Writing Critically

What does it mean to write critically?
The word ‘critical’ usually means ‘negative’. A ‘critical person’, for instance, finds fault with things. But this isn’t what we mean by writing critically. Instead, writing critically means to be analytical, thoughtful and questioning.

You may come across assignments asking you to ‘critically analyse’ a source, or ‘critically engage’ with an article. What these assignments are asking you to do is not simply read the source and summarise what it says, but to actively engage with it – to analyse its arguments, assess its strengths and limitations, and to identify what your own opinion is in relation to the topic.

Above all else, critical writers are always questioning. They don’t accept material at its face-value. Instead, they pick it apart piece by piece to see how it holds up to scrutiny. They want to know who wrote it, what they’re arguing, and how they came to their conclusions. If you want to be critical, start by questioning everything!

Arguments
Critical writing is concerned with arguments. Almost every academic piece of work will have an argument to make, so it’s important that you can identify an argument when you see it. By ‘argument’ we do not mean ‘disagreement’. A disagreement could simply involve the clashing of two opinions based on little evidence or reason. An academic argument, meanwhile, persuades the reader towards a particular point of view by the use of reason. For example:

**Disagreement**: You shouldn’t eat that sandwich. It’s got mayonnaise in it and I don’t like mayonnaise.

**Argument**: You shouldn’t eat that sandwich. It’s three months out of date and it’s covered in fungi. You’ll probably get sick.

When you come to study a source or a text make sure you can identify the author’s argument. The same goes for when you come to write an essay: what exactly is your argument? When you’re analysing a text you will offer your judgment of the successes and failures of the text.
Critical Reading
You can identify arguments and assess their strengths and weaknesses by critically reading the text. Rather than passively absorbing the information, critical reading involves constantly questioning the text as you go along. Here are some good questions to bear in mind as you read:

• Who is the author?
• What is the purpose of the text?
• Who is the intended reader?
• What are the key arguments?
• How does the author present their argument?
• What evidence and sources are used?

Once you’ve read through the piece of work there are a few things you can try to help with your critical analysis:

• Summarise the author’s argument in one sentence
• List their main points
• Add your own thoughts to each main point - Do you agree or disagree? Why?

What makes a strong argument?
A good argument should include:

1. An identifiable position. You should have one main point to make, and this point should be clear. Make sure it doesn’t get lost amongst sub-points and side-notes
2. Consistent persuasion towards that position. It’s not enough to just state your position; you need to persuade your reader that your argument is valid
3. Evidence to support the position. Bring in the facts and figures to back your argument up!

What makes a weak argument?
Lots of things! The most common mistake is to make an assertion without using evidence or sound reasoning to support it. But there are some other traps which a great many people often fall into:

Confusing correlation with causation
Arguing that because a particular set of circumstances were present, they caused a particular outcome. Sometimes known as ‘post hoc ergo proctor hoc’ (after this therefore because of this)

e.g. The students involved in the school shootings at Columbine liked heavy metal music, therefore heavy metal music causes violence
**Weakness**: correlation does not necessarily imply causation. Not every set of circumstances are linked.

e.g. *I was wearing a blue tie when I won the lottery, therefore if you wear a blue tie you will win the lottery*

You need to be able to show that there is a direct relationship between the circumstance and the outcome. Correlation alone isn’t enough.

---

**Ad hominem – attacking the arguer**

Arguing that because the arguer has a negative quality or carried out a negative act, their argument is wrong.

e.g. *The MP who proposed an agricultural reform bill had an affair, therefore the agricultural reform bill is bad!*

**Weakness**: negative qualities or actions are often completely irrelevant to the argument itself. You may have attacked the arguer, but the argument itself is unaffected.

e.g. *The athlete only came 4th in the race, therefore his views on existentialist philosophy are a load of rubbish*

---

**Building a Straw Man**

A false argument (the straw man) is created by the opponent and then attacked. Usually the person’s argument is distorted or misrepresented:

Person A - *There should be welfare available for those who are unemployed*  
Person B - *You want to give all our tax money to people who are too lazy to work!*

**Weakness**: Person A’s argument has been deliberately misrepresented. Person A did not argue that *all* tax money should go to lazy people, but Person B thought that this argument would be easier to attack.
Slippery slopes
Arguing that if one thing occurs, other things will automatically follow which are bad or undesirable.

e.g. If we cut funding to one section of the armed forces, soon we’ll cut funding to another. Gradually we’ll withdraw funding from all army divisions until we’re left with no armed forces and will be completely defenceless!

Weakness: Unless you can prove otherwise, it does not automatically follow that a series of terrible events will occur because one thing changes. It’s similar to something called ‘cliff edge theory’, i.e. the closer you are to the cliff edge, the more likely you are to fall off.

The trouble is there’s nothing actually wrong with being close to the edge of the cliff – it’s the falling off that’s bad!

Restricting options
Presenting only a limited number of options and making your audience choose one or the other of these options

e.g. Pigeons have been settling on the building and have caused mess and damage. We have to choose between letting this continue as it is, or shooting all the pigeons.

Weakness: There may well be other options available, you’re just not presenting them. You could, for instance, put up wire netting to keep the pigeons out rather than shooting them.

Appealing to popularity or tradition
Arguing that because lots of people agree with a point it must be right. Alternatively, arguing that because something has been that way for a long time it must be right.

e.g. Lots of people believe in ghosts, therefore there must be some truth to them

Weakness: Just because a lot of people agree with something it doesn’t make it right or true. Equally just because something has existed for a long time it doesn’t mean it’s right

e.g. Slavery has existed for the major part of human history, therefore it’s ok to have slaves
Further help:

Head to the Academic Skills website for a range of guides and other useful resources (http://library.soton.ac.uk/sash).

Visit the Academic Skills Hub at Hartley Library for academic guidance and advice. Drop in Monday to Friday, between 10:00-12:00 and 14:00-16:00 (http://library.soton.ac.uk/sash/contact-us).

Book a 30-minute appointment for one-to-one writing support, available to all students from Monday to Friday – remember to check the time and location when booking. Book here: http://library.soton.ac.uk/sash/academic-writing.