

Critical thinking

3. Critical writing

Introduction

In Unit 1 the concept of developing an argument was described as intrinsic to critical practice (critical thinking, reading and writing), especially to essay writing. There are several aspects to developing an argument: examining and evaluating the literature on the topic, developing your own position in relation to the question, and gathering evidence to support that position. The most important aspect in terms of writing critically is structuring your essay in such a way that your argument and the evidence to support that argument is clearly articulated. These aspects as well as other processes intrinsic to critical practice in assignment writing are the focus of this unit. For a detailed discussion of structure of arguments see the self access module *Essay Writing, Unit 2 – the argument: development and structure*.



1. Critical thinking: overview



2. Critical reading and note-making



3. Critical writing

Getting started

Critical analysis can begin with your approach to an assignment question. Recognising that there isn't only one right answer to an assignment question should help you to realise that you can take a number of approaches when preparing your assignment. Firstly, getting started with your assignment should involve analysing the question – what are you being asked to do? You also need to start thinking about how you could answer the question based on your lectures and tutorial discussions.

Often students are advised to look for the keywords when analysing assignment questions. However, the concept of keywords doesn't help you to differentiate aspects of the question. Scoufis et. al. (1999) suggest students identify three aspects of an assignment question: the topic area, the focus, and the instruction word. While the topic area can be described simply as the general 'about' of the assignment, and the instruction word is what you have to do, the focus needs a little more explanation. James et. al. (1999) describe the focus as

...the framework for your discussion of the topic. It narrows down the topic area and focuses you on which aspects of the topic are relevant to the question...It is crucial to explore the connection between topic and focus. (p. 23)

For example:

“Although we are sometimes justified in withdrawing or withholding life-sustaining treatment from someone who is terminally ill and suffering, we could never be justified in killing such a person.” Critically discuss this claim.

The **topic** is *withdrawing or withholding life-sustaining treatment from someone who is terminally ill and suffering* (i.e. debates about euthanasia)

The **focus** is *although we are sometimes justified... we could never be justified in killing such a person* (i.e. what sort of euthanasia is justifiable)

The **instructional words** are Critically discuss

Learning objectives

This module will help you to:

- understand the importance and function of critical thinking at university
- develop critical reading skills
- apply critical thinking to your note-making
- structure arguments and include critical analysis in your assignment writing



Points of view and establishing a position

To develop and establish your own position in relation to your assignment question and to find the evidence to support it, you need to read widely and critically and think critically about what you find out. You will need to add up the weight of evidence to help you determine what your viewpoint will be, remembering that sometimes the evidence may not conclusively support one viewpoint or another. In such cases, your position must reflect that lack of evidence.

One of the things you may need to do in developing a position is to distinguish between opinions and facts in your research. At times, this can be difficult because a particular viewpoint or perspective can be so widely accepted that it is treated as 'fact-like'. Look at the following excerpt from a philosophy essay that answers the question 'Is euthanasia ever justified?':

This "intuitive" difference between killing and allowing to die can be explained as follows. The former involves actually initiating the sequence of events that leads to someone's death. The latter, however, only involves refraining to intervene in an already established course of events leading to death. Gay-Williams argues that refraining to treat a patient, when the treatment cannot reasonably be expected to save his/her life, is not euthanasia at all. The patient is not killed, but dies of whatever disease s/he is suffering from. And the patient's death is not aimed at by the person who does not treat them. Instead, the decision is a medical judgment about the value of continuing a course of treatment that aims to avoid further pain, indignity and expense for the patient and his/her family and friends.

Rather than accepting the common definitions, the student introduces the viewpoint of an authority who questions the given assumption about passive euthanasia

The student closely examines Gay-Williams' argument, and establishes the significant implications of the argument for the essay question.

The student's wide reading in the area has also alerted her to related hypothetical situations, which allow her to evaluate Gay-Williams' argument critically. Through the careful scrutiny of this argument, and the examination of other evidence, the student is able to clearly state her position:

Where doctors believe they are acting in their patient's best interests, and the end result is the same (the death of the patient), I do not believe the methods used make any difference to the morality of euthanasia. ... I think the arguments of people like Gay-Williams are sheer sophistry. A doctor who discontinues a course of treatment because it is not believed to be in the patient's best interests, and foresees the patient will die because of this, does not intend his/her patient's death. Yet the doctor ceases treatment knowing that the patient will die. And the doctor has made an informed decision that this is the better course of action. The doctor who knows this, and nevertheless ceases treatment has hastened the death of the patient just as much as the doctor administering a lethal injection. It is unreasonable to separate the decision to stop treatment from the realisation that a patient will die when it is ceased.

The student uses logic to examine propositions and hypothetical situations to refute Gay-Williams' argument that passive euthanasia is not euthanasia at all. She states her position that active and passive euthanasia are very closely aligned.

Your position also needs to be restated in the essay's conclusion to remind your reader of your position on the question. Students writing a report also need to clearly state their position in regards to the case study issue or problem addressed by the report. This is most evident in the report's abstract or executive summary, and in the conclusion and recommendations. For examples from different disciplines, see the self access module **Report Writing**.

Reference

James, B., Scoufis, M., Farrell, H. & Carmichael, E. (1999). *Unravelling the Mysteries of Critical Thinking*, Video, Critical Thinking and Writing Network: University of Western Sydney, Nepean.

Scoufis, M., James, B., Carmichael, E. & Farrell, H. (1999). *Critical Thinking in Assignment Writing*, CD-ROM, Critical Thinking and Writing Network: University of Western Sydney, Nepean.

Woodward-Kron, R., Thomson, E. & Meek, J (2000). *Academic Writing: an language-based approach*. (CD-ROM), University of Wollongong.

Endnote

1. Mack Smith, D., (1968), *The Making of Italy, 1796-1870*, Harper and Row, New York, p. 2.

Key 3.1 analysing assignment questions

Suggested answers:

a) *Why did the British establish a penal settlement at Botany Bay, Australia?*

Topic area: *penal settlement at Botany Bay*

Focus: *the British established the colony* (reasons for the decision)

Instructional word: *why*

b) *Discuss the contributions of feminism to contemporary arts, emphasising the work of two or three artists.*

Topic area: *contemporary arts*

Focus: *contributions of feminism with references to 2 or 3 artists*

Instructional word: *discuss*

c) *Italy on the eve of 1860 has often been described as an unlikely nation. Why?*

Topic area: *Italy on the eve of 1860*

Focus: *an unlikely nation*

Instructional word: *why*