

# Critical Argument and Synthesis

## Critical argument

Research writing requires you to make a critical argument, not just give a summary of existing literature. Some literature will be easy to argue with, whilst other sources will require a deeper level of critical thought and analysis. There are some key steps to being critical when evaluating a source:

1. Identify the author's line of reasoning—what are they basing their argument on?
2. Critically evaluate the line of reasoning—is it weak or strong (and why)? Is it based on current evidence or is it outdated? Is their argument one-sided?
3. Consider if the author has a hidden agenda or is biased
4. Identify evidence—what is their evidence (studies, other scholarship, trends in the field)?
5. Evaluate evidence—Is it current? Too broad or too specific? Relevant amongst current scholars and debates?
6. Identify conclusions—what was the author's conclusion from their evidence?
7. Decide whether the evidence supports the conclusions—is there a logical and reasonable link?

Once you have evaluated the source, there are 'sign words' that can signal how you feel about it. Phrases and words like these help you to show your critical argument and engagement with the source. For example:

Although studies in... have examined... there has not been an...

As such, this study provides additional insight into...

The analytic focus on... enables another contribution.

Although numerous studies... have identified..., little attention has been paid to...

I address this issue by demonstrating...

Source: Kamler, Barbara, and Pat Thomson. *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge, 2014, pp. 65.

The research...

Disregarded... • neglected to consider... • overlooked... • underestimated... • has been limited to... • overestimated... • has taken no account of...

The evidence is...

Incomplete... • efficient... • questionable... • logical... • useful... • simple... • reliable... • too general... • robust... • inconclusive... • unsatisfactory... • comprehensive... • complex... • over-simplified...

Adapted from: <http://staging-www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/writing/general/lit-reviews/index.xml>

## Synthesis

Synthesising your arguments means connecting the different parts of your essay in a logical and cohesive way.

Synthesis involves recognising connections and contrasts between existing sources; identifying how scholars are linked by their lines of argument; how studies are similar or different in their conclusions, results or methods; and how sources can be linked through themes and ideas.

A synthesised thesis, proposal or literature review will group together sources that agree or disagree, analyse and evaluate them and weave them into the new essay (your work). You also need to contextualise your own research by positioning it in relation to the sources you are evaluating.

### Example of Critical Argument and Synthesis

In the below paragraph, the author's word choice signals their critical position and argument in relation to the existing literature (in green), whilst making synthetical comparisons and contrasts of the different points they discuss (in blue).

Relatively little research has been done on the way in which psychiatric nurses spend their working day or on the nature of their interactions. The few observational studies that have been done have shown fairly consistent patterns of activities, despite the use of different methodologies and subject populations (Fairbanks et al., 1977; Handy, 1991; Hodges et al., 1986; McGuire et al., 1977; Poole et al., 1981; Sandford and Elzinga, 1990; Sanson-Fisher et al., 1979). A relatively large amount of time, varying from 25 to over 50% was spent on administrative or task-oriented activities. On the other hand, the percentage of total time spent interacting with patients was low, ranging from 8.2 to 42.5%, with a mean of 17.6%. The figure of 42.5% reported in the study by Hodges et al. (1986) was unusually high and possibly reflects the fact that it was obtained in a chronic, closed ward with a very structured program that was designed to foster contact, whereas all the other data comes mainly from short-term units.

SOURCE: Tyson, G.A., Lambert, W.G., Beattie, L. (1995). The quality of psychiatric nurses' interactions with patients: an observational study [Electronic version]. *The International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 32(1), 49-58.

Academic Learning Support offer free individual consultations and group workshops for HDR students. For more writing, study, and academic support contact [learningsupport@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:learningsupport@newcastle.edu.au) or call 02 4921 5350.