

SKILLS FOR LEARNING

INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL WRITING

Critical writing is an essential part of writing an assignment. When you write your assignment you are writing with a definite purpose, that purpose is to answer the question that has been set. Part of answering a question, an academic question, is convincing the reader that your answer is the correct one. In order to be convincing you need to persuade, and present evidence. This is your academic argument or your line of reasoning.

When you are researching information for your essay, you will evaluate the quality of information based on how well it is written, what references are given, and so on. When you submit your assignment, your marker will follow a similar process with your work. You therefore need to ensure that the evidence you present fully justifies your conclusions. This will involve critically analysing the work of others and presenting the results of that critique in your own work.

Your assignment is essentially an argument to support your answer. You answer the question that has been set with a series of statements, or points of view, that all go together to convince the reader of the validity of your answer or conclusion. If your argument is going to be convincing, you need to provide adequate evidence to support your statements. If your statements, or premises, have adequate evidence the reader ought to accept them.

You also need to ensure that your premises support your conclusion. If you have premises in your assignment that are valid, but are not relevant, your conclusion will be weakened. You must stay focused on the question which you are attempting to answer, or the argument you are using to justify your answer.

When you are writing, it may be a good idea to consider the maxims of conversation out forward by Paul Grice (1975). These maxims were originally formulated to express the requirements of effective communication, but as you cannot express your argument without communicating, they apply to written as well as spoken language.

Grice suggested four maxims:

1 - Maxim of Quality

This maxim states you should be truthful. Do not say what you believe to be false, do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Although you should not state that which you believe to be false as being true, it may be the case that you will state that which you believe to be false as a comparison to that which you believe to be true. For example, if you were writing about the causes of global warming. There may be theories that you believe to be false that you need to include in your evaluation. To present information and then give evidence as to why you believe it to be false would be perfectly valid.

The issue of adequate evidence is not always so easy. Firstly you need to make your arguments believable. Part of this is to do with the use of cautious language. If we use our example of global

warming, a quick search can reveal two opposing views. Firstly there is a report that scientists are '95% certain that humans are the "dominant cause" of global warming.' (McGrath, 2013).

This article presents a cautious argument. Scientists are not say that humans *are* the cause of global warming, only that they are 95% sure. Also, they are only say humans are the *dominant* cause, not the only cause.

Alternatively there is a report that the Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbot considers global warming to be 'total crap' (Marks, 2013).

By flatly denying that global warming is real, the argument is weakened greatly. Mr Abbot is not allowing for any other argument or evidence, or the possibility that he may be wrong. If you present your arguments as absolutes, people will be less inclined to accept them.

By using cautious language, you are more likely to convince, but do not be too cautious.

The second issue with providing adequate evidence is: how much is adequate? Unfortunately there is no easy answer to this. The amount of evidence you provide will depend on the amount of evidence you find, the weight of argument you want to devote to any particular point, which in turn will depend on the amount of words you have to write. You may want to take evidence from different sources and synthesise them, this will add weight to your argument.

Whatever you write, you will need to be concise. This ties in with the second maxim.

2 - Maxim of Quantity

Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary. Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary.

Don't write too much, don't write too little. It can be tempting to throw in a few extra words here and there to either try and make your argument more convincing, or to pad your assignment out. You should stick to the point; keep your language clear and concise. Do not include anything you do not need to.

3 - Maxim of Relevance

Stay focused on what you are writing about. Do not include information that does not contribute to your answering of the question that has been set.

Including information that is not relevant will weaken your argument.

As part of your essay will need to include descriptive, as well as analytical, writing. The descriptive element of your essay may not add any weight to your argument, but not including it could adversely affect the clarity and impact of your work.

4 - Maxim of Manner

This comes in four parts. Firstly avoid obscurity of expression. You may want to include obscure, exotic words in your essay. While such terms may be technically correct, if your marker is reaching for the dictionary, or if you have used them incorrectly, the overall impact of your work will be lessened.

Secondly, avoid ambiguity. Do not write in a manner that will cause confusion. Write what you mean. Use plain language, avoid grammatically complex statements.

Thirdly, be brief. Avoid unnecessary words.

Fourthly, be orderly. By presenting the steps in your line of reasoning in a logical order, your work will be easier to read and understand.

REFERENCES:

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