you? However, do remember that any works cited will be older than the current one so be mindful of their currency!
- Relevance: How relevant is the source?
  - Does the source fit with your topic or help you answer the question/brief you have been set? Remember to choose the pieces that fit with your question. Having the most books

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

checked out of the library doesn't always mean you have identified the most high-quality sources. Remember, whilst wide reading helps build depth, your tutor is looking for smart choices and critical engagement - not just a long bibliography.

- o Don't just read the title - if it is a journal article, remember to read the abstract as this will help you assess how useful is it to you.
- o It would also be useful at this stage to consider whether the text is from a respected academic source e.g. is it peer reviewed? Remember, there is a peer reviewed filter in Discover More and many databases you can use to narrow down your results!

- Evidence: Does the evidence support the argument?
    - o What evidence has been provided? How has the author(s) used and interpreted their findings? Are you convinced by the argument?

Top Tip: Remember to leave plenty of time to read widely and make links between what you have read.

Critical Questions to Ask

Now you've critically chosen what you are going to read you can start to question, evaluate, and locate the arguments the author poses.

Activity: Access this video from Doug Specht on how to evaluate what you are reading. After building your understanding via this video, explore the prompts below that will help you to question, evaluate, and locate information effectively:

Question:

- What assumptions does the author make? Do you think these are correct?
- Is the argument logical?
- Is there enough evidence?

Evaluate:

- How do the conclusions relate to other research?
- Are you persuaded by their arguments? Why or why not?
- How does this add to your argument?

Locate:

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

- How does this reading relate to other things that you've read and to other academic research?
- What is the authors position on this issue?
- Does this author offer a different view to others?
- How does this relate to what you already know?
- Does the author come from a particular school of thought? e.g. Marxism or Feminism.

Reading With the Author vs. Reading the Author Critically

Now you know the questions you should ask when you're reading critically, you have two ways you could engage with the text:

- Read with the author
- Read the author critically

But how do you do this?

Reading With the Author: When you first read a text, read it with the author. This means you're reading to understand the author's perspective.

- You want to fully understand what the author is trying to say so read carefully.
- Make notes on the author's ideas - what is the author's main argument(s)?
- Don't question or challenge the views expressed in the text at this stage. We're simply reading to make sure we understand what the author is saying.

Reading the Author Critically: Now read the text and your notes again. This is where we draw on the critical questions such as:

- What are the strengths and limitations of the text?
- Are there other theories or studies that support the author's argument? Or do they pose a different perspective?
- Are there any questions left unanswered?
- What do you think? Based on your reading, what do you think about the argument presented?

So remember, you may need to read a text multiple times to get both a sound understanding and a critical perspective too.

Critical Appraisal

While you are reading, you will come across a variety of evidence that you will need to appraise. This means assessing how useful it is to your assignment, how accurate it is, and whether it is of a high quality. Critical appraisal may also include investigating the suitability of the methods used.

Top Tip: An invaluable resource when appraising evidence is a Critical Appraisal Checklist. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) offers a number of <u>free downloadable checklists</u>, along with a <u>guide on how to use CASP checklists</u>.

Appraising Statistics

Activity: Work through the two scenarios below to further explore how to critically appraise statistics.

Scenario 1 - Statistical Manipulation

- Sometimes, statistics can be presented in a way that persuades you to believe a certain perspective, think a certain way or interpret data in a way that is beneficial to the author.
- In 2007, Colgate published a billboard that claimed:
    - "More that 80% of dentists recommend Colgate"

Activity: Take a moment to reflect on what you think about this. For example, would you see this as a good piece of evidence, or would you want to ask more questions?

Colgate were warned by the Advertising Standards Agency for this advert, as it was deemed to be misleading. In fact, dentists surveyed were allowed to choose multiple brands. The results actually showed that a competitor was chosen equally.

Always make sure you ask questions about statistics and examine the data as it can be presented to persuade us to think in a certain way.

Scenario 2 – Correlation and Causation

When you examine data, you are searching for correlation: that is a relationship between two variables. This can imply one causes the other (known as causation), but this isn't always the case!

There are two types of correlation to investigate: Positive correlation and Negative correlation.

Library and Learning Services

Positive correlation is where the data shows that as one variable increases or decreases, the other variable does the same.

Negative correlation is where the data shows that as one variable increases or decreases, the other variable does the opposite.

Data can show either negative or positive correlation, but this doesn't mean they are actually related and one causes the other.

So how do you know if the correlation means there is causation? There are two main things to remember:

1. Is it logical? Does it make sense that these things are related?
2. If you're not sure, research! Can you find any other evidence to back this up?

Activity: Now you know how to spot when something is and isn't correlated, and how to recognise causation, let's try to spot it in the following questions.

1. Statistics suggest that as height increases, so does weight. Do you think these two variables are correlated or not?
   a. These variables show positive correlation because as one rises, the other also rises.
   b. They also show causation, as it is logical that as a person gets taller, their weight is higher.
2. Statistics suggest that the popularity of the name Thomas decreases at the same rate as motor vehicle thefts in Maine. Do you think these two variables are correlated or not?
   a. As the name Thomas drops in popularity, motor vehicle thefts also decline showing positive correlation.
   b. However, while both show the same trend, the name Thomas declining doesn't cause motor vehicle thefts to decline too - this wouldn't be logical!
3. Statistics suggest that as money spent on admission tickets to sporting events increases, whole milk consumption declines. Do you think these two variables are correlated or not?
   a. This statistic demonstrates negative correlation between money spent on admission to spectator sports and per capita consumption of whole milk.
   b. Still, while these variables show the opposite trend, the spend on spectator sport admission declining doesn't cause milk consumption to increase - this wouldn't be logical!

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

Appraising Language: Rhetorical Manipulation

Sometimes, texts use emotive or persuasive language to push a viewpoint without solid evidence. For example:

"This craze for veganism surely must be stopped if we are to save our agricultural industry from disaster, as Smith (2020) has rightly argued . . . "

In this case, you can question:

- Is there evidence behind what the author labels as a 'craze' or a 'disaster'?
- Does the language used reassure you that the author is being critical or does it imply bias?
- Why should you be so 'sure' Smith is right? What does the evidence actually say?
- Is the author interested in the wider debate in the literature?

When language feels loaded, dig deeper. Critical reading means questioning, not just accepting.

Activity: Take some time to engage with the paragraph below. What critical questions might you ask of it?

"It is without doubt that the internet has changed the world of work forever. For a start, in terms of recruitment, this process is now happily much faster (Revell, 2022). It is clear that the use of AI also means that employers can be sure they always reach the very best candidates for the job (Smith, 2021) and reduce bias, despite some unfair criticisms that bias is inbuilt. It is also easier to communicate with candidates and for employers to research their potential employees: is this not best for everyone? Therefore, the use of online recruitment can arguable only be a positive step".

Activity: Now apply the following questions to the passage:

- Are any claims overstated and/or unsubstantiated?
- Is any of the language imprecise, vague, and/or informal?
- Are any assumptions made?
- Are there any rhetorical questions?

When engaging in critical appraisal, it is important to be aware of the tools used in rhetorical manipulation (such as overstated claims and rhetorical questions). Such writing can often appear convincing at first, but may unravel with further critical probing.

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

Library and Learning Services

For more information on Rhetorical Manipulation, you might wish to explore [Chapter 7](#) of Tom Chatfield's book *Being Critical.*

Plan to Be Critical

Now you know what you're checking for when you're reading, let's consider how you can keep track of this in a critical planning grid. A plan like the one below can help you to organise your thinking, identify key themes, and begin to form an argument/structure for your assignment. You can change the column titles (e.g. participants) for ones relevant to your subject and critiques.

The table below is based on the following assignment title and Learning Outcomes (LOs):

Title: Critically assess students' understanding of academic integrity when engaging with AI.

LO1: Demonstrate an understanding of academic integrity as a concept.

LO2: Identify and discuss students' experiences of using AI at university.

Source	Key Themes	Learning Outcomes	Participants	Areas for Criticality
GODDIKSEN, M.P., JOHANSEN, M. W., ARMOND, A. C., CENTA, M., CLAVIEN, C., GEFENAS, E., GLOBOKAR, R., HOGAN, L., KOVACS, N., MERIT, M. T., OLSSON, A. A., POSKUTE, M., QUINN, U., SANTOS, J.B., SANTOS, R., SCHOPFER, C., STRAHOVNIK, V., VARGA, O., WALL, O. J., SANDOE, P. and	Academic Integrity Cheating	1	1,639	• Participants from 7 countries and representing all major disciplines. • More participants identifying as female = not representative of census data/student populations. • Disproportionate number of students from humanities therefore cannot generalise findings.

LUND, T.B., 2024. Grey zones and good practice: a European survey of academic integrity among undergraduate students. *Ethics & Behaviour,* 34 (3), pp. 199-217.				
TERBLANCHE, N., MOLYN, J. WILLIAMS, K. and MARITZ, J. 2023. Performance matters: students' perceptions of Artificial Intelligence coach adoption factors. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice,* 16 (1), pp. 100-114.	<mark>Artificial Intelligence</mark>	2	11	• Moroccan study – cannot generalise to a UK context.
BENFATAH, M., MARFAK, A., SAAD, E., HILALI, A., NEJJARI, C. and YOULYOUZ-MARFAK, I., 2024. Assessing the efficacy of ChatGPT as a virtual patient in nursing simulation training: A study on	<mark>ChatGPT</mark> Nursing students <mark>Students' experiences</mark>	1, 2	12	• Students felt prepared for clinical practice after using ChatGPT simulation-based training. • Research offered limited scenarios, so it's not possible to say that AI enabled confidence in all areas of practice.

nursing students experiences. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing,* 19 (3), pp. e486-493.				

Activity: Make a start on completing your own Plan to Be Critical. You can do this by accessing this as a pre-filled PDF or as a customisable Word document. Why not be creative and have a go at designing your own!

Critical Writing

Now you've explored how to read critically, you can move on to turning this reading into critical writing.

As your studies progress, there will be a growing expectation for you to demonstrate critical thinking through your writing. Direction words such as "critically analyse" and "critically evaluate" will appear in more assignment briefs and learning outcomes the further into your studies you are. It is key you meet these to pass the assignment.

Don't worry if this feels daunting at first, though; this lesson will guide you through how you can demonstrate your critical reading and thinking in your writing.

Before you work on writing critically in more depth, you may want to visit your Academic Writing toolkit.

What is Critical Writing?

Critical writing is where you try to communicate your critical thinking and critical reading on the page. It is one of the central challenges of academic writing: to make your thinking explicit in a way that others can engage with and understand.

The term 'critical' has several meanings, for example *finding fault* (to criticise) or something *key* or *decisive* (critical incident or critically ill). However, in an academic context, criticality means not accepting things at face value, but evaluating the evidence presented by an author. It is being objective and open-minded, recognising limitations and providing alternative solutions. It could include

considering the strengths and weaknesses of a theory or argument, exploring counterarguments on a particular topic, or evaluating arguments or theories against each other. It is asking how valid an argument or study is rather than simply criticising the evidence, and you can demonstrate this in critical writing.

Two ways you could demonstrate criticality in your writing are:

Evaluating an argument:

- This is where you assess what the author has said and consider if there are any limitations or other perspectives on this. This requires reading widely to find other literature to support or refute the argument.
- Example: "The claim that sustainable fashion is always more ethical overlooks issues like affordability and accessibility. While the intention is positive, it assumes all consumers can prioritise ethics over cost, which is not always realistic".

Evaluating the methods used:

- This involves evaluating whether the author's research methods were appropriate for their aims. To do this effectively, you'll need a solid understanding of research methods, which comes from wide reading.
- Example: "*Using online surveys to study sustainable fashion choices offers broad reach but lacks depth. A qualitative approach could better capture the personal and cultural factors behind consumer decisions*".

From Descriptive Writing to Critical Writing

When you start writing, you will usually be descriptive. This means you state the information you have found in your reading to evidence your point. However, as you move through the levels at university, there is the expectation that you do more with your research and knowledge. In simple terms, you want to move from the "how" to the "why".

Activity: The table below shows the different features of descriptive writing and critical or analytical writing. Jot down some notes to help you remember the key differences.

Library and Learning Services

Descriptive Writing	Critical/Analytical Writing
Describes what happened.	Identifies the significance.
States what something is like.	Evaluates the strengths and weaknesses.
Gives the story so far.	Weighs one piece of information against another.
Outlines the order in which things happened.	Makes reasoned judgements.
Instructs how to do something.	Argues a case according to the evidence.
Lists the main elements of a theory.	Show why something is relevant or suitable.
Outlines how something works.	Indicates why something works.
Notes the methods used.	Identifies appropriate or suitable methods.
States when something occurred.	Identifies why the timing is important.
States the different components.	Weighs up the importance of component parts.

Language for Criticality

The language you use in your assignments can demonstrate how you have thought about your reading critically to the marker.

Critical writing involves using precise language to explain your reasoning - not just stating disagreement, but clearly articulating why you question a perspective or method.

This may also mean that you need to use cautious language (also called "hedging" language) in order to show that your interpretation is not the only perspective.

The Academic Phrasebank from The University of Manchester is a great resource to help with phrasing for cautious or critical writing.

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

Library and Learning Services

Reading to Write

Critical writing also means interacting with the literature: using your reading in order to write. This includes addressing limitations and highlighting alternatives; remaining objective whilst staying curious; and not to ignoring sources just because they challenge your viewpoint.

Addressing Limitations

To some extent, all studies will have limitations of some kind, and many authors will acknowledge the limitations they think impacted their results (this is commonly discussed towards the end of a paper). However, in many cases there will be limitations that have not been explored which you can also draw upon in your critical writing. You may highlight some of these in your notes or critical plan, and you will need to decide which of these limitations could be relevant in forming your argument on a particular topic.

Examples:

- Methods - was the best method used to elicit data?
- Sample - is the sample generalisable to the wider population?
- Argument - does the evidence and reasoning that the author presents back up their point? (this would be clear as you may have come across counterarguments in your reading)

Highlighting Alternatives

If you do examine the limitations of the sources you are discussing in your assignment, you can also consider any suggestions you can make. If you find a limitation with the study design or methods, you could suggest what methods may elicit better results based on your research. If you find a limitation with the argument, you may suggest other theories or counter arguments you come across in your reading that answer this.

Examples:

- Methods - which method would have been better to use to elicit this data (remember, this could be a different method altogether or suggesting triangulation with another method).
- Sample - how could the sample be improved? You may also note what limitations there could have been to cause this sample issue (e.g. time, resources, distance, financial etc.).
- Argument - present the counterarguments and their evidence.

Library and Learning Services

While you do want to critically analyse what you read, you need to be careful not to pass judgement based on your own unsupported opinion on a topic. You should be approaching an assignment from a neutral standpoint, and remember it is okay to explore and engage with arguments and viewpoints that challenge your own perspective! This doesn't mean one perspective can't be stronger than another, it just means any points you make must be informed by literature and evidenced accordingly.

Synthesis and Integration

As you develop your academic writing you will also be expected to integrate and synthesise literature. It is therefore useful to know what these terms actually mean.

Integration is where you bring together theory, policy, practice and academic literature. The example below shows how you can combine academic literature with professional guidelines:

"Wilson (2020) found that effective communication with patients can have a positive impact on their wellbeing during a hospital stay, which supports clinical guidelines that stress getting to know a patient as an individual can vastly improve their experience of care (NICE, 2021)".

It is important to remember that while you can include policy and professional guidelines in your work as evidence, you are working on academic assignments which means you must find and include evidence from academic literature.

Synthesis is where you infer there is a relationship between different sources i.e. that the sources come to the same conclusion or contribute to the same argument. The example below shows synthesis of 3 academic sources:

"The ability to demonstrate critical writing is important for students (Adejumo, 2019; Patel, 2020; Smith, 2021)".

You will find opportunities for synthesis while you're reading as you will be making notes on the sources you come across. Revisit these notes - are there any common themes or do any authors form similar arguments? This is an opportunity to synthesise these sources.

Top Tip: When writing your main body paragraphs, you will likely combine descriptive writing, synthesis, and critical writing to form your argument.

Structuring a Critical Argument

Now you know what you need to include when writing critically, let's consider how you can structure this in your own argument.

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

Library and Learning Services

You may have a lot of points you want to make, so you might want to consider your word count here. In addition, think about how much you will be able to explore in depth to meet your learning outcomes, as well as which points you have good evidence for. Remember, each paragraph will cover one point, so you won't be able to cover everything on a topic. This is about being selective and making a critical judgement about what to include.

A paragraph will usually start by describing the point you are making and evidence that supports it. For this you might use the SEED tool (Statement - Expand - Evidence - Develop).

Statement
Each paragraph will explore one theme or point from your reading so first you need to state your point clearly to your reader so they know what you are going to discuss. This point should link back to the question you are answering.

Statement example: *"Wilson (2024) has identified that the rise in violence and aggression towards healthcare professionals is being underreported".*

Expand
This is where you give your reader more information on your point. Here you could provide reasons for something, a little more context or explain something to the reader.

Expand example: *"Reasons for not reporting incidences are significant but complex, such as..."*

Evidence
Evidence is key to support the point you are making, and this will come from the literature you have read. Depending on the assignment you are writing, this evidence could be from:

- Academic literature such as books, eBooks and journal articles
- Credible sources (grey literature) such as the NHS website, government websites and organisations such as the World Health Organization
- Your experience in practice if you are writing a reflection on practice
- Policy and professional guidelines such as the National Curriculum and NICE

Remember, you could synthesise multiple authors or integrate evidence from different source types here to demonstrate your knowledge.

Library and Learning Services

Evidence example: *"According to McKenna (2023) there is a lack of appropriate support and training for staff subjected to violence and aggression, leading to many incidences not being reported. (Further supporting evidence here...)".*

Develop

This is the 'mini conclusion' to the descriptive section of a paragraph. Here you make explicit what the reader should think about the point and evidence you have presented, and will use language such as 'This suggests...', 'Consequently...', or 'Therefore...'

Develop example: *"Therefore, it is essential that staff of all levels need to receive training in order to promote safety of service users, staff and visitors (NIMHE, 2022)".*

While this structure is a good starting point, it only covers the basic descriptive part of your paragraph. You should then try to bring in some criticality and explore your argument which could follow this structure:

So What?

Asking 'so what?' is key to developing your critical writing.

For this example, you could ask yourself:

- What could happen if staff aren't trained?
- Are there any financial/time implications here?
- If staff are training, how does this impact upon patient care? (both in terms of the result of training but also if they are training during working hours).

So What? example: *"However, it is important to recognise that training all staff has a huge financial implication for an already struggling NHS (provide evidence here)".*

What Next?

Asking 'What Next?' prompts you to think about the future and what you can do about this point. This could be considering where the research needs further exploration, examining the consequences, or even going as far as making your own recommendations.

For this example, you could ask yourself:

- What else would be useful to consider?
- Are there any limitations to this argument?

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

- How could research improve this area?

What Next? example: *"While offering support and training to healthcare staff is vital, future research could investigate the reasons why there has been an increase in healthcare professionals being subjected to violence and aggression".*

<u>But?</u>
You can get an extra squeeze of criticality into your paragraph by keeping the word 'but' in your mind. While you're writing, ask yourself if there are any limitations, counterarguments or objections to the point you're making. Including this in your writing will demonstrate that you have considered alternative perspectives.

But? example: *"Although accessing both the adequate time and funding for this research would prove difficult in the NHS currently..."*

<u>Link</u>
A strong critical paragraph should end with a linking sentence which links your paragraph back to the question or learning outcome you are answering. Consider it 'sandwiching' your paragraph between an opening statement and a finishing link that brings your writing back to the main point.

Link example: *"...this research and staff training together would ensure the safety of healthcare staff, while also bringing the level of violence and aggression that they are experiencing down".*

<u>Bringing It All Together</u>
Statement - Wilson (2024) has identified that the rise in violence and aggression towards healthcare professionals is being underreported.
Expand - Reasons for not reporting incidences are significant but complex, such as…
Evidence - According to McKenna (2023) there is a lack of appropriate support and training for staff subjected to violence and aggression, leading to many incidences not being reported (synthesise further supporting evidence here).
Develop - Therefore, it is essential that staff of all levels need to receive training in order to promote safety of service users, staff and visitors (NIMHE, 2022).
So What? - However, it is important to recognise that training all staff has a huge financial implication for an already struggling NHS (provide synthesised evidence here).
What Next? - While offering support and training to healthcare staff is vital, future research could investigate the reasons why there has been an increase in healthcare professionals being subjected to

violence and aggression.

But? - Although accessing both the adequate time and funding for this research would prove difficult in the NHS currently…

Link - …this research and staff training together would ensure the safety of healthcare staff, while also bringing the level of violence and aggression that they are experiencing down.

Top Tip: It is important to remember that while the SEED acronym and critical questions can be really useful when you are starting with critical writing, your paragraph doesn't have to be quite so rigid. Moreover, the SEED structure might not be applicable to all paragraphs at all stages of an essay. Your introduction, for instance, might not require this level of depth. As you write more, you will develop your own style and structure that works for your writing.

Writing a Critical Reflection on Practice

As part of your studies, you may also be required to reflect critically on your practice. This may relate to your experiences on placement, or your performance in a particular setting. The challenge with this type of writing is striking a balance between personal, sometimes emotional, ponderings and the academic, objective articulation of these.

Academic vs. Reflective Writing

Although challenging, writing a critical reflection employs many similar skills to academic writing generally.

Activity: Explore the table below to help you identify some of these similarities and differences. What are the key elements that stand out to you?

Academic Writing	Reflective Writing	Both	Neither
Only uses third person narrative.	Uses first person narrative.	Is formal in tone.	Includes long-held complaints about your field.

Uses existing studies and literature, or own research, as central evidence.	Helps you to understand your experiences.	Uses references and evidence to support and develop points.	Only describes what happened.
Identifies areas where more research may be needed.	Identifies areas for further personal development.	Uses subject-specific vocabulary.	Consists of an emotional outpouring of your feelings.
	Uses experience as an object of enquiry and evidence.	Follows appropriate academic conventions.	Lists all of your perceived failings.

Top Tip: Remember also to balance the positives and negatives. Although it is often human nature to focus on what went wrong or could be improved, reflecting on your practice in a more balanced way can be really beneficial in encouraging you and building your confidence.

Examples of Critical Reflection

Whilst elements of critical reflection may be required in all courses, there are some where it is particularly crucial. What follows is not intended to be an exhaustive list; instead, it should give you an idea of the nature of critical reflection in different contexts.

Teaching and Education
As part of your teacher training, you will likely be asked to reflect on your practice. This is often a feature of job applications too. You might reflect on a particular lesson, or your development over a period of time. Typical topics to consider include behaviour management; adaptive teaching; scaffolding and modelling; and subject knowledge.

Nursing and Healthcare
Evidence-based reflective practice is an essential element of healthcare professions. As part of your course, you will likely need to reflect on various elements of the profession. This may include reflecting on management styles; changes in the profession; patient interactions; and your own performance and development.

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

Library and Learning Services

Law

Whilst often understood to be a predominantly academic pursuit, your tutors and potential employers will want to see that you are able to reflect on best practice in law. You may be asked to reflect on your performance in negotiations; your interpersonal skills with clients and colleagues; and the application of your knowledge to real-life scenarios.

Performing Arts

As you will know, an essential element of developing your skills in performance is self-reflection. Whilst this may include reflecting on your strengths and weaknesses as a performer, it can also incorporate reflection on your ability to work with others; your confidence in taking and giving direction; and how you interpret and respond to feedback and reviews.

Sport

Similar to the Performing Arts, you will likely be familiar with reflective practice if you are a sports or sports-related person. Many areas of sports require post-performance debriefs. For your university studies, you will be required to combine this with academic evidence in order to analyse areas where you were successful and aspects that could be improved.

Activity: Using one of the examples above (even, or especially, if not in your subject), start to think about what you might include in a reflective piece of writing. How might you order your reflections? How much time might you spend describing the experience, compared to evaluating and analysing it? How personal will your reflections be? How academic?

Models of Critical Reflection

It is often helpful to use a reflective model in order to add detail and structure to your reflections. Whilst there is no right or wrong model to choose, it is important that your selection enables you best to reflect on your particular context and experience. Kolb, Gibbs, and Driscoll have produced the most well-established and widely used models, and you can explore these below.

Kolb (1984)

Kolb's Cycle of Reflective Practice (1984) is a learning model developed by David Kolb that explains how people learn through experience. Known as the Experiential Learning Cycle, it consists of four stages:

- Concrete Experience - actively engaging in an experience or event.
- Reflective Observation - reflecting on the experience and considering thoughts and feelings.

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

- Abstract Conceptualisation - analysing reflections to form theories or concepts.
- Active Experimentation - applying new insights to future situations.

The cycle is continuous, with each stage building on the last. It highlights the importance of engaging in experiences, reflecting critically, and applying learning to improve understanding and practice.

Gibbs (1988)

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988) is a six-stage model developed by Graham Gibbs to guide deeper reflection, especially in professional fields like education, healthcare, and social work. It consists of the following steps:

- Description - outline what happened, where, when, and who was involved.
- Feelings - reflect on your emotions and thoughts during the experience.
- Evaluation - assess what went well, what didn't, and any ethical considerations.
- Analysis - explore why things happened as they did and what the experience means.
- Conclusion - summarise what you've learned and how your perspective may have changed.
- Action Plan - identify steps for future improvement and skill development.

This cycle encourages critical thinking and self-awareness, helping professionals learn from experience and enhance their practice.

If you choose to use Gibbs, you might also like to use our Planning Log for reflection-in-action and Planning Grid for reflection-on-action, which are based on Gibbs's model.

Driscoll (1994)

Driscoll's Model of Reflection (1994) is a simple, structured framework often used in healthcare and education to guide reflective practice. It revolves around three key questions:

- What? Describe the experience: what happened, where, when, and who was involved.
- So what? Reflect on the significance: what did you learn, and how did it affect you?
- Now what? Plan for the future: how will you apply this learning to improve your practice?

This model supports critical thinking and helps turn reflection into meaningful action for personal and professional growth.

Top Tip: Remember that you can also practise critical reflection with the models of critical reflection you use. For instance, whilst you might prefer Gibbs's model, you may feel that it lacks the 'So What?'

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

element found in Driscoll. As such, you may decide to use a combination of different models. Just be sure to justify and evidence your choices.

Activity: Now you have an understanding of some different models, choose one and apply it to a particular scenario you have experienced on your course. Make note of how useful it is in helping you to reflect: what do you like/not like about the model? Might another model be more beneficial?

Useful Texts

[The Reflective Practice Guide by Barbara Bassot](#)
This extensive eBook provides an interdisciplinary overview of reflective practice. Section 1 gives a good overview of reflective practice, while Section 4 is particularly useful for understanding different models of reflection.

[Critical Thinking Skills by Stella Cottrell](#)
This text provides an easy-to-follow guide to criticality for students. Chapter 12 specifically addresses critical reflection.

[Teaching and Learning Through Reflective Practice by Tony Ghaye](#)
Although written primarily for teachers and those in educational fields, this text is beneficial for anyone seeking professional development. Against deficit models, it takes a positive and strengths-based approach to critical reflection.

Activity: Choose one of the texts above. Read and make some notes on it. You can find support with reading academic texts and making notes in the Critical Reading section of this toolkit, and also in our [Academic Reading Toolkit](#).

Top Tip: For further support with reflective writing, please explore the 'Reflective Writing' section of our [Academic Writing Toolkit](#).

GenAI and Criticality

The recent explosion of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), particularly in the form of chat interfaces that allow users to interact with Large Language Models (LLMs) (such as ChatGPT, Meta,

and Copilot), has posed crucial questions for students and tutors alike. Many of these questions relate to academic integrity, which you can explore more in our [Academic Integrity and Referencing Toolkit](#).

What follows here is not a statement as to whether you should or should not use GenAI, nor is it a definitive guide to the use of GenAI at Edge Hill University. You should always consult your tutors regarding this. Instead, it is an invitation to think critically about GenAI and to question the ethics and efficacy of its use.

Am I Learning?

The first and most crucial question you must ask when deciding whether or not to use GenAI is whether it is actually helping you to learn. Whilst it may be tempting to rely on tools such as ChatGPT to do the work for you, real learning happens when you engage, struggle, and practice. If you skip that process, you miss out on building the skills that truly transform and empower you.

Using AI to support your thinking can be helpful. It can also be a great tool for monitoring your own learning and producing quizzes and tailored activities to test yourself. However, if you rely on it to do all of the thinking you risk weakening your own ability to reason, reflect, and grow. This is not about deciding to never use AI, but about learning to use it creatively, wisely, and critically - with you in the driver's seat.

Thinking Critically About GenAI

In addition to being mindful of our own learning journey in relation to the use of GenAI, it is also important to consider some issues with the very existence of GenAI.

Engaging with a critical approach to the use of GenAI is an academic skill that you will (or should) likewise apply to any source, as we explored in the Critical Reading section of this toolkit. Furthermore, it links with the earlier-mentioned Graduate Attributes of Ethics, Diversity, and Sustainability as it encourages you to consider issues relating to sustainability, and personal and social responsibility.

You are invited to cast a critical lens over each of these issues, and to use them to make an informed decision as to whether you wish to engage with the use of GenAI.

Human Rights
There are a number of human considerations to be mindful of if/when using GenAI. These include:

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

- Production - in conversation with Mark Graham, David Sutcliffe notes that *"without workers training machine learning algorithms, we would not have GenAI tools such as ChatGPT"* (2024). Graham's work highlights the oft-hidden human labour, and subsequent human cost, of producing GenAI material.
- Equity - most LLMs feature a free model and a paid-for model. This means that students with the capacity to pay will be likely to benefit more from using GenAI. Thinking more globally, wealth inequality will potentially rise as investors in GenAI seek to benefit from its expansion (Tai, 2020).
- Privacy - the success of GenAI is largely reliant on the data it receives - data that is often of a personal and private nature. Once input, this data is open to being misused or maliciously used (Huang et al., 2023). Furthermore, it depends on you inputting your original work, which could compromise the integrity of your intellectual property.
- Employment - many jobs will likely be replaced by machinery (Tai, 2020) which further compounds the aforementioned inequities.

Environmental Impact

Huang et al. note that training LLMs *"usually consumes large amounts of energy"*, with the carbon footprint of LLMs being around five times that of an average car in its entire lifespan (2023: 805). The United Nations Environment Programme ((UNEP), 2024) further specifies the environmental problems produced by GenAI. These relate to:

- The amount of raw material needed to power data centres.
- The raw, and rare, elements used in microchips that are often mined in destructive ways.
- The electronic waste produced, often containing hazardous substances.
- The amount of water used to construct and cool electronic components, when 1/4 of humanity already lacks access to clean water.
- The energy used often comes from fossil fuels which contribute to global warming.

In the spirit of critical reading, it is worth noting here that there are some who question the environmental impact of GenAI. Saenko (2023), whilst noting aspects of impact, implies that the speed at which answers can be found using GenAI (when compared with search engines) may offset the environmental cost. Still, these voices are in the minority, and it is certainly worth doing your own research if you wish to explore this issue further.

Library and Learning Services

Remember that, alike any form of knowledge, GenAI is not a purely objective enterprise. It can be programmed on a foundation of biased algorithms. It does not produce unbiased facts, nor is it free from the context in which it is produced. As Tai notes, *"The human masters who create AI may invent something that is racial[sic] bias or egocentrically oriented to harm certain people or things"* (2020: 340; see also Gibney, 2020; Huang et al., 2023).

Furthermore, LLMs are designed to sound plausible, not necessarily to be accurate. As such, they should not be treated uncritically as sources of truth. Always ask:

- Where is this information coming from?
- Is it backed by evidence?
- Can I verify it elsewhere?

Just like with any source, cross-checking and critical thinking are essential. GenAI does not know everything, and it certainly does not have access to all types of knowledge. Good critical thinking means not accepting single and simple explanations without further investigation and critique.

References

GIBNEY, E. (2020). The Battle to Embed Ethics in AI Research. *Nature* [online]. 577(7792), p. 609. Available from: https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00160-y [Accessed 29 May 2025].

GRAHAM, M. (2024). *The Hidden Human Cost of AI: In Conversation with Professor Mark Graham* [online]. Available from: https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news-events/the-hidden-human-cost-of-ai-in-conversation-with-professor-mark-graham/ [Accessed 29 May 2025].

HUANG, C., ZHANG, Z., MAO, B., and YAO, X. (2023). An Overview of Artificial Intelligence Ethics. *IEEE Transactions on Artificial Intelligence* [online]. 4(4), pp. 799-819. Available from: https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=9844014 [Accessed 29 May 2025].

SAENKO, K. (2023). *A Computer Scientist Breaks Down Generative AI's Hefty Carbon Footprint* [online]. Available from: https://theconversation.com/is-generative-ai-bad-for-the-environment-a-computer-scientist-explains-the-carbon-footprint-of-chatgpt-and-its-cousins-204096 [Accessed 3 July 2025].

Library and Learning Services

TAI, M. C-T., (2020). The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Human Society and Bioethics. *Tzu Chi Medical Journal* [online]. 32(4), pp. 339-343. Available from: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7605294/pdf/TCMJ-32-339.pdf [Accessed 29 May 2025].

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (2024). *AI has an Environmental Problem. Here's What the World can do About That* [online]. Available from: https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/ai-has-environmental-problem-heres-what-world-can-do-about [Accessed 29 May 2025].

Edge Hill University and GenAI

Whilst you should always also consult with your tutors, Edge Hill University has produced a detailed, centralised guide for students regarding the use of GenAI. The Students' Union has helpfully summarised this in their article A.I. The use of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) at EHU. Take some time to familiarise yourself with these documents, paying particular attention to the difference between using GenAI as a source and using it as a tool.

Activity: Now have a think about whether the following scenarios would be deemed acceptable and unacceptable use of GenAI at Edge Hill University. Try to make a decision before progressing to the explanation.

Scenario 1
You read a journal article but are struggling to understand the key concepts. You put the name of the article into ChatGPT and ask it for a summary.

Would this be deemed acceptable or unacceptable?

Asking ChatGPT to summarise an article is, in itself, acceptable. However, what you then do with that information is what matters here. If you were to copy and paste the summary into your work, that would be unacceptable. Instead, if you were to simply use the summary to aid your understanding, and then communicate that understanding in your own words, that would be acceptable.

Scenario 2
You note that feedback on your work often comments on the lack of academic tone. You decide to enter your own draft of an essay into ChatGPT and ask it to make it sound more academic.

Would this be deemed acceptable or unacceptable?

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

Library and Learning Services

This is a tricky one. If you were simply looking for feedback, this would be acceptable. However, this could easily turn into an unacceptable use of GenAI as there is a great temptation to accept any auto-generated suggested improvements. This would be relying on GenAI to do the 'brain work' of improving and editing your work, and amounts to GenAI rewriting your response. This is too close to using it as a source.

A better option here would be to refer to the [Academic Phrasebank](#) for help with improving your academic tone. You could also explicitly ask the GenAI to only offer feedback and not rewrite, or ask for some exercises to help you practice phrasing and expressing your own critical thinking in academic writing.

Scenario 3

You are conducting some interviews as part of a research project. You want to count the number of times participants provided a particular answer, so decide to put the answers through ChatGPT and ask it to do this. You include participants' names to help you identify them in your discussion.

Would this be deemed acceptable or unacceptable?

Not only is this unacceptable, it is also unethical. ChatGPT stores and learns from the information that you input - here, you are not only sharing your original work (your 'intellectual property'), but you are also sharing other people's data. This contravenes ethical standards and likely goes against the ethical approval you received to conduct your research.

Scenario 4

You are in the initial stages of planning a response to an essay question. You ask ChatGPT to suggest a structure for your response, and to make some recommendations for key texts to read. You then use this as a basis for further editing and wider reading.

Would this be deemed acceptable or unacceptable?

This is an acceptable and sensible use of GenAI. By using it to do some of the groundwork, you are saving time. With the addition of further editing and wider reading, you are not relying too heavily on AI but instead are using it as a tool - a springboard from which to further develop your skills, knowledge, and understanding.

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

GenAI in Action

Having completed the previous activity, it should now be clear that you should not use GenAI to write your assignments for you. However, it is useful to interrogate what kind of writing GenAI can produce in order further to understand why this may be deemed not only unacceptable but also unethical.

Artificial Intelligence relies on detailed and specific prompts. The paragraph below was created on ChatGPT using the prompt: *"Write me a paragraph on popular music. Include criticality and references. Make a judgement about the best pop singers or groups. Write it like a first-year undergraduate".* Although a strong prompt, close reading of the resulting paragraph calls into question the efficacy of using such GenAI tools.

Activity: Take some time to engage with the paragraph below. What critical questions might you ask of it?

"Popular music, or pop music, is a genre that is widely listened to and often reflects the culture, values, and issues of its time. It's important to think critically about pop music – not just what sounds good, but what messages are being shared, who is creating the music, and how it influences society. For example, Adorno (1941) criticized pop music for being overly commercial and repetitive, arguing that it limits creativity and encourages passive listening. However, others argue that pop music can be powerful and meaningful, especially when it challenges norms or represents unheard voices (Frith, 1988). When looking at the best pop singers or groups, artists like Beyonce stand out not only for musical talent but also for the way she uses her platform to speak about race, gender, and empowerment. Similarly, groups like BTS have gained global popularity by combining catchy music with messages about mental health and self-love. While there are many great pop artists, the best ones are those who combine strong musical ability with meaningful cultural impact

References:

Adorno, T.W. (1941). On Popular Music.

Frith, S. (1988). Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop".

Activity: Now apply the following questions to the passage:

- Are claims evidenced and justified?
- Is the language appropriately academic; does it contain any contractions?

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

- How recent are the sources? Are they presented in Edge Hill Harvard (or your subject's referencing style)? Is there enough evidence?
- Is enough context provided?
- Are alternative perspectives considered?

Top Tip: Don't worry if you thought this was a strong paragraph - there are certainly some good elements to it. Remember, though, that criticality is a skill that develops over time. The more you read and write the more adept you will become at identifying what successful critical writing looks like. This is part of the academic process, and something you should take pride in.

Activity: Choose a topic that you could confidently say you have a good level of knowledge on. Ask [ChatGPT](#) to write you a paragraph, using prompts similar to those used above (or experiment with using some of your own).

Now, using the skills you have gained throughout this Toolkit, analyse the quality of the paragraph produced. You might consider:

- The quality, quantity, and style of references.
- The tone of the piece - is it academic? Conversational?
- The accuracy of the claims being made.
- Whether it follows a logical pattern.
- The validity of the critiques it raises.
- Whether it would meet the Learning Outcomes for one of your assignments.

Top Tip: Using GenAI effectively is a skill in itself, and learning how to craft prompts and follow-up questions are key elements of this. Here are some things to consider:

- Tone - should this be formal or casual?
- Audience - who are you writing for?
- Voice - should it sound like you, or someone else?
- Questions - are you asking the right ones? How can you add nuance/depth, or find more information?

For example, instead of saying "Tell me about pop music," try:
"I am a first-year student in Music Technology who wants to locate academic sources and explore

ideas about popular music in the UK for a formal essay. Can you explain how pop music has evolved since the 1980s, focusing on changes in production style and audience engagement?"

The more thoughtful your prompt, the more useful the response. Remember, though, that this is not about having GenAI do the work for you - instead, your prompts should request summaries and suggestions, which you then take control and ownership of.

GenAI and Other Media

It is important to note that GenAI not only relates to LLMs and written work (including equations, coding, and compositions), but also to other forms of media such as images, sound, and presentations. Indeed, this very toolkit asked if we would like to use artificially-generated images, text, and activities (we did not!). Nevertheless, the same guidance provided by Edge Hill University still applies: GenAI can be used as a tool but not as a source, and you should always consult your tutors before engaging with any form of GenAI.

Further Reading

Remember, as you have done throughout this Toolkit, to put your 'critical hat' on when engaging with the following sources.

[Banning GenAI by James Stacey Taylor](#)
This tutor explains why he decided to ban the use of GenAI in his classes.

[Using GenAI by Betts, Surendran, and Hawes](#)
This article explores eight ways that GenAI may be used, and four challenges when doing so.

[Article Retraction by the PLOS ONE Editors](#)
This article was retracted from publication due to suspected yet undeclared GenAI usage. Explore the journal's reasoning for this, and consider the implications of the use of GenAI here.

[Does ChatGPT Tell the Truth? by OpenAI](#)
A useful summary of things to consider regarding the reliability of GenAI such as ChatGPT.

Critical Engagement with Feedback

The critical process does not stop once you have submitted your assignment. As soon as you receive any feedback, it is time once again to start thinking, reading, and writing critically. Whilst it is normal and natural to focus solely on your grade, a key aspect of critical self-reflection is practising a proactive response to feedback. This links to having a growth mindset and being resilient, both of which you can explore more in our [Academic Resilience Toolkit](#).

Activity: Once you have spent some time exploring our [Academic Resilience Toolkit](#), return to this Toolkit. Use the table to explore how a measured self-critical approach can help you with having a growth mindset approach to feedback.

Top Tip: Remember, as with writing a critical reflection on practice, this is not a biased or exaggerated exercise in either self-congratulation or self-criticism. Instead, it should be a balanced assessment of your strengths and weaknesses, and a proactive plan to build or work on these.

Feedback Comment	Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset	Next Steps
"Referencing".	"I do not understand this comment. I thought my referencing was okay".	"Let me return to my [Referencing Guide](#) and the [Referencing Toolkit](#) to double-check my references are accurate".	If your referencing appears to be accurate, think about what else your tutor might be referring to. Are your sources up-to-date and appropriate? Are you providing enough evidence?
"Lack of criticality".	"I have shared my opinion - that counts as being critical".	"Is my opinion supported by evidence? Have I sufficiently explored different perspectives?"	Ensure that you read widely in future assignments, and support any judgements with

Library and Learning Services

			reference to appropriate sources.
"You have not met the Learning Outcomes".	"I did what you told me to!"	"I must have missed something here. Let me revisit the Learning Outcomes and check I have fully addressed each one".	In future, consider planning your response around your Learning Outcomes and/or focussing on them as part of your proofreading.
"There are consistent spelling, grammar, and punctuation mistakes".	"Spelling isn't really that important, is it?"	"Spelling is not yet a strength of mine - I will be more mindful of this in future".	There are lots of proofreading tools to help you ensure that your spelling, punctuation, and grammar are correct. Explore your Assistive Technologies page for more information.
"Lack of structure"	"My subheadings give my response structure".	"Do my subheadings make sense? Is there a logical flow between each section?"	Make sure you spend time planning your response, and know that the structure may change as you write. You can use your Academic Writing Toolkit to help with this.

Top Tip: To help with your next steps, you might consider using this Feedback Plan that features in your Academic Resilience Toolkit.

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

As ever, if you need help understanding your feedback you can consult with your tutor or book a [UniSkills One-to-One Appointment](#).

We hope that this toolkit helps you to cultivate that critical impulse, and to push your marks higher and your thinking further. Head to the next sections for further resources and support.

Related Resources

Useful Reading

To learn more about criticality, you might find the following text useful:

WILLIAMS, K., 2022 *Getting Critical* [eBook]. 3rd ed. London: Bloomsbury. Available from: https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/edgehill/detail.action?docID=6934053 [Accessed 3 March 2025].

If you are a postgraduate researcher, you may also find this text helpful:

WALLACE, M. and WRAY, A., 2021. *Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates* [eBook]. 4th ed. Washington: SAGE Publications. Available from: https://bibliu.com/app/?bibliuMagicToken=yPpEjY5ieVeg8Lls1FYnJ3ejp9SqyUWd#/view/books/9781529757682/epub/OEBPS/toc.html#page_6 [Accessed 3 April 2025].

Useful Links

This resource from [Manchester Academic Phrasebank](#) can help with the phraseological 'nuts and bolts' of academic writing.

Your [Academic Writing and Academic Reading Toolkits](#) are helpful starting points when you are beginning to think about criticality.

UniSkills Blogs

UniSkills write regular [blogs,](#) including a monthly focus on library resources and academic skills**.** In these quick reads you can learn about useful resources, how to access them and their benefits to your studies. You might even find us exploring new ways of thinking!

Other Resources

Check out [LinkedIn Learning](#) for access to free, unlimited access to thousands of high quality online courses and video tutorials written by industry experts.

UniSkills Support at Edge Hill University

As well as our toolkits, there are many ways you can access support for your academic skills development. No question or query is too big or too small. Whether you are new to studying or need to refresh or develop skills, we have a range of options for you to access at both graduate and postgraduate taught level.

Webpages

Reach your potential and visit our [UniSkills web pages](#). Find out more about the support designed to help you develop your academic skills and confidence at university and beyond. Whatever your subject or level of study, UniSkills has something to offer.

Workshops and Webinars

[UniSkills workshops and webinars](#) are an opportunity for a deeper dive into a specific skill that will support you on your academic journey. Facilitated by our friendly and knowledgeable Academic Skills Advisors, these sessions provide an informal safe space where you will be supported alongside other students in a small group setting.

Appointments

All students are able to book [a one-to-one appointment.](#) Our experienced Academic Skills Advisors can help you develop your academic skills and strategies throughout your time at university. One-to-one support is available on a wide range of topics including academic reading, writing, and referencing, finding information, and preparing your assignment for submission.

AskUs

For any questions across any of our library and learning services, you can [Ask Us](#) online.

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**

Campaigns

Explore our year-round [UniSkills campaigns](#) to enhance your academic journey at Edge Hill. From pre-arrival prep to acing your exams, we've got something for everyone!

Keep in Touch

Library and Learning Services Instagram

Make sure you're following us over on [Instagram](#) for all the latest Library and Learning Services news, events and support.

You'll discover weekly 'what's on' stories; reminders about upcoming campaigns and events; fun, interactive polls and competitions; hidden treasures from our Archive; and reading for pleasure recommendations.

Library and Learning Services Blog

In the Library and Learning Services (LS) blog you'll find lots of information, ideas and support curated by a wide range of staff and students from across the service.

Browse through all our useful blogs via the Home tab or visit individual areas of interest via the sub-blog headings along the menu bar.

Your Views Count

Thank you for engaging with this toolkit.

We'd love to know what you thought, and you can share your feedback in our short [UniSkills Toolkit Satisfaction Survey](#). The survey should take you no longer than five minutes to complete.

Your feedback helps us to continually improve our support - thank you!

You have now completed this UniSkills toolkit and can close the window. We hope you found it useful, and we look forward to continuing to support you with your academic skills development.

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills   **ehu.ac.uk/ls**