INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL READING

When you write assignments at University, it is necessary to provide your reader with a convincing argument. You are trying to present an argument that your answer is the correct one, you need to convince the reader of this. One way of convincing or persuading your reader is to present them with good evidence to back up your argument.

Critical reading is an essential part of the information gathering process that is required to create an academically sound assignment. At its most basic level, critical reading involves not taking for granted anything you read. Whenever you read a journal article, or other piece of text, you need to be convinced by the author's argument.

An argument can be defined as a 'series of statements intended to establish a definite proposition' (Monty Python, 1972). The series of statements that an author delivers in their text forms the basis of the article. Each of these statements should be accompanied by relevant evidence to back it up. You need to decide whether or not the evidence is sufficient to convince you of the point the author is making.

WHERE TO BEGIN

A good place to start is to try and identify why the article was written. The author of an article will have a reason for writing it. This may be to present research findings, or to give an opinion on someone else's research, it may be to inform and audience about some topic they feel is important or interesting, it may be to try and sell something, it may be in order to raise awareness or debate.

Having identified why the article was written, you need to consider whether or not there is an element of bias in the article. Some element of bias is almost inevitable, whenever anyone writes anything they tend to write from their point of view, and that point of view could be seen as an element of bias. If there is a strong element of bias, you may wish to consider finding an alternate point of view to balance out the arguments.

LOOK AT THE EVIDENCE

Next try looking at the author's conclusions. Read the article with these conclusions in mind and see if you think the author has offered enough evidence to support them. The author will give evidence to support their conclusions. This evidence may be data from research, or supporting evidence from other authors' research, or a mix of both. Part of reading critically is to look at the argument and the evidence and decide if one does indeed justify the other.

Consider the evidence, is it fairly presented? Is it sufficient to convince you of the statement it is intended to justify? Is it logical? Is it presented in such a way as to bias the outcome? It can be

worthwhile trying to find the source material used to back up a point and check that it has not been taken out of context, although this can be time consuming.

When looking at data, try to think about how the data is presented. If, for example, data shows that 100% of people who responded to a survey were positive about the benefit of a new treatment, you might want to look at how many people were questioned as part of the survey. If only 3 people took the survey, then the result is fairly meaningless. If 200,000 people took the survey, the results would be more positive.

Is it relevant?

In addition to considering why the article was written, you also need to consider who it was written for. Depending on the target audience, the information will be presented at different levels. For example, an article written for researchers will be very different to an article written for the general public, or for school children. You need to make sure that whatever information you use as evidence is written at the correct level. You should also ensure that any evidence that you use in your assignment is relevant to both the question and your conclusions.