

2.04 Critical analysis skills

What is Critical Analysis?

Essay titles often contain the instruction *critically analyse*, yet a common complaint from tutors is that students do not analyse, but simply describe, with resulting low marks.

If you are asked to critically analyse something, it means that you must consider and evaluate the claims made by the theorists, “experts”, official bodies, journalists etc. that you have read, asking yourself if the basis of these claims is sound and whether they apply or are relevant.

Don't just put references in your work. Think about how the references relate to your title/question. Make sure you have explained this in your writing.

How to go about it

It is usually useful to think of claims consisting of three parts: the basic premise; the actual claims; and some sort of conclusion.

Even though the basic premise may be true, the consequent claims made by the writer may be false or only partly true when applied to your situation.

For example - Something written 20 years ago may not be relevant to the contemporary situation. It may no longer be possible, or even legal.

Remember, your analysis must always consider the situation/topic that your essay is focussed on.

For example

- In Situation A - the plan is perfect and makes the best use of your resources and staff
- In Situation B - the plan does not work because you do not have the same resources or staff
- Therefore - the plan itself is not a "good" or "bad" plan, it just depends on the situation

The basic premise

If the basic premise or claim is faulty, then the whole argument will be faulty.

To take a simple example, if you show that someone has based an argument on the false premise that “all asylum seekers are economic migrants” (some are; many are not), then you have critically analysed the claim.

Very often, it may be necessary to show that general or sweeping claims need to be modified to align them with the actual, present situation, for example by using the

word “some” or “certain” instead of “all”. (**Some** asylum seekers are economic migrants).

You will, of course, need to provide evidence in the form of exceptions to the general rule claimed. You make your writing clearer and stronger by providing data, figures or examples.

The arguments/claims based on this premise

This is often a question of logic. If someone claims that because a certain theory applies to one situation, it will automatically apply to another, you may need to apply critical analysis and show that even though the theory does apply in the first case, there is insufficient evidence to assume that it will work in other cases.

It is wrong to use a particular instance to make a general claim.

To expand on this analysis and to develop your own argument you need to:

- look at the **similarities and differences** between the two (or more) situations you are considering and ask yourself whether there are the necessary and sufficient conditions in “B” to produce the same results as in “A”.
- examine the **conditions** relating to the claim. These conditions include the previously mentioned aspects of time and place; social, cultural and economic conditions; government policy and general political climate etc. etc. Just because something may be true in one situation does not necessarily mean that it is true in another. It is necessary to analyse the conditions pertaining to the claim and to decide if they are true for other situations. Some conditions are transferable (eg the law of gravity); others are not (eg UK economic policy): you need to make a clear distinction between the two. You also need to be able to recognize what are in fact value judgements by the author, whose subjectivity may weaken the claim being made. To critically analyse a claim and consequently reject it, it may be sufficient to demonstrate that there are enough differences to make the outcome in other situations uncertain.
- show originality by presenting new ideas or interpretations based upon your understanding of the material. Critical analysis often results in new ideas; this is part of the learning process. Don't be afraid to follow up your hunches and intuition with further reading and research, but again applying critical analysis to the material. Critical thinking should be a constant process and you should train yourself to notice and record questions in your mind as they arise.
- learn to think from a “perspective”. Try to understand different theories and how they might relate to one another, and then try to group different theories into broader theoretical approaches. This will help you identify what is critical according to whom. Knowing the broader picture is essential for critical thinking.

The conclusion of the claim

You also need to look at the conclusion the writer reaches. Sometimes two claims may be acceptable, but the conclusion drawn from them is not.

For example, “water is necessary for survival; food is necessary for survival; therefore to survive we **only** need food and water”.

The first two claims are obviously true, **but the conclusion is not**; other things are needed for survival, although what these are is debatable.

For another guide to Critical Analysis you can read the workshop information and presentation in our resources.