

STUDENT NOTES FOR SUCCESS

No 13

Critical Analysis: asking questions

To analyse is to question, to think things through, to form an opinion, to make judgement.

What is critical analysis?

Critical analysis is a term used to describe ways of examining a situation, problem, document, or activities in order to understand these, form opinions about them, and develop solutions to problems associated with them.

Critical analysis usually begins with the situation or item to be analysed being carefully examined in terms of the following:

- What is being said or what actions are taking place?
- Who are the key participants and what are their roles?
- What outcomes can be observed to be taking place (or to have already taken place)?
- What potential outcomes have been suggested by the participants or discussion in a document?



We can start the process of analysis by gathering facts and factors that will help us to understand or make sense of a situation or document. Begin by asking questions about what is taking place, who is involved, and what problems and solutions have been presented so far. Your description of these in note form will form the basis of your analysis which is likely to involve:

- categorising data, facts and events
- relating these to known theories
- determining the causes and effects of events or actions
- developing an evidence-based argument

- comparing with similar situations or outcomes
- evaluating actions and possible “what if?” scenarios
- making possible recommendations for further actions.

Analysing documents

Critical analysis of a document involves using analytical or reasoning skills to find information and develop understanding. Read the text carefully to find key facts and influencing factors that convince the reader to see a particular point of view.

Critical analysis of a document seeks to determine, among other things:

- assumptions made by the authors
- the quality of evidence used - recent or dated research
- the point of view the writer has taken and why
- whether the reasoning leads logically to a plausible conclusion
- limitations of the matter presented, its impact and generalisations
- relevance of the argument to the setting
- where the information is leading, and why
- whether (from an objective point of view) the material is valid and reliable in the context of the discussion.

Applying a critical analysis approach to evaluating a text or journal article

Critical reading involves taking a structured approach to analysing documents to discover what is being said, how that is supported, and what meaning might be derived from the material. As you read, make brief notes to record principal ideas, facts and your interpretation of what it all means. Follow the steps overleaf:



Scan

Begin by examining the title for key words that set the subject and context of the document. Then take an overall view of the document by scanning through (beginning with the table of contents) to see how the document is structured. The main sections and headings will tell you a great deal about what has been included and where key arguments and evidence may be found.

Read key sections

Next, carefully read the abstract (for a journal article) or introduction. From these, seek to gain a sense of what the author has highlighted as the core subject matter, research methods used, and conclusions drawn. A quick look at the recommendations and conclusion sections will guide you in critically reading the main body of the document.

Make notes

In reading the main body of the document, make notes about how the author develops his/her argument, and what evidence is provided (references or research data). Be prepared to question what is said so that you have a sense of whether the document presents a valid argument based on reliable research methods or data.

Your notes should show the following:

- what is going on – events, activities
- who the key players are, and what their roles are in the events taking place
- in what context the situation is evolving
- the writer's use of language: rhetoric or reason; emotive or impartial, to convince the reader to see his/her point of view
- the research approach taken and the rigor applied to that process
- findings, contentions or recommendations that emerge from the document (or research)

- evidence in support of the argument: qualitative, quantitative, referenced peer reviewed publications; and
- the quality of the work in terms of author recognition in the field of study.

Other points to look for

Read carefully to identify:

- generalisations
- 'facts' without reason or evidence
- poor research (unreliable websites, for example)
- evidence of where the author compares data, applies appropriate theories, explores potential outcomes from multiple perspectives (points of view).

In the end you need to weigh up the strengths and weaknesses in the arguments you are presented with. You may not agree with what is said sometimes, but you must be prepared to consider it in the context of the argument presented in order to make an impartial, considered evaluation when forming your own position.

Find out more at the CBS Academic Communication Development website:

<https://businesslaw.curtin.edu.au/study/student-experience/academic-communication-development/>

You might also be interested in *Handy Handout 11. Case Studies*.

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