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Academic Writing

Writing using critical analysis

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Thinking beyond the summary

Critical analysis requires thinking. When you critically analyse a text, you're showing you can think about its implications, relevance, validity, and comparisons and contrasts of that text in relation to other texts.

This means you'll need more than a summary of the text's main ideas. When you only summarise a text, you do not convey any judgement on the text—it is purely descriptive.

Suppose you read an article and you identified that the author covered four 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

A summary of those notes might look like this:

> *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 asserts 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.*

This kind of writing is purely descriptive. It reads like a textbook, and simply states what the original author said. The writer's perspective is missing. There is no indication that the writer understands the ideas and their implications (real-world relevance), or that they have made connections or contrasts between the text and other texts. There is also no indication of how the writer feels about the text, for example, if they agree, disagree, consider the text valid and useful, or if they found limitations in the author's argument.

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How to write ‘critical analysis’

Critical analysis means that you can interpret what you read to show relationships between ideas, and, ultimately, to make evaluative judgements about them.

Compare the first paragraph to the one below.

> *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.*

The above paragraph does more than just summarise a text. The bolded words show how the writer expresses an interpretation of ideas, and connections between them.

Critical analysis means that the writing:

- Explains how ideas are related, or how they are significant
- Expresses some kind of perspective (how the writer is thinking), e.g.:
    - The principles of the Thinking Curriculum are related to three key elements of successful learning
- May make a judgement:
    - Is the argument effective/innovative/strong/weak?

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  - 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 of 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.

Sustaining critical analysis

You'll need to sustain a critical analysis throughout your essay. This means making judgements, connections, evaluating strengths and weaknesses, and identifying implications all the way through your essay.

These sample topic sentences feature elements of critical analysis that would allow a writer to develop a critical argument throughout their essay:

> *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…*

> *Whilst the aims of the Thinking Curriculum are inspiring, successfully implementing it in a culture that emphasises content over process may be difficult…*

A sample introduction for this essay may look something like this:

> *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. Whilst Cole's ideas are inspiring, their implementation may not be realistic…*

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In the sample introduction, the writer makes judgements on the text by deciding that Cole is optimistic. They also analyse—rather than describe— the main arguments by using phrases like ‘drawing on’ and ‘the author prescribes’, instead of using phrases like ‘Cole discusses’. This indicates the writer has thought about how Cole has constructed their argument, rather than just repeating it.

A sample conclusion for this essay may look something like this:

> *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…*

In the sample conclusion, the writer reiterates their critical anaysis and judgement of the topic, calling it ‘idealistic’, asserting it is to be ‘commended’ and deciding it would be ‘difficult’ to implement. This is a conclusion of the writer’s critical analsysis—not a conclusion of a summary of a text. Language choice is very important in conveying critical analysis.

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References

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

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