

# ACADEMIC LEARNING SUPPORT



## Academic Writing

Critical Analytical Essay Process

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CRICOS Provider 00109J



# Critical Analysis 1: Planning the Essay

## Understanding the purpose of the essay

*ESSAY QUESTION: What is the main argument and what is your reaction to it? (500 words)*

When a question asks you to identify the main argument, it is implicitly understood that I will 'critically analyse' the argument in order to identify it. In the second part of the question, you are being asked to reflect personally on that argument. So this essay will combine rational, impersonal writing (in 3<sup>rd</sup> person) with reflective writing (in 1<sup>st</sup> person).

## How to begin structuring your essay

From simply analysing this question, you can plan a structure for your essay. The question suggests one, even before you do any reading. The first step is a 'word budget':

Introduction 10% = 50-70 words  
 Conclusion 10% = 50-70 words.  
 That leaves 360-400 words for the body

Q: How many paragraphs can I make in 360-400 words?  
 A: Two or three. A decent paragraph is anywhere from 120-200 words.

Q: Why am I calculating in paragraphs?  
 A: Academic writing is constructed in paragraphs, and each coherent paragraph focuses on one idea. Each paragraph is of similar word length because that indicates that each idea has been considered with similar depth. So, for this essay, you can explain 2-3 ideas in enough depth.

Using this word budget, you can think of some possible plans.

PLAN A: While you can sum up the author's argument in one sentence, there will probably be at least two key concepts of that idea to discuss.

Introduction [50]: name the article, state your 'big answer' (i.e. thesis), and give some idea of the key concepts you will discuss.

Paragraph 1 [c. 130]: concept A of article

Paragraph 2 [c. 130]: concept B of article

Paragraph 3 [c. 130]: your response to both these concepts and the argument as a whole

Conclusion [50]: remind the reader of the key points in your discussion (perhaps the key point of each paragraph, or section), and briefly restate your thesis.

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PLAN B: Alternatively, you might find there are 3 important concepts to discuss, in which case you could weave your response into each one.

Introduction [50]: name the article, state your 'big answer', and give some idea of the key concepts you will discuss.

Paragraph 1 [c. 130]: concept A of article & your response

Paragraph 2 [c. 130]: concept B of article & your response

Paragraph 3 [c. 130]: concept C of article & your response

Conclusion [50]: restate your thesis in a summary way by tying together the concepts and your responses.

PLAN C: Another possibility is that you might want to summarise only the overall argument, and have a lot to say about your reaction to parts of it.

Introduction [50]: name the article, state your 'big answer', and give some idea of the 3 parts of your answer.

Paragraph 1 [c. 130]: summarise the overall argument

Paragraph 2 [c. 130]: your response to specific concept A

Paragraph 3 [c. 130]: your response to specific concept B

Conclusion [50]: restate your perspective in a summary way by tying together the concepts and your responses.

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## Critical Analysis 2: How Note-Making Helps You Think

Follow the 3-step process:

- Read the article once all the way through
  - to get a bit familiar with the ideas in the article
- Read it again to highlight key points
  - (You'll make better selections because you've now seen the whole argument)
- Make notes from your highlights
  - dot points in your own words; diagrams rather than sentences if possible
  - brief diagrammatic notes help you absorb the ideas and see new possibilities

Depending on the size of the article, you will now have several pages of notes.

You can further identify the essential ideas by either:

- Making notes of your notes
- Highlight key points in the notes

Doing this can help you see what's really important.

(One student, who said that this process was very helpful, described it as a 'filtering' process.)

(For a bigger assignment, when dealing with many articles, you can spread all the notes pages out in front of you and think about the connections. Try to see the similarities, differences, and points discussion about common ideas. To clarify that even further, summarise all that in a table.)

Put the article(s) away, and just think about what you have there in your notes. Think about your 'big answer' to the essay question, e.g.

- **ESSAY QUESTION:** *What is the main argument and what is your reaction to it? (500 words)*
- **BIG ANSWER:** *The overall argument is that the explicit teaching of thinking processes leads to independent and self-regulated learners. I am inspired by this approach, but it might be difficult to use it in my teaching, given the emphasis on teaching content.*

Write your assignment from your notes.

- You can go back to the article to check something, but never try to write directly from the article.
- You can't think for yourself if all that dense text is in front of you.

### Example: Notes of the Cole article

Cole, P. (2004). A snapshot of brain-based teaching. In *Professional Educator*, 3 (1), pp. 23- 25.

#### 23 Elements of learning:

- relaxed alertness
- authentic experience
- processing experience

#### Theories of intelligence:

- multiple intellig. (Gardner 1989) > 8 'ways of knowing'
- emotional intellig. (Goleman 1998) > 5 dimensions
- reflective intellig.

Types of intellig can be learned

#### 24 Has influenced curric: teachers value some types of intellig over others

##### Thinking Curriculum (TC) (Russell 2000)

- based on theories of intellig

##### Explicit teaching of thinking process

- how to be independent learner
- learn how to learn
- become self-regulated

##### Principles

- time for thinking
- depth rather than breadth of topics
- teach cognitive and metacog. strategies
- Strategies - authentic tasks

#### 25 Implementation:

Details of necessary characteristics

Suggestions for classroom activities

Case study Singapore > positive results:

- incr motivation
- incr problem solving ability

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## Reflecting on your notes

In the article, the author covers 4 main topics in the following order:

1. Theories of intelligence
2. Principles of the Thinking Curriculum (TC)
3. Implementation of the TC in the classroom
4. Successful example of implementing TC in Singapore

Those 4 topics all seem important, and you could summarise them all. Students are often anxious about getting all the key points 'right'.) For example:

*The author gives an overview of theories of intelligence. He states that the essential elements for learning are alertness, complete involvement in authentic experience, and the opportunity to process that experience. He goes on to say that there are several complex theories of intelligence. Gardner (1989) described eight multiple intelligences, such as 'verbal-linguistic' or 'visual-spatial' intelligence, while Goleman (1998) identified five dimensions of emotional intelligence. Intelligences vary between individuals, and types of intelligence can be learned. They have influenced the curriculum in that teachers value some types of intelligence over others; for example, some dimensions of emotional intelligence are taught, and Gardner's ideas of the different 'ways of knowing' have been integrated into teaching. (114 words)*

The ideas have been paraphrased fairly well from the notes, and from checking a few details from the article, but this kind of writing is purely descriptive. It reads like a text book, and says nothing more than 'The author said this, and then said that.' As such, it is fairly easy to write.

The problem with this descriptive summary is that your perspective is missing, and you have given no indication that you understand the connection between ideas. In other words, you have not 'critically analysed'.

By looking at your notes again, you might see that it is possible to synthesise the 4 topics into just 2 ideas for discussion:

1. The principles of the TC are based on theories of intelligence (& you will explain how)
2. and the practical implementation of the TC in the classroom is shown by the success of the Singapore example

## Critical Analysis 3: Writing 'Critical Analysis'

*ESSAY QUESTION: What is the main argument and what is your reaction to it? (500 words)*

The first step is to make notes because they help you think. Here are some notes from the original article:

Cole, P. (2004). A snapshot of brain-based teaching. In *Professional Educator*, 3 (1), pp. 23-25

### 23 Elements of learning:

- relaxed alertness
- authentic experience
- processing experience

### Theories of intelligence:

- multiple intellig. (Gardner 1989) > 8 'ways of knowing'
- emotional intellig. (Goleman 1998) > 5 dimensions
- reflective intellig.

Types of intellig can be learned

### 24 Has influenced curric: teachers value some types of intellig over others

#### Thinking Curriculum (TC) (Russell 2000)

- based on theories of intellig

#### Explicit teaching of thinking process

- how to be independent learner
- learn how to learn
- become self-regulated

#### Principles

- time for thinking
- depth rather than breadth of topics
- teach cognitive and metacog. strategies
- Strategies - authentic tasks

These notes outline two topics from the article: theories of intelligence, and the Thinking Curriculum.

When writing assignments, students usually think they need to show that they have understood every topic in the reading. On the following page is a paragraph written about the first topic from these notes (and after checking a few details from the original article):

Sample paragraph 1:

*The author gives an overview of theories of intelligence. He states that the essential elements for learning are alertness, complete involvement in authentic experience, and the opportunity to process that experience. He goes on to say that there are several complex theories of intelligence. Gardner (1989) described eight multiple intelligences, such as 'verbal-linguistic' or 'visual-spatial' intelligence, while Goleman (1998) identified five dimensions of emotional intelligence. Intelligences vary between individuals, and types of intelligence can be learned. They have influenced the curriculum in that teachers value some types of intelligence over others; for example, some dimensions of emotional intelligence are taught, and Gardner's ideas of the different 'ways of knowing' have been integrated into teaching. (114 words)*

The ideas have been paraphrased fairly well, which shows that the student writer has been able to condense the main ideas. But that is not enough. This writing describes the main ideas, but does not discuss them. This paragraph says nothing more than 'The author said this, and then said that.' As such, it was fairly easy to write.

The problem with descriptive writing is that the writer's perspective is missing. We don't know what the writer thinks, nor has the writer explained the connection between ideas. In other words, there is no discussion or 'critical analysis'.

By **thinking** about the ideas in the notes again, you can synthesise them into a discussion.

Sample paragraph 2:

*The Thinking Curriculum (Russell, 2000, in Cole, 2004) aims to develop independent, self-regulated learners. Its principles are linked to three elements of successful learning: alertness, authenticity and the processing of experience. By allowing time for thinking, the Thinking Curriculum creates 'relaxed alertness' (Cole, 2004, p.23). By focussing on depth rather than breadth, and by insisting on authentic tasks, it addresses the learner's need for authentic experience. Finally, its explicit teaching of thinking processes facilitates the processing of experience. The Thinking Curriculum draws on Gardner's (1989, in Cole, 2004, p. 23) theory of multiple intelligences in that it accommodates individual 'ways of knowing', and is related to Goleman's (1998, in Cole, 2004, p. 23) dimensions of emotional intelligence in that it develops self-awareness and self-regulation. A link can also be inferred between Cole's suggestion that intelligence can be learned, and the principle that thinking can be taught. (144 words)*

What is different? How does the language show that the writer is thinking? Can you identify words that show the writer's understanding of ideas and how they are related?



## How to write ‘critical analysis’

‘Critical analysis’ means that you are able to interpret what you read in order to show relationships between ideas, and, ultimately, to make evaluative judgements about them.

Here is Sample Paragraph 2 again. The highlighted words show how the writing expresses an interpretation of ideas, and connections between them.

*The Thinking Curriculum (Russell, 2000, in Cole, 2004) aims to develop independent, self-regulated learners. Its principles are linked to three elements of successful learning: alertness, authenticity and the processing of experience. By allowing time for thinking, the Thinking Curriculum creates ‘relaxed alertness’ (Cole, 2004, p.23). By focussing on depth rather than breadth, and by insisting on authentic tasks, it addresses the learner’s need for authentic experience. Finally, its explicit teaching of thinking processes facilitates the processing of experience. The Thinking Curriculum draws on Gardner’s (1989, in Cole, 2004, p. 23) theory of multiple intelligences in that it accommodates individual ‘ways of knowing’, and is related to Goleman’s (1998, in Cole, 2004, p. 23) dimensions of emotional intelligence in that it develops self-awareness and self-regulation. A link can also be inferred between Cole’s suggestion that intelligence can be learned, and the principle that thinking can be taught. (144 words)*

Critical analysis means that the writing:

- Explains how ideas are related, or how they are significant
- Expresses some kind of perspective, e.g.:
  - The principles of the Thinking Curriculum are related to three key elements of successful learning
  - (Perspective means that we can see how the writer is thinking.)
- May make a judgement:
  - Is the argument effective/innovative/strong/weak?
  - The judgement does not have to be negative. It’s fine to say that an argument is strong and sound; what’s important is to explain why
  - The judgement might acknowledge the importance one aspect but admit the dominance of another, e.g.
    - ‘Although the authors present a convincing model of how teachers can facilitate deep learning, it would be difficult to implement it within the current culture.’
- HINT: The words ‘explain why’ or ‘how’, or ‘justify’ are the keys to ‘critical analysis’

## Critical Analysis 4: Writing a Line of Argument

**ESSAY QUESTION:** *What is the main argument and what is your reaction to it? (500 words)*

This is the first paragraph of the essay:

*The Thinking Curriculum (Russell, 2000, in Cole, 2004) aims to develop independent, self-regulated learners. Its principles are linked to three elements of successful learning: alertness, authenticity and the processing of experience. By allowing time for thinking, it creates 'relaxed alertness' (Cole, 2004, p.23). By focussing on depth rather than breadth, and by insisting on authentic tasks, it addresses the learner's need for authentic experience. Finally, its explicit teaching of thinking processes facilitates the processing of experience. The Thinking Curriculum draws on Gardner's (1989, in Cole, 2004, p. 23) theory of multiple intelligences in that it accommodates individual 'ways of knowing', and is related to Goleman's (1998, in Cole, 2004, p. 23) dimensions of emotional intelligence in that it develops self-awareness and selfregulation. A link can also be inferred between Cole's suggestion that intelligence can be learned, and the principle that thinking can be taught. (144 words)*

Here are the topic sentences and notes for the next two paragraphs:

*Cole's outline of the teaching strategies of the Thinking Curriculum and its successful outcomes is somewhat prescriptive and idealistic.*

- This paragraph will:
  - Summarise the teaching strategies and explain how they are linked to motivation, self-regulation and higher order thinking skills
  - Include the example of Singapore
  - Comment that there is no admission by Cole of any problems with the curriculum

*I am inspired by the aims of the Thinking Curriculum, but am not confident that it can be successfully implemented in a culture that emphasises content over process.*

- This paragraph will:
  - Argue for the necessity of teaching thinking and writing processes (based on reading about pedagogy)
  - Explain the existing difficulties in implementing that
  - Reflect on how some aspects of the Thinking Curriculum could be integrated into existing practices

The topic sentences of these paragraphs form a progressing line of argument:

*The Thinking Curriculum (Russell, 2000, in Cole, 2004) aims to develop independent, self-regulated learners...*

*Cole's outline of the teaching strategies of the Thinking Curriculum and its successful outcomes is somewhat prescriptive and idealistic...*

*I am inspired by the aims of the Thinking Curriculum, but am not confident that it can be successfully implemented in a culture that emphasises content over process...*

Having constructed that line of argument, it is now possible to draft an introduction which expresses an overall perspective and personal reaction, i.e. the 'big answer' to the essay question:

*Cole (2004) argues optimistically that the Thinking Curriculum will develop independent learners. Drawing on theories of intelligence, the Curriculum emphasises the explicit teaching of thinking processes, and the author prescribes strategies for success in the classroom. While I would like to adopt this approach in my teaching, I think it might be unrealistic. (53 words)*

Here is an analysis of how the language is performing various functions:

- Critical judgement (which includes personal reflection)
- 'Analysis': language that shows an understanding of how the ideas are connected
- Summary of overall argument of the article (i.e. what it's about, generally)
- The key concepts of that overall argument

*Cole (2004) argues optimistically that the Thinking Curriculum will develop independent learners. Drawing on theories of intelligence, the Curriculum emphasises the explicit teaching of thinking processes, and the author prescribes strategies for success in the classroom. While I feel inspired by this approach to teaching, I think it might be unrealistic. (51 words)*

The three paragraphs (see p. 1 of this handout) which follow this introduction expand these statements into a discussion.

## Critical Analysis 5: Sample Essay Analysed

**ESSAY QUESTION:** *What is the main argument and what is your reaction to it? (500 w)*

Here is the draft essay so far. The introduction, 1st paragraph and conclusion are fully written. Paragraphs 2 & 3 are in note form:

*Cole (2004) argues optimistically that the Thinking Curriculum will develop independent learners. Drawing on theories of intelligence, the Curriculum emphasises the explicit teaching of thinking processes, and the author prescribes strategies for success in the classroom. While I feel inspired by this approach to teaching, I wonder if it is realistic. (51 words)*

*The Thinking Curriculum (Russell, 2000, in Cole, 2004) aims to develop independent, selfregulated learners. Its principles are linked to three elements of successful learning: alertness, authenticity and the processing of experience. By allowing time for thinking, it creates 'relaxed alertness' (Cole, 2004, p.23). By focussing on depth rather than breadth, and by insisting on authentic tasks, it addresses the learner's need for authentic experience. Finally, its explicit teaching of thinking processes facilitates the processing of experience. The Thinking Curriculum draws on Gardner's (1989, in Cole, 2004, p. 23) theory of multiple intelligences in that it accommodates individual 'ways of knowing', and is related to Goleman's (1998, in Cole, 2004, p. 23) dimensions of emotional intelligence in that it develops self-awareness and selfregulation. A link can also be inferred between Cole's suggestion that intelligence can be learned, and the principle that thinking can be taught. (144 words)*

*Cole's outline of the teaching strategies of the Thinking Curriculum and its successful outcomes is somewhat prescriptive and idealistic.*

- *This paragraph will:*
  - *Summarise the teaching strategies and explain how they are linked to motivation, selfregulation and higher order thinking skills*
  - *Include the example of Singapore*
  - *Comment that there is no admission by Cole of any problems with the curriculum*

*I am inspired by the aims of the Thinking Curriculum, but am not confident that it can be successfully implemented in a culture that emphasises content over process.*

- *This paragraph will:*
  - *Argue for the necessity of teaching thinking and writing processes (based on reading about pedagogy)*
  - *Explain the existing difficulties in implementing that*
  - *Reflect on how some aspects of the Thinking Curriculum could be integrated into existing practices*

*The Thinking Curriculum represents an idealistic model of teaching students how to think. The principle of explicitly teaching cognitive processes through authentic tasks is to be commended. It is difficult, however, to see how this could be fully implemented in the current context. Nevertheless, it may be worth considering. (49 words)*

## An analysis of what the language is doing

- Critical judgement (which includes personal reflection)
- 'Analysis': language that shows an understanding of how the ideas are connected
- Summary of overall argument of the article (i.e. what it's about, generally)
- The key concepts of that overall argument

Cole (2004) argues optimistically that the Thinking Curriculum will develop independent learners. Drawing on theories of intelligence, the Curriculum emphasises the explicit teaching of thinking processes, and the author prescribes strategies for success in the classroom. While I feel inspired by this approach to teaching, I wonder if it is realistic. (51 words)

The Thinking Curriculum (Russell, 2000, in Cole, 2004) aims to develop independent, self-regulated learners. Its principles are linked to three elements of successful learning: alertness, authenticity and the processing of experience. By allowing time for thinking, it creates 'relaxed alertness' (Cole, 2004, p.23). By focussing on depth rather than breadth, and by insisting on authentic tasks, it addresses the learner's need for authentic experience. Finally, its explicit teaching of thinking processes facilitates the processing of experience. The Thinking Curriculum draws on Gardner's (1989, in Cole, 2004, p. 23) theory of multiple intelligences in that it accommodates individual 'ways of knowing', and is related to Goleman's (1998, in Cole, 2004, p. 23) dimensions of emotional intelligence in that it develops self-awareness and self-regulation. A link can also be inferred between Cole's suggestion that intelligence can be learned, and the principle that thinking can be taught. (144 words).

Cole's outline of the teaching strategies of the Thinking Curriculum and its successful outcomes is somewhat prescriptive and idealistic.

- This paragraph will:
  - Summarise the teaching strategies and explain how they are linked to motivation, self-regulation and higher order thinking skills
  - Include the example of Singapore
  - Comment that there is no admission by Cole of any problems with the curriculum

I am inspired by the aims of the Thinking Curriculum, but am not confident that it can be successfully implemented in a culture that emphasises content over process.

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The Thinking Curriculum represents an idealistic model of teaching students how to think. The principle of explicitly teaching cognitive processes through authentic tasks is to be commended. It is difficult, however, to see how this could be fully implemented in the current context. Nevertheless, it may be worth considering. (49 words)