

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

# How to write analytically

A Writing Centre  
workshop

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## **Introduction**

Welcome to this workshop, in which we will explore what analytical writing is and examine ways in which we can become more effective analytical writers. Within this handout you will find several exercises, which you may complete and return to the Writing Centre for feedback if you wish.

We hope you find this workshop useful. It is one of a range of services provided for you by the Writing Centre. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you would like to know more about what the Writing Centre offers.

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## Exercise 1 – What is analytical writing?

This exercise is intended to help you think about what you are trying to achieve by writing analytically.

Firstly, write a sentence explaining what you think analytical writing is.

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Now write another sentence explaining *why* you think we have to write analytically at University level.

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# So what *is* analytical writing?

Collins Concise Dictionary (2001: 49) defines the verb *to analyse* thus:

**1** to examine in detail in order to discover meaning, essential features, etc. **2** to break down into components or essential features.

It goes on to define the noun *analysis* as follows:

**1** the division of a physical or abstract whole into its constituent parts to examine or determine their relationship.

The adjective *analytical* has four definitions. The fourth definition is interesting, from our point of view:

**4** *Logic* (of a proposition) true or false by meaning of the words alone . . .

When we analyse a piece of text, we are seeking to examine critically the meaning of the words alone. What can be deduced, concluded or inferred from the words on the page? Can we use these words as evidence to support our argument for or against something?

# Why do we have to write analytically at University level?

Look at the following examples of descriptive writing:

The Independent is now available in tabloid format.

A replica of The Globe theatre has been built in London.

The line has a feminine ending.

They show knowledge about a subject, but they do not do anything with it. In each case, you want to ask 'so what?'

'The Independent' is now available in tabloid format. **SO WHAT?**

A replica of 'The Globe' theatre has been built in London. **SO WHAT?**

The line has a feminine ending. **SO WHAT?**

More analytical versions of the same sentences may be as follows:

The Independent is now available in tabloid format, challenging the traditional distinction between popular, 'low brow' tabloids such as 'The Sun', and the more intellectual, 'high brow' territory of broadsheets such as 'The Times'.

A replica of The Globe theatre has been built in London, allowing spectators to approach what some might term a more 'authentic' Shakespearian experience.

The line has a feminine ending, which affords the actor more flexibility in their interpretation of it.

Studying in Higher Education is all about learning to think clearly, critically, and independently. If you only write descriptively, you are not showing your thinking skills. Analytical writing is a very effective way of showing your tutors not only the knowledge you have gained about a particular subject, but also the thought processes that you are learning to use and develop. At this level, being able to describe something is not enough. **Unless you are told otherwise, writing at University level should always be analytical.**

# Turning descriptive writing into analytical writing

Below you will see a list of narrative sentences. They tell you a piece of information, but they do not explore what the consequences of that information may be. Your task is to convert these sentences into analytical writing. You can do this by thinking about the implications of the information contained in the sentences.

- What possible effect could that information have?
- How could it relate to other things that you know?
- What is the significance of this information?
- Can this information be applied in a meaningful way?

Do not assume that your reader knows anything. Make the significance of these facts explicit.

## **Example**

Britain's motorways are becoming increasingly congested.

## **So what?**

Britain's motorways are becoming increasingly congested, with the resulting delays costing businesses a great deal of time and money.

## Now you try. Be as imaginative as you want.

Oranges are rich in Vitamin C.

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Sociology students develop many transferable skills.

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Organic food is usually expensive.

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The sky is blue today.

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Most students have to work part-time.

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Compare your answers with others in your group. Can you see how knowing a fact and applying that fact are two different things? Of course, you need to know a fact before you can apply it, but at University level, your knowledge is usually taken for granted. Your understanding is what is being assessed. Being able to describe something is a starting point, not the end point.

# Writing and thinking

Writing comes from thinking. In order to be an effective analytical writer, you need to be able to think critically.

Why is critical thinking so important?

Critical thinking is a process whereby you become an active participant in your own learning, rather than a passive absorber of facts. It should therefore make you a more effective student.

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualising, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.

(Scriven & Paul: n.d.:

<http://www.criticalthinking.org/University/univclass/Defining.html>)

According to Scriven and Paul (n.d.) critical thinking can be seen as having two components:

1. A set of skills to process and generate information and beliefs
2. The habit, based on intellectual commitment, of using those skills to guide behaviour



## Exercise 2

In groups, consider what these components (a set of skills and the habit of using them) might mean in terms of your subject area. In particular, you may wish to think about:

- The kind of information you need to process
- The particular skills you need to develop in order to do this
- What kind of behaviour will these skills guide?
- How will this help your studies?

Scriven and Paul (n.d.) state that critical thinking can be contrasted with non-critical thinking, which can be defined as follows:

**Non-Critical thinking**

1. The mere acquisition and retention of information alone, (because it involves a particular way in which information is sought and treated,)
2. The mere possession of a set of skills, (because it involves the continual use of them,) and
3. The mere use of those skills ("as an exercise") without acceptance of their results.

**Exercise 3**

Consider the above three points.

- Why are these characteristics seen as the opposite of critical thinking?
- What might the disadvantages of these characteristics be?

Try to suggest an alternative, critical strategy for each of the above three points.

<b><u>Non-critical</u></b>	<b><u>Critical</u></b>
Acquiring and retaining information alone	
Possessing a set of skills	
Using skills 'as an exercise'	

### **Non-critical statement**

Feral children are of great interest to sociologists.

### **More meaningful statement**

Feral children are of great interest to sociologists because they seem to crystallise the 'nature/nurture' debate.

### **Analytical statement**

Feral children are of great interest to sociologists because they seem to crystallise the 'nature/nurture' debate, and their study gives valuable clues in the search for answers to fundamental questions about what it means to be human.

Reading, thinking and writing are closely connected processes. If you are able to think critically, you will be able to read critically and write analytically. A critical frame of mind could be described thus:

**As a critic, you are encouraged to ask questions about a text, to discover its essential points, to examine the premises of its statements, to differentiate between fact and opinion, and to decide the truth of conclusions presented to you. (Jacobus: 1998: 181)**

A critical frame of mind can be achieved by asking yourself the right questions:

- What possible effect could this information have?
- How could it relate to other things that I know?
- What is the significance of this information?
- Can this information be applied in a meaningful way?

Ask these questions of the texts that you read. Ask them of yourself when you are producing written work.

## Exercise 4 – critical reading

Read the following piece of text:

Leah's vision was perfect. According to one of the more ridiculous fables embroidered around my family's history, she ruined her eyes by crying a river of tears over the prospect of marrying Uncle Esau. If you believe that, you might also be interested in purchasing a magical toad that will make all who look upon you swoon with love. (Diamant: 1997: 12)

- What kind of writing is this?
- What is the author's motivation for writing?
- What assumptions and beliefs are implicit in this writing?

Discuss the answers to these questions with other group members.

Cultural action is always a systematic and deliberate form of action which operates upon the social structure, either with the objective of preserving that structure or transforming it. As a form of deliberate and systematic action, all cultural action has its theory which determines its ends and thereby defines its methods. Cultural action either serves domination (consciously or unconsciously) or it serves the liberation of men [sic]. As these dialectically opposed types of cultural action operate in and upon the social structure, they create dialectical relations of *permanence* and *change*. (Freire: 1972: 230).

- What kind of writing is this?
- What is the author's motivation for writing?
- What assumptions and beliefs are implicit in this writing?

Discuss the answers to these questions with other group members.

## Exercise 5 – analytical writing

Exercise 4 was an example of critical reading. This exercise seeks to combine critical reading with the task of analytical writing.

Critically analyse the following text::

This question has been at the heart of centuries of debate on the "nature" of humankind. Are we born evil — natural born killers or the most creative and compassionate of all animals? Are we both? Does our best and our worst come from our genes or from our learning? Nature or nurture? These questions have tainted political, sociocultural and scientific processes for thousands of years. Its simplicity — suggesting that the essence of a person is the inevitable product of one or the other — genes or learning — is seductive. The human mind tends to prefer simple linear explanations rather than complex ambiguity. Unfortunately, simple categorical explanations of humankind feed destructive belief systems and deflect from a healthy process of inquiry about our true complexity. We now know more about our genes and more about the influence of experience on shaping biological systems than ever before. What do these advances tell us about the nature or nurture debate? Simply, they tell us that this is a foolish argument. Humans are the product of nature *and* nurture. Genes and experience are interdependent. Genes are merely chemicals and without "experience" — with no context, no microenvironmental signals to guide their activation or deactivation — create nothing. And "experiences" without a genomic matrix cannot create, regulate or replicate life of any form. The complex process of creating a human being —and humanity — requires both. The amazing malleability and adaptability of humankind is allowed by our genetically-mediated capacity to perceive and respond to myriad environmental cues including the complex social-emotional milieu created when humans live together; and the organ most sensitive and responsive to the environment is the human brain. (Perry: 2002: 1)

Write a brief critical analysis of what you have read (about 200 words). Here are some questions to help you:

- What is the author's motivation in writing this piece? Do they have a strong opinion or particular view that they want you to agree with?
- What is the main argument in this piece?
- What 'has been at the heart of centuries of debate on the "nature" of humankind'? Do you agree with this? Is the author asking the right question?
- Do you think the author has over-simplified the issues involved?
- Think about the language used. Is it neutral, objective and balanced? Or is it emotive and value-laden? (Think about the use of words like 'evil', 'tainted', 'killers').
- Are there further questions that the text has raised but not answered?

You may wish to re-read your analysis in the light of the following checklist:

Has your writing

- Used the text evidence to generate ideas and discussion?
- A logical structure?
- Draw in wider reading and contexts where relevant?
- Used description as the foundation, with analysis coming from it?
- Left room to consider the implications of things?
- Used words like 'could', 'may' or 'seems' rather than claiming to know the definitive answer?
- Paid close attention to what the words on the page are doing?
- Shown awareness of different layers of meaning?
- Tried to draw meaningful conclusions from what has been observed, while considering alternative points of view?

Compare your critical analysis with others in your group. As a group, decide which analysis best fulfills the criteria that we have been discussing.

Suggest ways in which this analysis could be improved. Share your chosen analysis and recommendations with the rest of the class.

## Follow-up activities

1. Before the next class, critically analyse an academic text of your choice. Be prepared to share this analysis with the class at the next session.
2. In the light of what you have learned about critical thinking, look at a piece of your own written work. Critically analyse your own writing, making suggestions for improvements that you will seek to make in future.



## **Last word**

We hope you have found this session on analytical writing useful. There is a lot of information to take in, but as with everything, the more you write, and the more you practice the techniques we have discussed here today, the easier it will get.

If you would like to discuss your writing further, you are welcome to make an appointment with the Writing Centre Co-ordinator. Appointments last for 30 minutes, and you can book them by contacting the Writing Centre via the details given below.

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