Being critical when writing

What is being critical?

Critical thinking is a central part of university life in the UK. You’ll hear people talking about it in lectures and discussions. The term “critical” or “critically” often appears in assignment and exam questions, and in marking criteria and feedback. Criticality (being critical) is essential to your success as a student. One lecturer said that the ability to take a critical approach was the quality, more than anything else, that “separated out the really successful students” (Moore, 2011, p. 265). In other words, if you want to do well in your studies, you need to learn how to be critical.

When academics talk about “being critical” or “critical thinking”, they are talking about an approach you take to everything you do. It is associated with mainly with questioning things and using these questions to develop your own argument.

Almost all the reading you do at university requires you to ask questions about what you read. The process of reading and questioning enables you to develop your own point of view about the topic and then to express this through a strong written argument. If you have already read the handout Being critical in reading, then this one aims to help you transfer this critical thought into your written work.

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Having done critical reading and analysis of the source texts you’ll use in your writing, you need to show this critical thought in your writing. The aim of academic writing is not to present “the right answer”, but to discuss the controversies in an intelligent way. In other words, the marker is really more interested in the quality of your thinking than in any “facts” you might present. Therefore, you must make your thinking explicit on the page – don’t pretend that everything was clear-cut and simple. Instead, include discussion in your writing to show that you have thought about the strengths and weaknesses of different ideas and that you’ve reached informed conclusions based on this thinking.

Your assignments will usually involve creating an argument. This means that you need to have a position / view on the things you’ve read, based on evidence and good critical thinking. Your essay will act as a way of persuading the reader that your conclusions are sound, that you’ve considered a wide range of evidence, and based on this, can justify your
particular opinion in the issue. Assignments very seldom ask you to write everything you know about X. Instead, they ask you to present a selection of what you know about X to the extent that it supports your argument. Here are some tips for showing your critical thinking in your writing:

- Keep referring back to the assignment question to make sure you are answering the question.

- Near the beginning of your assignment, give enough context that the reader can follow your ideas, but don’t include anything that is not directly relevant to the assignment question, or which does not in some way advance your argument.

- Include references to the material you’ve read to show the marker that you have engaged with the important ideas in the field.

- If you have a section like a literature review, consider carefully the best way to structure it. Don’t just list the different studies you read one by one. Instead, try to group them thematically and make links between ones that are related.

- When you include source material, explain it to your reader to show why it is relevant. Don’t assume that your reader will know why it is relevant unless you tell them.

- Don’t just drop references into the text and move on – discuss the ideas that come from these source texts in your writing. Write about the pros and cons of the different ideas. If you agree, explain why. If you disagree, explain why.

- When you evaluate source material, remember to justify your judgements – say why you think an idea is relevant / valid / interesting.

- Don’t over-generalise – remember that few solutions/theories/models are perfect for everyone, so do acknowledge the drawbacks or limitations of ideas, even the ones you agree with.

- Avoid absolute statements – use hedging language to make your statements more convincing. For example, instead of “X is the best solution”, write more nuanced statements such as, “X may be the best solution in Y context because...” or “it is possible that X would be the best solution in this case because...”
• Don’t be afraid to make intelligent suggestions or hypotheses. If you think model X might work in context Z, say so, but remember to explain why you think it might work and provide evidence to support your view.

• Do not sit on the fence. No one will be impressed by a “Both X and Y have advantages and disadvantages” type of conclusion. You are supposed to make judgements based on evidence, so your conclusions must be meaningful.

• Note that conclusions are usually plural – there is seldom one, simple and straightforward conclusion to anything worth discussing.

• Don’t ignore arguments you disagree with. Your own argument will be strengthened if you anticipate opposing arguments and discuss them intelligently, saying why you think they are wrong.

• Avoid praising authors just because they are famous in the field. If you are going to say something like, “Smith’s groundbreaking research found that…” be ready to explain why you think the work was groundbreaking.

• Check that your argument flows logically. Where possible, add links between the paragraphs to show how your thought process is moving from one sub-topic to the next.