

How to Give Your Work a Critical/Analytical Edge?

What does it mean to be critical/analytical?

DON'T Panic! No theory is beyond criticism and you have every right to believe or disbelieve some very educated people. Theories, by their nature, can only account for certain things and we need to assess them against evidence. All theories have limits - a theory of everything is probably no real theory at all. We all have our biases – these are inevitable. But, we can move beyond merely asserting a personal bias to strengthen our case with evidence from the literature.

Being critical/analytical is a skill you will develop and refine with practice. It means being able to show awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of a theory, argument, concept and so forth. Critical analysis can also involve taking a line of argumentation and following it through with examples in the body of your essay. You will never be marked up or down according to whether a marker agrees/disagrees with your argument but you will lose marks if you don't argue your case well. Below are some guidelines that you could use as a checklist (e.g. after doing a detailed draft of an essay) to help you build critical analysis into your work.

Doing analysis/critique

- Explanation of a theory usually comes before analysis of it. Doing this first means that you set up a theory, idea, concept etc that you can then either knock down (using counter-arguments from other theorists and your own reasoning). Or, you could support a theory (again, through argument, evidence, reasoning etc.). You can do both. For example, you could point out the pros and cons of one point of view then, on balance, come down either in favour of or against a theory/viewpoint.
- Use theorists to critique each other. You can compare and contrast. Write to persuade your reader and avoid writing as if s/he is bound to agree with you. You could even try and anticipate what objections could be made to your argument and answer these before they have had chance to form in the reader's mind.
- Try to “unpack” what a theory, idea etc is saying. This is about reading between the lines or looking beneath the text to see what their ‘real’ political agenda is. For instance, what assumptions does a theory make about people, groups,

phenomena, the workings of society etc. Can you justify the assumptions the writer/theorist makes? Why/why not? Again, how does it compare/contrast with other theories or your experience of a social phenomenon?

- It is easy to get seduced by a theory especially when the writer uses elegant prose, polemic (controversial argument). Take notes on a theory/argument and then come back to them later and you may find that you have some critical distance from them. This could prompt that “Eureka moment” (I’ve got it!) when you suddenly see a theory’s minuses as well as its pluses.
- Is a theory clear about what it can and cannot explain? Does the writer/theory overlook anything important that you would reasonably expect his/her theory to cover? Does it erase or preclude certain groups’ experiences e.g. “Anthony Giddens’ work on modern relationships (1991) has been criticised by Skeggs (1997) for overlooking inequalities of class, gender and race and how these shape/constrain people’s choices.” On the other hand, is a theory too comprehensive? Does it overstate its case or overreach itself in trying to account for phenomena beyond its capacity?
- Aim for nuanced critique i.e. that recognizes shades of opinion. This is to show that you are alive to the multi-layered nature of a complex argument/body of theory where there are subtle and important differences, shades of meaning etc. You will show nuanced analysis if you specify where a theory, concept etc can be usefully applied to extend our understanding of something and where it breaks down or only applies rather weakly or in a limited way. Do some aspects of a theory hold up better than others?
- Big “brownie points” especially if you can criticise the critics! For instance, you can say how X criticises Y but then use counter-criticism to argue that X is ALSO mistaken because of reasons a), b) and c) etc. You could disagree with both theorist and critic and put your own argument across. But, this cannot be simply asserted. You will need to justify/support any argument you make with some evidence from readings and your observations about how social phenomena work.

Summary

At root, it is crucial to ask questions of theories/writers you encounter. Who is saying this, from what position, why, what do they assume, what do they neglect, omit or silence? What do they reveal/conceal? What can/can’t they tell us about the here and now and back there and then? What is their continuing relevance (or not)?

Try to practice some of the above. Above all, read, read and read again! This should help you develop the all-important skills of critical analysis, improve your marks and your understanding of things around you.