

# Critical Reading and Note-taking

Follow these steps to help you read and make notes for your essay:

- Take time to **understand the question**: think critically about the requirements. Ask yourself why you are being required to write it, the tutor's expectations and what you need to cover. Note down in bullet-point form your thoughts and ideas in response to the question and its key terms. List all of the topics/issues that you think you will need to cover in the essay and record your initial ideas.
- **Create a reading list composed of relevant material** that relates to your specific essay question.



Begin by searching in the readings listed in your module guide. List material that is **definitely relevant** and **possibly relevant** in separate columns. Then go to the library and collect the 'definitely relevant' material. While there, browse through and check the indexes of the 'possibly relevant' material, discarding any readings that do not look fully relevant and adding to the 'definitely relevant' those readings that will be useful to you in answering the question. Review the list and cut it down if it is too long and overwhelming. If it is a manageable list, and you feel that you could comfortably do a few additional readings, search QDiscover for a few of these. But keep the list relevant and manageable!

**Tip:** Make an appointment with your subject librarian for guidance on using the library and searching for relevant reading material.

- Employ **critical reading skills**. Identify and evaluate current evidence. Why are certain arguments successful? What evidence do they use? What are the strengths/weaknesses? Why are other arguments less convincing? See pp. 7-8 for further detail on this skill. You may find the 'critical notes' sheet below useful in encouraging critical reading and note-taking skills.

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- Make **focussed, relevant notes**.

As you read through the items on your reading list, add relevant points, quotations and information under the headings you created while brainstorming. As you develop a firmer idea of the topic and how best to answer the question while reading, you may find it necessary to add in a couple of sections that you had not thought of during the initial stage, or, indeed, to remove some.

- You should now have several quite full bullet-points that contain notes, ideas, quotations and references to your wider reading. These form the skeleton that will ultimately be fleshed out to form the paragraphs that will make up your essay.

**Tip: It's easier and more efficient to do your in-text referencing and reference list as you go along.**

- Identify **your own perspective** on the topic; imagine that you are a lawyer arguing a case. As you read, you will be aware of multiple views on the issue and it is often difficult to decide the 'best' but your role is to weigh up the evidence and identify what is currently the most convincing. You need to have a clear sense of your own point of view and substantial reasons for it.
- Consider the need to **persuade the reader** with a well-structured, logical argument. Think about the best way to present the argument to allow the reader to follow the various points. Clearly link each argument to the one before so that it builds towards the conclusion (see information on 'Signposting', pp. 12-14). You want to show your active engagement with the topic and other writers' work on it.
- **Engage in debate.** Demonstrate that you have weighed up the various theories and are attentive to the strengths and weaknesses of different viewpoints. Your argument needs to move from simply description to analysis and evaluation. See below for further detail on critical writing, pp. 15-19.
- Re-read the question and read back through your paragraphs to **check that you've fully answered the question and that all of your points are relevant**. Add in any information and analysis that you feel still needs to be included and cut any irrelevant material. If you've exceeded the word count, you may need to cut material that is not absolutely essential (see p. 20 for further information on 'Word Count Issues').

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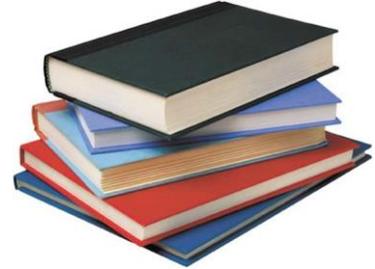
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# Critical Reading Skills

Instead of accepting things at 'face value', you need to look for the evidence and reasoning behind the claims made by other writers.

Ask yourself before you begin reading:

- What do I want to find out?
- What do I need to read to get the information I need?
- What is my point of view? Why do I think this?



Ask questions of the writing:

- What, in basic terms, is the author's argument?
- Is it effectively evidenced?
- What are the limitations or flaws in the evidence?
- What examples would prove the opposite theory?
- Can the theory be disproved or is it too general?
- Is this convincing? Why/why not?
- What are the implications?
- What are the alternatives?

The '**Critical Notes**' sheet on the next page can be used to make notes when reading: it helps you to focus in on the author's argument, reasoning, and how it links to other readings. Photocopy this page multiple times if you think it would be helpful.

Form your own opinion:

- Which parts of the author's argument do I want to use/reflect on in my essay?
- How does this fit in with my own theory?
- How does it fit with the opposite theory?
- How does it fit with other relevant theories I have come across?
- Is my own theory still valid? If so, why?
- Am I surprised? If so, why?
- Do I agree? If so, why? Why not?

University of Sussex (2011) *Questioning as you read*. Available at: [www.sussex.ac.uk/s3/?id=83&site=normal](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/s3/?id=83&site=normal). (Accessed: 10 December 2012).

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Author(s)/Source	
Title	
Website	
Date	Access Date
Publisher or Journal	Place
Volume	Issue Number
Author's position/theoretical position	
Essential background information	
Overall argument or hypothesis	
Conclusion	
Supporting reasons	
1.	5.
2.	6.
3.	7.
4.	8.
Strengths of the line of reasoning and supporting evidence	
Flaws in the argument and gaps or other weaknesses in the argument and supporting evidence	
How does this Compare/Contrast other readings	

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# Critical Writing

Critical writing needs to persuade the reader of your point of view on the topic. It should be a well-reasoned argument which leads to a clear conclusion. To help convince the reader you need to present a set of reasons, in a convincing and logical order. You need to back up your arguments with evidence from a variety of reliable academic sources.

## Description - Analysis - Evaluation

To ensure analytical writing, you need to show progression from **description** (What? When? Who? Where?) to **analysis** (Why? How? What if? So what?) and finally, move towards **evaluation** (What next? Why is this significant? How does this answer the question?)

Finding the balance between descriptive and analytical writing is essential to good writing practice at university level. All writing includes some description but examiners want to see evidence of deeper, critical thinking on the topic.

The table below identifies the differences between description and analysis:

Descriptive Writing...	Critical Analytical Writing...
states what happened	identifies the significance
states what something is like	evaluates strengths and weaknesses
gives the story so far	weighs one piece of information against another
states the order in which things happened	makes reasoned judgements
says how to do something	argues a case according to the evidence
explains what a theory says	shows why something is relevant or suitable
explains how something works	indicates why something will work (best)
notes the method used	identifies whether something is appropriate or suitable
says when something occurred	identifies why the timing is of importance
states the different components	weighs up the importance of component parts
states opinions	gives reasons for selecting each option
lists details	evaluates the relevance of links between pieces of information
lists in any order	structures information in order of importance
states the links between items	shows the relevance of links between pieces of information
gives information	draws conclusions

Cottrell, S. (2008) *The study skills handbook*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 286.

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# Critical Writing Terminology

To provide evidence for your claims, it is usually necessary to refer to other sources. You should use critical skills to make links between different authors' opinions on the topic and to synthesise the various ideas into a coherent argument. Some of the phrases below may be useful in linking ideas.



## To introduce someone's ideas:

Bloggs suggests/argues/states/proposes/emphasises/believes that ...

Bloggs draws attention to ...

describes X as ...

describes how ...

indicates that ...

refers to ...

takes the stance that ...

According to Bloggs ...

As stated/suggested/argued by Bloggs, ...

There is a view/theory/argument that ...

It has been suggested/argued/proposed that ...

One view/theory/suggestion/argument/proposal is that ...

One view, expressed by Bloggs, is that ...

## Introducing questions, problems and limitations (theory)

One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether ...

A serious weakness with this argument, however, is that ...

One of the limitations with this explanation is that it does not explain why ...

One criticism of much of the literature on X is that ...

The key problem with this explanation is that ...

The existing accounts fail to resolve the contradiction between X and Y ...

However, there is an inconsistency with this argument ...

Smith's argument relies too heavily on qualitative analysis of ...

It seems that Jones' understanding of the X framework is questionable because ...

Smith's interpretation overlooks much of the historical research ...

One major criticism of Smith's work is that ...

Many writers have challenged Jones' claim on the grounds that ...

X's analysis does not take account of ... nor does he examine ...

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### Introducing questions, problems, weaknesses, disadvantages and limitations (method/practice)

Another problem with this approach is that it fails to take X into account ...

Perhaps the most serious disadvantage of this method is that ...

Difficulties arise, however, when an attempt is made to implement the policy ...

Nevertheless, the strategy has not escaped criticism from governments, agencies and academics...

One major drawback of this approach is that ...

The main limitation of X, however, is ...

However, this method of analysis has a number of limitations ...

However, approaches of this kind carry with them various well known limitations ...

All the studies reviewed so far, however, suffer from the fact that ...

However, there are limits to how far the idea of/concept of X can be taken ...

However, such explanations tend to overlook the fact that ...

However, one of the problems with the instrument the researchers used to measure X was

...

### Identifying a study's weakness

The main weakness of the study is the failure to address how ...

The study fails to consider the differing categories...

The research does not take into account pre-existing ... such as ...

The author offers no explanation for the distinction between X and Y ...

Smith makes no attempt to differentiate between various different types of X ...

Jones fails to fully acknowledge the significance of ...

The paper would appear to be over ambitious in its claims ...

The author overlooks the fact that X contributes to Y ...

However, what Smith fails to do is to draw a distinction between ...

Another weakness is that we are given no explanation of how ...

No attempt was made to quantify the association between X and Y ...

### Offering constructive suggestions

Bloggs' paper	would have been	somewhat more	interesting	if he/she had	used ...
His/her conclusions	might have been	more	useful	if the author had	considered ...
The study		much more	original		adopted ...
The findings		far more	persuasive		discussed ...
			convincing		demonstrated ...
			insightful		

A better study would examine a large, randomly selected sample of X with ...

A much more systematic study would identify how X interacts with other variables that are believed to be linked to ...

### Highlighting inadequacies of previous studies

Most studies in the field of X have only focussed on ...

Most studies in X have only been carried out in a small number of areas.

The problem with much published research on this issue is its generality ...

The experimental data are rather controversial, and there is no general agreement about ...

Such expositions are unsatisfactory because they ...

However, few writers have been able to draw on any structured research into the opinions and attitudes of ...

The research to date has tended to focus on X rather than Y.

The existing accounts fail to resolve the contradiction between X and Y.

Researchers have not treated X in much detail.

Previous studies of X have not dealt with ...

However, these studies used non-validated methods to measure ...

Half of the studies evaluated failed to specify whether ...

However, much of the research up to now has been descriptive in nature ...

Although extensive research has been carried out on X, no single study exists which adequately covers ...

However, these results were based upon data from over X years ago and it is unclear if these differences still persist.

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### Introducing other people's criticisms

However, Jones points out that ...

Many analysts now argue that the strategy of X has not been successful. Smith, for example, argues that ...

The X theory has been / vigorously / strongly challenged in recent years by a number of writers ...

Bloggs' analysis has been criticised by a number of writers. Jones, for example, points out that ...

Smith's meta-analysis has been subjected to considerable criticism.

The most important of these criticisms is that Smith failed to note that ...

Jones is probably the best known critic of the X theory. He argues that ...

The latter point has been critiqued by Jones ...

Critics have also argued that not only do social surveys provide an inaccurate measure of X, but the ...

Critics question the ability of X theory to provide ...

More recent arguments against X have been summarised by Smith and Jones ...

Jones is critical of the conclusions that Smith draws from his findings.

### Introducing an idea/theory that agrees with or has built on another:

This is supported by/in line with the view held by Smith ...

Smith accepts/supports/agrees with/concurs with ...

A similar view is held by/stance is taken by Smith ...

This concept/idea/theory has been extended/developed/taken further/built upon by Smith ...

### Introducing an idea/theory that disagrees/contrasts with another:

This conflicts/contrasts with/is contrary to the view held by Smith that ...

This is not accepted/has been challenged by Smith, who instead argues that ...

Smith, on the other hand/however/in contrast, suggests that ...

An alternative view/suggestion is that ...

The opposite/a conflicting view is expressed by Smith; he asserts that ...

The University of Manchester (2011) *Being critical*. Available at:

[www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/critical.htm](http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/critical.htm). (Accessed: 17 January 2013).

Be sure to provide **references** for the material you cite directly,  
paraphrase and/or refer to.  
See p. 26-27 for further detail on 'referencing'.

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