



Massey University
STUDENT LIFE PALMERSTON NORTH

Student Learning Development Services

Academic Writing

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Page 1 of 119



Te Kōwhiri
ki Pūrehuroa

0800 MASSEY (627 739)

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Some Differences between Academic Writing & Other Writing Contexts

Writing is a skill that is required in many contexts throughout life. For instance, you can write an email to a friend or reflect on what happened during the day in your personal diary.

- In these kinds of interpersonal settings (or intrapersonal in the case of a diary record), the aim may be to communicate the events that have happened in your life to someone close to you, or to yourself.
- Opportunities abound for personal reflection.
- It is expected that in writing about these life events, you will include your personal judgements and evaluations, which may be measured by your feelings and thoughts.
- The personal stories you write in a diary or email to friends can be written down at the moment they enter your mind.
- There is no need to follow a structure, as prose on the page or the computer screen appears through freely associated ideas.

Similarly, another quality of writing in personal contexts is that it is typically informal, so there is no need to adhere to structures of punctuation or grammar (although your reader may be quite appreciative if you do so).

- In these settings, it is perfectly acceptable to deploy colloquialisms, casual expressions, and abbreviations, like “that’s cool”, “by the way...”, “slacker”, “Palmy”, “b4”, and “thru”.

In contrast, academic writing does many of the things that personal writing does not. *Firstly, some kind of structure is required, such as a beginning, middle, and end.* This simple structure is typical of an essay format, as well as other assignment writing tasks, which may not have a clearly articulated structure.

- In the case of an essay, the introductory paragraph informs the reader about the nature of the topic, which is discussed and evaluated in the middle of the essay, also referred to as the body.
- The introduction may also summarise very succinctly, in a sentence or two, your position on the issue, which is then elaborated on at length in the series of paragraphs that make up the essay’s body.
- Lastly, the end paragraph constitutes a conclusion in which you may summarise the overall points made, but obviously not every single one, as there is often never the word space to do so.
- The concluding paragraph is also a good point at which to move the essay forward to touch on implications or future advancements surrounding the issues addressed.
- Another type of structure, common in university assignments is that of a report, often organised around the identification of problems or difficulties and corresponding solutions.
 - Unlike most essays, a report is divided according to clearly labelled sections, such as “Introduction”, “Discussion”, “Conclusions”, and “Recommendations”.
 - Further, unlike an essay, reports allow for bulleted points with respect to the Conclusions and Recommendations sections.

Consequently, in briefly considering the formats expected of typical university assignments, it is clear that they do follow a formal structure, which is often less clearly demarcated, if at all, in personal writing contexts.

A second difference between academic writing and other writing genres is based on the citation of published authors.

- If you make judgements about something in academic writing, there is an expectation that you will support your opinion by linking it to what a published author has previously written about the issue.
- Indeed, citing the work of other authors is central to academic writing because it shows you have read the literature, understood the ideas, and have integrated these issues and varying perspectives into the assignment task.

Secondly, the very selection of ideas from the total pool available within the original version has also contributed to the difference between my version and the author's version. For instance, you will notice that I have not focused on the meaning contained in the first sentence about children spending much of their "daily lives in school." Instead I have summarised the ideas contained in the last two sentences. Yet, at the same time, I have omitted specific details within the second sentence, such as "the community", and interpreting academic in the "widest possible" sense. Further, instead of allocating a whole sentence to the point that "schools provide the setting in which such learning takes place", I have condensed this idea and merged it with the ideas in the second sentence, as evident in "schools are places for children to..."

Thirdly, difference from the original version has also been created through the order in which the ideas are presented. For example, in Leyden's version, she mentions the academic focus of learning first, followed by a broader context of issues which children also learn about while they are at school. In contrast, my version presents the broader context of issues first followed by the academic focus of learning.

Consequently, when summarising the ideas of authors, you can use several techniques. Firstly, you can identify some key words and link these with other words to create a different combination. Secondly, you can be selective about the specific ideas you choose to adopt, while leaving out others. In this way, you are actively summarising the information. Finally, by reordering the ideas in your own framework, you are also creating a distinction between your version and the author's. All this can be achieved without significantly altering the meaning of the information. Many of these techniques can also be applied to the strategy of paraphrasing authors' ideas.

Paraphrasing

Before you begin to paraphrase, it is **REALLY IMPORTANT** to build up your **OWN IDEA** of the information or try to develop a picture in your mind, and then use this as a **FRAME** or **GUIDE** to help you paraphrase the author's idea.

Paraphrasing means to restate information using different words. Unlike summarising though, paraphrasing focuses less on shortening and condensing the information. Paraphrasing aims to rewrite the information by drawing on different words and phrases.

Examples

"Children spend a very large proportion of their daily lives in school. They go there to learn, not only in a narrow academic sense, but in the widest possible interpretation of the word – about themselves, about being a person within a group of others, about the community in which they live, and about the world around them. Schools provide the setting in which such learning takes place."

Leyden, S. (1985). *Helping the child of exceptional ability*. London: Croom Helm, page 38.

Paraphrasing

Author citation in the body of the sentence

As Leyden (1985) points out, schools are places where children spend a significant amount of time. Beyond merely going to school to learn academic information, Leyden argues that learning occurs within a far wider context as children also learn about who they are, by being in groups, their local community, as well as the wider world which surrounds them. Hence, schools offer the settings to facilitate children's learning about a great many things.

Reference Lists

Having referred to sources by author in the body of your assignment, you will also need to provide a detailed list of these sources at the end of your assignment. If you are using APA conventions, then this is referred to as a Reference List and is headed up References. In some disciplines, you may also be asked to include a Bibliography, which is a list of sources you used to develop ideas around the assignment topic, but which you did not actually cite or include in the body of your assignment. Occasionally, you may be asked to include only a Bibliography, which is likely to cover all sources, whether or not they were used in your assignment.

While the general procedure is presented on the following pages according to APA guidelines for listing references at the end of your assignment, **CHECK WITH YOUR STUDY GUIDE**, since lecturers and course co-ordinators may develop their individual preferences.

For further information, not provided here, you can always consult with the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001), 5th edition, available in the Massey University library.

Details to Include in Your Reference List

1. APA follows an author-date style for listing references at the end of your assignment. This involves placing the authors surname first, followed by initials. With two or more authors, an ampersand, &, is required before the last author. The publication date appears in brackets, with a full stop after it.

Example

Smith, K., Swatson, D., McDonald, G. Y., & Butcher, J. (1999).

A comma separates each author unit from the next, while a full stop appears after each initial.

An ampersand is included before the last author.

A full stop is placed after the bracketed year.

2. When there are more than six authors, list the first six followed by et al. for the remaining authors.

Example

Bligh, T., Johnson, P., Quok, S. K., Smart, G., Masters, Y., Tressler, U., et al. (1999).

3. If there is no individual author, but an organisation has created the document, include the organisation as the author.

Example

Ministry of Consumer Affairs. (1999). *Pyramid schemes*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.

When the author is also the publisher, avoid duplicating information by substituting the name of the publisher with "Author".

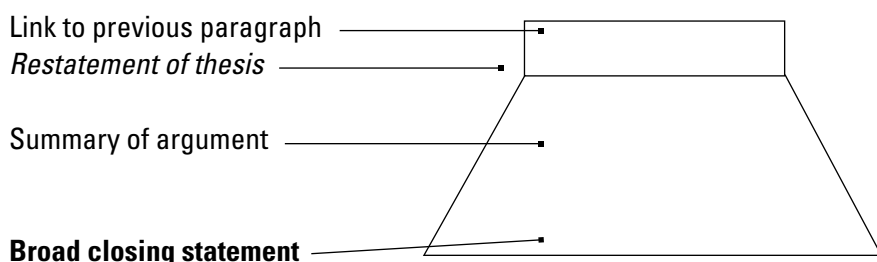
4. When no author information is available, place the publication title in the author position, followed by year of publication, location, and publisher's name. Retain formatting of the title, including italics.

Example

Significance of the Human Rights Act 1993. (2000). Wellington, New Zealand: Human Rights Commission.

Conclusions

- Conclusions round off your essay. They remind the reader of all your main points and explain the significance of your argument.
- The concluding paragraph of an essay should include:
 - A narrow statement relating the conclusion to the preceding paragraph.
 - A restatement of the proposition or thesis statement.
 - A brief summary of the main points made in the essay.
 - A final, broad statement on the significance of the argument, and, if appropriate, its implications.
- Your conclusion should not just be a list of the points you have made.



Example

By promoting a caring atmosphere in schools, teachers can reduce the likelihood of bullying. Above all, teachers need to inform themselves and the rest of the school community so that together they can develop a policy to discourage bullying. By educating themselves about bullying, teachers and parents have the knowledge to set up effective programmes and structures both within the classroom and for the whole school. Furthermore, by removing the opportunity for children to bully, providing children with a stimulating environment, and giving them the tools to deal with conflict appropriately, teachers can reduce children's inclination to bully. **Although bullying will never be fully eradicated and must be dealt with as soon as it occurs, increasing awareness of the problem is making schools a safer and more enjoyable environment in which children can learn.**

Strategies for Organising Points in Assignments

In understanding how to organise and structure the points you want to make in an assignment, it is worthwhile demonstrating several different patterns to use for an essay, which could easily be adapted for other assignment forms.

Mock essay: Discuss the social effects surrounding an Act of Parliament.

Imagine you have chosen an Act of Parliament and have identified two main effects, with each effect incorporating several other sub-effects. Paragraphs could be structured around one or more sub-effects that comprise a main effect.

Introduction

Introduce effects A and B.

Effect A

1. Sub-effect (1st paragraph in body of assignment)
2. Sub-effect (2nd paragraph)
3. Sub-effect (3rd paragraph)

is necessary for all subjects, and “must be used across the curriculum, in the same way that a pen and pencil are used in most subject areas” (Ager, 2000, p. 15). The best way to plan the use of IT in the classroom is to approach it as simply a learning tool that is more advanced (and more exciting) than the traditional pen and paper.

nbowker 19/1/06 4:05 PM

Comment: Rather than standing alone, the quotation is integrated into the sentence, with appropriate acknowledgement made, by including the author’s name and year of publication, the page number, as well as speech marks around the quotation.

nbowker 15/12/05 8:56 AM

Comment: This sentence brings the detail mentioned in the paragraph back to addressing the essay question by focusing on “the best way to...use...IT in the classroom”.

It is vitally important for students to be taught the strategies for using IT. Children also need to be fully informed about the capabilities of IT before being asked to use it. Pupils should be aware that the contexts in which they use IT will change, and they need to know what is the appropriate use of IT and what is not. Whilst it is important that children learn to use IT effectively, teachers must emphasise that IT is not always suitable. For example, personal communication is a better option than an email when thanking someone. According to Apter (1968), the danger is that the “computer dehumanises people and inevitably leads them to act like machines themselves” (p. 58). Teachers must make sure they plan to use variety in their lessons. Too much IT instruction may be just as harmful to a child as not enough.

nbowker 15/12/05 8:56 AM

Comment: This topic sentence deals with the final points made in the thesis statement, with respect to teaching students how, why, and when to use technology.

The usefulness of IT in the classroom, as with any learning tool, depends on the innovation and imagination of the teacher. It is imperative, though, that the implementation of IT into a school is carefully planned. The current information explosion makes it essential that IT be used extensively within the classroom so

nbowker 15/12/05 8:56 AM

Comment: Another author citation, followed by a quote. Notice that throughout the body of the essay, each paragraph includes one author citation – this is a good formula to use for 100 level papers because throughout each paragraph there is evidence that you have been engaging with the literature when writing the assignment.

nbowker 15/12/05 8:56 AM

Comment: This sentence refocuses the essay towards the general theme of how to effectively use IT in the classroom. The sentence acknowledges that the teacher’s skills are central to this.

Preview from Notesale.co.uk
Page 52 of 119

References

- Baym, N. (1998). The emergence of on-line community. In S. G. Jones (Ed.), *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 35-68). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bruckman, A. S. (1996). Gender swapping on the internet. In P. Ludlow (Ed.), *High noon on the electronic frontier: Conceptual issues in cyberspace* (pp. 317-325). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Calvert, S. L. (2002). Identity construction on the Internet. In S. L. Calvert, A. B. Jordan, & R.R. Cocking (Eds.), *Children in the digital age* (pp. 57-70). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Calvert, S. L., Mahler, B. A., Zehnder, S. M., Jenkins, A., & Lee, M. S. (2003). Gender differences in preadolescent children's online interactions: Symbolic modes of self-presentation and self-expression. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 24*, 627-644.
- Coet, L. J., & McDermott, P. J. (1979). Sex, instructional set, and group make-up: Organismic and situational factors influencing risk-taking. *Psychological Reports, 44*(3), 1283-1294.
- Curtis, P. (1997). Mudding: Social phenomena in text-based virtual realities. In S. Keisler (Eds.), *Culture of the Internet* (pp. 111-142). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

nbowker 22/10/05 12:45 PM

Comment: Notice that book chapters make up a significant proportion of the references. There is much less to read in a book chapter versus a whole book.

nbowker 19/1/06 4:08 PM

Comment: Within the references, two more recent (at the time the book was printed) publications have been sourced, which indicates that up-to-date ideas have been found.

Basic Report Writing

What Is a Report?

A report is a specific form of writing that is organised around concisely identifying and examining issues, events, or findings that have happened in a physical sense, such as events that have occurred within an organisation, or findings from a research investigation. These events can also pertain to events or issues that have been presented within a body of literature. The key to report writing is informing the reader simply and objectively about all relevant issues. There are three features that, together, characterise report writing at a very basic level: a pre-defined structure, independent sections, and reaching unbiased conclusions.

Having a Pre-Defined Structure

At a very basic level, a report can be distinguished from an essay by the creation of headings into which information is organised. Broadly, these headings may indicate sections within a report, such as an Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion. Within the main section(s) making up the body of the report (the Discussion in the example just given), there is often an opportunity to create your own structure according to the literature you have sourced, your development of ideas, and the task assigned. An example of a report structure is presented below. Two versions are provided in which the first version indicates main sections and sub-sections through indenting, and the second does so through a numbering system.

You may find that the headings provide a link between sections, without the necessity of a linking sentence, although including a linking sentence from time-to-time may assist the reader's understanding.

Introduction
Discussion
 Technological benefits
 Efficiency
 Access to monitoring
 Technological weaknesses
 Disconnections
 Lack of face-to-face support
Conclusion

1. Introduction
2. Discussion
 2.1 Technological benefits
 2.1.1 Efficiency
 2.1.2 Access to monitoring
 2.2 Technological weaknesses
 2.2.1 Disconnections
 2.2.2 Lack of face-to-face support
3. Conclusion

In the body of the report, the difference between main sections and sub-sections may be indicated through changes in heading font style. You may need to check the assignment instructions to see whether this is appropriate.

Overall, a report is a highly structured piece of work. Typically, the course coordinator or lecturer identifies the main sections required. Hence, you are often given more guidance on how to write the assignment, with respect to its structure, compared to an essay where you decide the order of information in the (essay's) body. While you may have more freedom in structuring an essay, there can also be more difficulties in deciding upon exactly what structure that freedom will take. In contrast, a report provides you with that structure before you begin to answer the question, while still allowing you some flexibility and freedom in deciding on the organisation of sub-sections comprising the report's main sections. The second element of report writing follows.

Alternatively, you may wish to include a more evaluative focus to your analysis. A common technique, drawn from business studies' approaches to report writing, involves looking at the pros and cons surrounding a particular issue. This approach is conceptualised in terms of SWOT –

- Strengths
- Weaknesses
- Opportunities
- Threats

Each of these headings could form a separate section or a single paragraph within the body of your report's structure. Looking at the issue from different angles, especially pros and cons, will allow a more reflective and objective analysis of the topic. In cases where there are many issues at stake, you may also use SWOT as a method for analysing each individual issue involved in your report.

A similar technique to SWOT analysis has also been developed called Force Field analysis. This particular technique is drawn from a management arena. It identifies the process of comparing the pros and cons before arriving at a decision. Three steps are involved as follows:

- Identifying the driving forces in support of a decision
- Identifying the restraining forces or obstacles against a decision.
- Prioritising the most significant driving and restraining forces that will impact on the decision and writing these up in your report.

A further technique for managing your analysis, which is also drawn from the discipline of Management, involves simply addressing the following issues, aspects, or influences in relation to your topic:

- Political
- Economic (or educational)
- Sociological (or social)
- Technological
- Legal
- Environmental

Preview from Notesale.co.uk
Page 71 of 119

Each of these perspectives could form a single paragraph or a separate section of the body of your report. An easy way to remember these multiple perspectives is by using the acronym

PESTLE. In some cases, you may find that it is more beneficial to select three out of the six perspectives and discuss each of these in depth. Once you have addressed the issues in the body of your report, there may also be a requirement to look at ways to move forward with a particular issue or how to proceed with a particular decision. In such cases, considering the implications for the future or recommendations may be relevant.

Developing a Report Writing Style

With report writing, in particular, it is important that you present your points to the reader as efficiently as possible in the word space allowed. Often, a report can be assigned to a context involving several different kinds of issues, or a particularly complex issue, which needs to be broken down into smaller issues, or a combination of these two contexts. Therefore, if you are concise, yet direct and also detailed enough to demonstrate your level of understanding and evaluation, you will be more likely to cover a greater number of issues. While this seems an obvious point about the benefits of conciseness in your writing, it is very easy to lose sight of this when you are in the process of examining the issues. What follows is a list of points to help you to write concisely.

Tips on Being Concise in Your Writing

1. Get straight to the point in the first sentence

The first issue is.../involves.../relates to.../ is organised around...

A second issue focuses on...

The ... context presents another relevant issue because...

2. Explain the point more simply

At the present time = Presently...

In spite of the fact that = Although...

In the event that = If...

Portfolios can be developed **so as** to consider other options.. = Portfolios can be developed to consider other options...

3. Consider whether a phrase adds new meaning to the sentence?

The point is that... – Just state the point without the build up.

All things considered, the factors are... – It is assumed by your reader that you will have considered all the points in coming to your conclusion.

As a matter of fact... – In a very general sense, it is often assumed in academic writing that you are dealing with factual evidence, so there may be no need to assert something as a fact.

In a very real sense... – To an extent, everything can be real, but you would not be writing about it.

4. Avoid **qualifying words** which are redundant. The following examples highlight the redundant words and phrases.

Either **and**/or both... = either or both...

Each **and every**...

One and the same

Equal to **one another**

Exactly the same

The **end** result = The result

Earlier **in time**

Past records

Look back in retrospect = in retrospect

Real truth

True facts

Established fact = fact

Actual experience

Past experience = experience

Helpful assistance

Perfect ideal

Estimated **at about**

Rough estimate

Cost **the sum of**...= cost...

Sum total

Sufficient **enough**

allows users to explore various aspects of their identity, as well as the capacity to take on other identities. This included opportunities to explore a wider range of roles than those available in real life, such as experimenting with radically different personae and transcending to a higher power, in addition to adopting multiple characters with different genders simultaneously. Similarly, on IRC users have the ability to take on multiple identities, signified through user nicknames, simultaneously (Reid, 1993). Such activities demonstrate the freedom users have in constructing identities online as the constraints of physical reality are suspended (Calvert, Mahler, Zehnder, Jenkins, & Lee, 2003). This evidence indicates that the capacity for identity alteration online is vast.

nbowker 12/1/06 12:40 PM

Comment: The remainder of this paragraph is the same as the second paragraph in the essay.

2.1.1 Anonymity of the medium

Underlying users' capacity for identity alteration may be the anonymity of online communication. Researchers have argued that users alter their identity because of the anonymous features of the online medium, in which physical appearance cues are unavailable. This allows users to break free of social norms. For instance, Reid (1993) argues that the anonymity "and therefore invulnerability" (p. 403) surrounding online real life identity enables users to experiment with gender identity norms online by letting go of their social and cultural inhibitions. Literature exists about men and women masquerading as the opposite gender online (Curtis, 1997; Reid, 1996; Turkle, 1995). Consequently, as Calvert (2002) confirms, the anonymity of online interactions enables participants to freely express themselves in ways that are not as constrained by real world expectations. Hence, removing the rigid identity boundaries of such factors as age, ethnicity, and gender, which circumscribe behaviour offline, enables the

nbowker 19/1/06 4:09 PM

Comment: Topic sentence repeats the key word in the sub-section heading, "anonymity". Conveniently, the topic sentence manages to move from the broad topic of identity alteration to a possible reason for this behaviour brought about through the online medium – anonymity. It also functions to provide a link between the topic of the previous paragraph and the more specific focus of the current one. In this sense, although there is no linking sentence between paragraphs, this function can be carried out within the first sentence of a new section, even after the new sub-section heading is made available.

The findings in this report may have implications for research within the field of cyberpsychology. In particular, gender socialisation differences per se as well as gender socialisation differences in risk-taking may impact on behaviours of online users, beyond identity alteration. Future research needs to investigate this issue.

nbowker 12/1/06 3:19 PM

Comment: This final paragraph serves an important function of reports – to move the issue forward by introducing a practical application for the outcome. This may include the identification of future implications/recommendations, and/or the need to do further research.

To avoid duplication of information, refer to the essay on the same topic for the list of references used on pages 62-63, which is formatted according to APA conventions.

**Preview from Notesale.co.uk
Page 84 of 119**

Managing the Conclusions section

- 1.1 This is arranged as a numbered, bulleted-list.
- 1.2 Arrange each point in order of importance, rather than necessarily in the order found in your Discussion.
- 1.3 Match each point in sequence with the list of recommendations.
- 1.4 Each point provides a brief summary of one of the problems outlined in detail in the report.
- 1.5 Ensure each point links with the report's objectives.
- 1.6 Write each conclusion in the present tense.
- 1.7 Each point needs to be specific and clear.

Managing the Recommendations section

- 1.1 This is also arranged as a numbered, bulleted-list.
- 1.2 Each recommendation should appear in sequence with the order of points in the list of conclusions.
- 1.3 Each recommendation should provide a response to each problem identified in the list of conclusions.
- 1.4 Each recommendation should be action-oriented, concise, and clear.
- 1.5 Each recommendation should also be realistic and feasible within the social, economic, and political climate.
- 1.6 Write each recommendation in the future tense, as appropriate.

Qualities of an Effective Business Report

(Sourced from Ruch & Crawford, 1999, p. 40.)

- A management tool, usually assigned, for decision-making.
- Read for business gain, rather than entertainment.
- Provides an accurate way of obtaining information.
- Answers a question or solves a problem.
- Meets the needs of the situation.
- Usually written in a formal style, compared to other types of business writing.
- Reflects good, clear thinking and thorough planning.
- Organises the material in a natural sequence.
- Presents information from the reader's perspective.
- Stresses the value of the report in the title or first paragraph.

Resources on Business Report Writing

Bowden, J. (1997). *Writing a report: A step-by-step guide to effective report writing* (4th ed.). Plymouth, England: How to Books.

Emerson, L. (Ed.). (2005). *Writing guidelines for business students* (3rd ed.). Southbank, Victoria: Thomson Dunmore Press. **See chapter 6 on reports.**

Eunson, B. (1994). *Writing and presenting reports*. Brisbane: John Wiley & Sons.

Manalo, E., Wong-Toi, G., & Trafford, J. (2004). *The business of writing: Written communication skills for business students* (2nd ed.). Auckland, New Zealand: Longman.

Excellent resource, see chapter 2 on writing reports.

Ruch, W.V., & Crawford, M.L. (1988). *Business reports: Written and oral*. Boston: PWS-Kent.

Websites

There are also useful websites on business report writing, two of which are presented here. They were current at the time of publishing this book.

Skills Unit Pack, University of Surrey. (1999). *Communications: Report writing*. Retrieved January 13, 2006, from <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Skills/pack/report.html>

Merchant, S. (2003). *Business report writing*. Technical Vocational Institute, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Retrieved January 13, 2006, from <http://planet.tvi.cc.nm.us/ba122/Reports/Report%20Writing.htm>

Being Critical

Another defining feature of academic writing is evidence of some critical thinking. Although being critical is one of the most difficult and elusive aspects of academic writing, it is a feature that can gain high rewards. Indeed, critiquing theories, arguments, and evidence often gains significant marks in assignments. It is important to be able to develop some critical thinking skills and to communicate these in your writing.

What Does “Being Critical” Really Mean?

Firstly, I would like to identify some concerns surrounding the practice of being critical.

1. It is common for those beginning their journey into academic writing to take the view that being critical is all about picking out the negative or weak aspects of a process or theory. This may lead to unnecessary feelings of tension when being assigned the task of criticising a system that may have many useful attributes.
2. Secondly, the practice of criticising something that has already been decided upon and implemented may seem futile because of the lack of short and long-term application.
3. Thirdly, being assigned the task of criticising the work of an esteemed author may appear to be an unreasonable demand because of the lack of knowledge and experience encountered by someone entering a discipline for the first time.
4. Finally, the fact that the author has had their work published means that whatever information they have written has already undergone a rigid process of change and evaluation, thereby rendering the student's own criticisms as unnecessary and without substance or application.

However, all of these criticisms fail to take into account the fundamental purpose of academic writing. The central task of academic writing is to demonstrate to the marker that you have thoroughly engaged with the ideas and interpretations of academic experts. This process is not (always) about reaching a definitive or absolute answer or conclusion to a issue. Rather, it is about joining in a broader academic debate about the pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages, or strengths and weaknesses surrounding a particular issue. In demonstrating that you have engaged with the literature, using a level of analysis that incorporates some degree of evaluation is an effective method for presenting your engagement with the literature. Being critical is at the heart of this high-powered analysis or evaluation. Indeed, evaluation is a useful way of understanding the work involved in being critical in your writing, even to the point of providing an apt synonym for the word “critical”.

In terms of addressing the original criticisms involved in being critical, mentioned in the first paragraph of this section, I would like to respond with the following points.

1. Firstly, even when you agree with a process, in which you are required to carry out some critical analysis on, you can still highlight how it could be improved upon, and in so doing, identify areas of weakness. Furthermore, being critical encompasses not only the identification of weaknesses, but also strengths. Indeed, pointing out the benefits and particular advantages of a system also demonstrates a level of evaluation and critical thinking because you are having to make a judgement about the usefulness of a system. This is likely to involve comparing the strengths of one system with another, thereby, contributing to a more in-depth level of analysis.
2. Secondly, the practice of being critical is about showing the marker that you have read widely and understood different interpretations and points of view, even if there will never be any application of your discussion and findings.

3. Thirdly, despite being a potential novice within a discipline, reading widely and drawing on the criticisms of other authors (with acknowledgement of your sources) will provide you with the skills and knowledge to competently evaluate the workings and ideas of experts.
4. Finally, try not to overestimate the value and certainty of any one theory or point of view, because it is highly unlikely that a single organisation or person can ever totally account for the entire conglomeration of circumstances, positions, and interpretations within their belief system, which has been shaped at a particular point in time.

Included within the practice of being critical, I have already highlighted the concept of evaluation. However, in addition to this, the notions of refutation and justification are also worthy of mention. When you participate in the practice of evaluation, you may also enter the domain of refutation, which is about raising counter-evidence for the purpose of highlighting its weaknesses. This is a powerful strategy in arguing because it shows that you are mindful of the opposition's point of view, but you are also astute enough to evaluate the evidence on its merits, thereby conceding to its strengths as well as confirming weaknesses. In other words, if you provide both sides of a debate, this functions to demonstrate balance and lack of bias, leading to a carefully considered evaluation and outcome. In the process of carrying out this evaluation, you are also working to justify your overall position more persuasively. By presenting counter points of view and then minimising them, your position is strengthened. This whole procedure offers a more solid and thorough analytic foundation on which to base and therefore, justify, your point of view. Consequently, being critical also functions as a means of justifying your overall position and conclusion(s). Ultimately, this practice of being critical offers the marker a scholarly context in which to make an informed opinion.

What is Available for Critique

Nothing goes untouched when it comes to carrying out a critique. For instance, you can start with the very topic addressed by the authors and whether or not it appropriately deals with the concerns and issues that need to be discussed within a wider social, cultural, and/or political context. It may be that the authors have developed their topic of focus from a particular position, which neglects other, more pressing issues. In fact, the authors may have failed to consider an important component because of the potential difficulties surrounding access or measurement. Nevertheless, they still could have negotiated these difficulties or, at least, justified why they chose not to pursue them.

In addition to critiquing the nature of the topic chosen, you can also consider alternative ways of analysing the issue. In particular, the authors may have decided to adopt a quantitative approach to their investigation. This in itself upholds particular beliefs and assumptions, which may function to neglect other ways of understanding an issue. Alternatively, the authors may have chosen a qualitative approach, which may present limitations in areas such as measurement, validity, and reliability, depending on the particular philosophical position you choose to support.

Beyond the method of analysis and topic, you can consider how accurately the data has been interpreted. There may have been broad generalisations which have little bearing on what actually happens in real life. Secondly, alternative explanations could have been drawn from some aspects of the data, yet these were not mentioned by the authors. Thirdly, interpretations may not fit well with the theoretical underpinnings explained at the beginning. Moreover, problems with interpretation may result from poorly designed and inaccurate data collection where potential for misrepresentation and carelessness are high.

The type of argument used to support the author's philosophical position may present another area for critique. For instance, the argument may not be rigorous enough to dissuade you from alternative explanations. Further, you may have identified better arguments in support of the same idea in other readings.

Finally, the type of philosophical approach underlying the work can be made available for critique. In this I mean you can focus on the weaknesses or gaps that the philosophical approach does not address. This can be achieved by identifying the points addressed in other relevant philosophical positions, and then demonstrating how these points are not covered by the author's philosophical approach, followed by the potential outcomes gained if another philosophical approach had been utilised.

Steps for Developing Critical Thought

- Make up a list of the strengths and weaknesses or limitations surrounding a topic.
- Consider the advantages and disadvantages pertaining to an issue.
- Write down the costs and benefits of a solution or outcome.
- Carry out a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis.
- Carry out a PESTLE (political, economic, sociological, technological, legal, environmental) analysis. For example, consider the political implications at local, national, and international borders; evaluate the economic impact of a system globally and locally; identify the system's effect(s) on society; overview the impact of technological change; highlight the legal consequences nationally and internationally; and identify the issue's environmental impact globally and locally.
- Question.....Is the argument based on factual evidence that can be proven, or is it merely constructed around biased opinion?
- Does the theory come from only one perspective?
- Look at the topic from different angles. Imagine yourself in the role of someone occupying a different social identity (a woman, man, elderly citizen, greenie, activist, chief executive, politician), and ponder the pros and cons surrounding the topic from this other perspective, as well as the gaps in the topic which neglect your needs and concerns.
- What are the issues at stake for the author? What political motivations are involved? Are there political motivations?
- Does the author provide an inclusive range of options?
- Is the evidence convincing?
- Is the theory logically presented? Does the theory explain all of the outcomes and processes?
- How old is the study/investigation/research? Has any other research disproved or disagreed with the conclusions drawn?
- How many participants were included? Were they students? Did participants come from different cultural backgrounds or did they reflect one cultural group? How old were participants? Were there equal numbers of males and females?
- Could another researcher repeat the methods used and have a reasonable chance of getting the same or similar results?
- Are limitations of the research or theory acknowledged?
- Are there competing theories which offer better explanations?
- Are there more effective, more scientific, more reliable, more cultural sensitive, more ecologically valid, or more practical methods that the researchers could have used?

Finally, structure may also entail clarity in expression. Hence, it is useful to consider explaining definitions and terms where relevant. Remember that while the reader is likely to be knowledgeable in the topic you are writing about, they want to see that you have understood the issues and ideas. So it is often good to imagine yourself writing for your peers, rather than the expert marker, which allows you plenty of room to elaborate and highlight your comprehension of the topic.

Presentation

This is usually allocated the least amount of marks in any assignment. However, it is also an area where you can gain the most marks out of the total allocated for this section because it typically requires you to follow instructions, which, hopefully, have been clearly laid out. It is expected that you will present your work clearly. Ideally, typed printing is easier to read than handwritten assignments. Keep in mind other formatting conventions to follow, like a 4cm margin for the markers comments, and one and a half or double spacing of lines so that it is easier to read, as well as grammar and spelling. Overall, to pass an assignment it is expected that you will have met most of these standards.

Now, to get an A requires you to go that extra mile (or kilometre), beyond a competent and acceptable standard. The following list demonstrates some of the extra features that may be included in an assignment awarded a grade within the A range.

- Integrating additional references beyond those assigned in the course, which are included in your assignment to demonstrate new points, or extend and reinforce other points.
- Including some critical reflection and evaluation of the topic and/or the points used to support your argument.
- Including some original analysis of the issue or integrating the ideas in an original way by, for instance, adopting a broader framework in which to position your points.
- Providing two or three pieces of evidence from the literature to back up all or almost all your points.
- Integrating many points that are relevant to the topic, including sub-themes and further sub-themes and / or points from alternative angles that may not necessarily be mainstream.

Overall, getting a grade within the A range is difficult and involves a lot of hard work.

Nevertheless, achieving a grade close to an A, such as grades within the B range demonstrates that you have also done well to achieve a competent standard, with potential and promise for even greater work in the future.

What follows is a list of some of the common errors made in assignments, which may contribute towards the lowering of a grade.

- Relying too much on quotations and not using your own words to explain others' ideas. Remember, when you explain information in your own words, this demonstrates to the marker that you have clearly understood the topic.
- Providing too little support from your readings and/or textbook to back up your points.
- Covering only a few points related to the topic, rather than the full scope of issues and sub-issues.
- Including details about the topic which are too brief, and, which require more explanation through examples, details of events, and / or evidence from theories or studies.

Procrastination

Procrastination can be defined as the avoidance of doing things that need to be done, and is commonly encountered by students when undertaking a course of study, including the writing of assignments. The act of procrastinating may arise from any one or a combination of beliefs as follows:

- having excessively high standards.
- not seeing the relevance of the assignment.
- lacking clarity in how to manage the assignment.
- fearing the unknown process surrounding assignment writing.
- imagining catastrophes you will encounter while doing the assignment that function to prevent you from starting.
- feeling less than sufficiently skilled to complete the assignment.

To limit the effects of procrastination, several strategies are offered:

- Break your assignment into small, manageable tasks. This will allow you to use small sections of time instead of waiting for complete days, which may not eventuate.
- Set realistic timeframes with flexibility to deal with life crises.
- Look at the purpose of what you are doing and remind yourself of the end goal as a way into seeing the relevance of your study to your life.
- Reward yourself after small tasks. This will help retain the motivation.

Remember that great writers always have to start somewhere. It is rare for complete products of writing to develop in a short period of time. Rather, the process of writing takes time and involves transitions and transformations in thinking, understanding, and creating. To give justice to these stages in academic development, it is vital that adequate time is given to each stage. To achieve this, you REALLY do need to start an assignment as SOON as YOU CAN!

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Page 119 of 119