

Academic Skills: Critical evaluation and using feedback in Psychology

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What we'll cover

- How to apply feedback to ensure you address gaps in your knowledge
- Investigate what it means to be a critical thinker
- Apply higher-order critical skills to your own writing
- Evaluate your work and the work of others using different types of questions

Feedback about being more critical

- Academic tutors often tell students to “**be more critical**” in their writing. Or to “**be less descriptive.**”
- But often they don’t have the time in their feedback to explain what that means.
- This guide will explore the difference between critical and descriptive writing and will give you some strategies for being more critical in your work.



Discussion: What does this feedback mean? What should the student do?



You can make stronger use of research evidence to support your argument



Your sources need more critical analysis



Your structure could be clearer



Try to use a wider range of sources to provide support for your argument



You need to be more evaluative in your writing



Aim for a more coherent argument

Feedback

- **Formal** – voice note, written, grades
- **Informal** – in seminars, lectures, to groups, individually
- **Peer feedback** – people on your course, those who you ask to sense check your work
- **Self-feedback** – you become your own marker and match your work to grading criteria



A conversation among scholars

- “A conversation among scholars” Think of your discipline as a *conversation among scholars*.
- By reading what other scholars before you have written on a subject, you are *listening along* to that conversation.



You'll use your existing knowledge to *understand* what's being said and *analyse the different perspectives*.

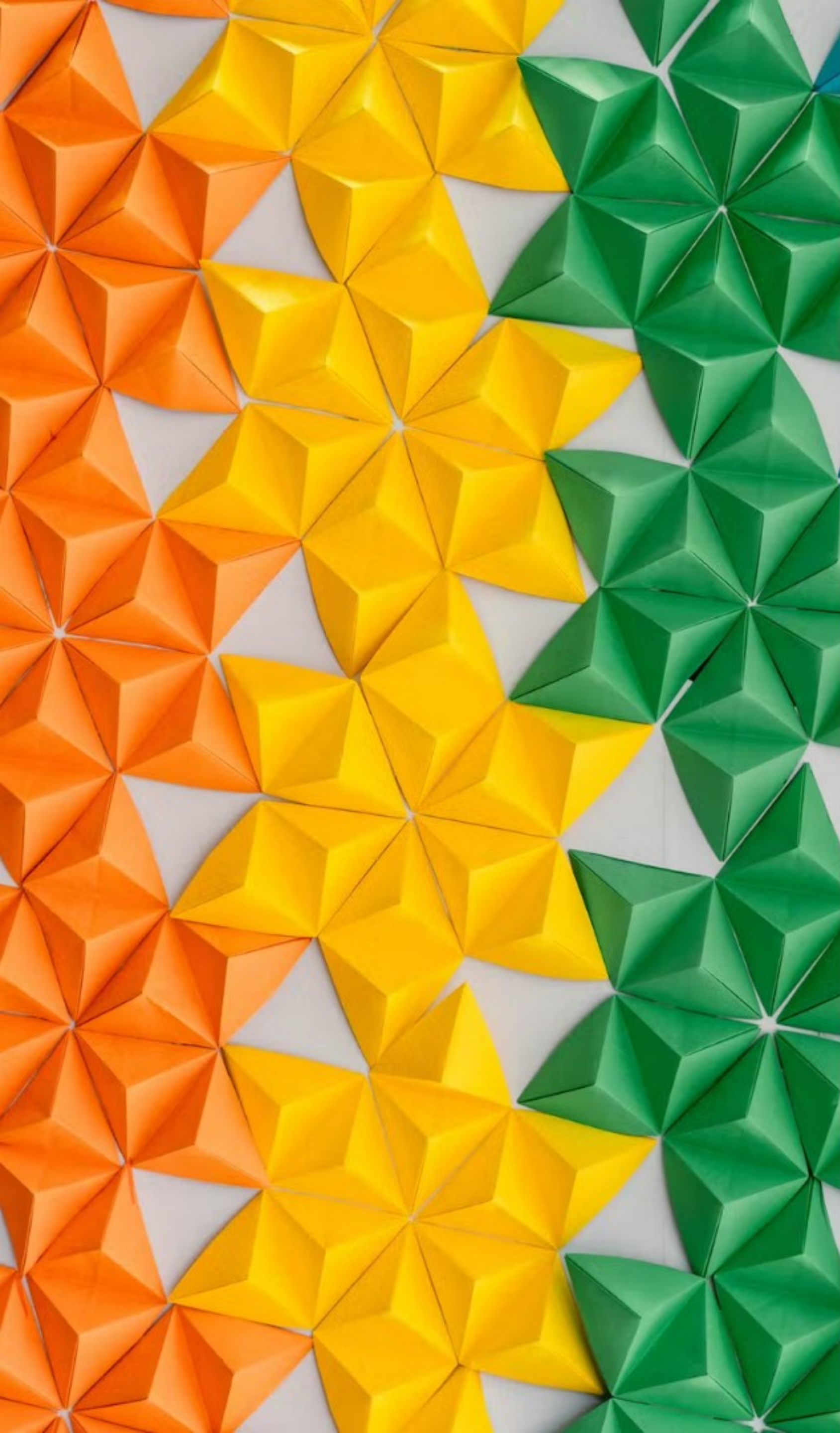
Thematic analysis grid

Author, Title	Type of paper/ Concept	Main themes	Sub Themes	Discussion	Cross-over

Adding your voice

- Critical analysis and evaluation is *not repeating what you've read*
- It's using what you've read as evidence to support your ideas
- It's bringing your voice to the conversation



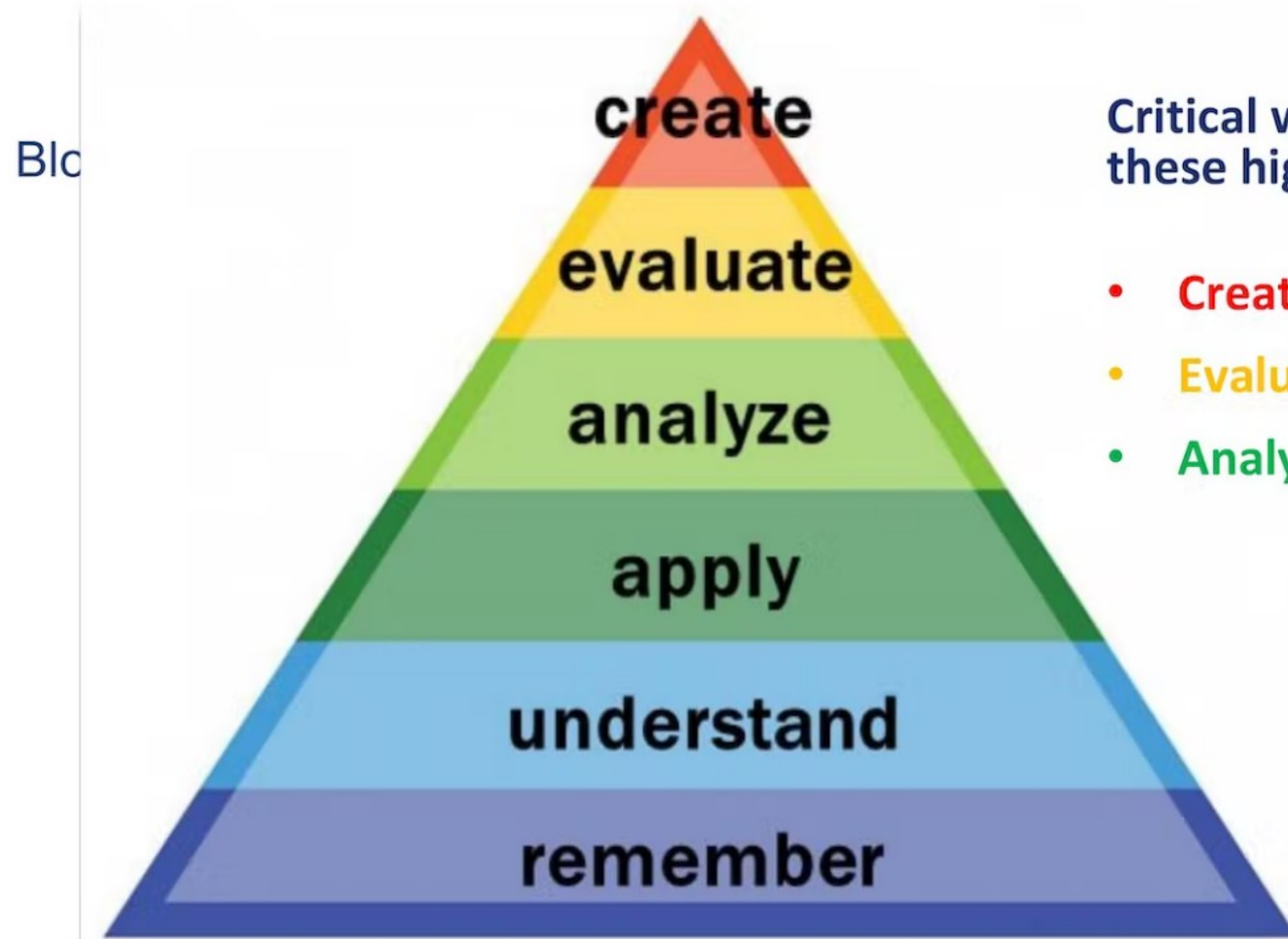


Rank these academic skills from the most difficult to the easiest.

- 1st | analyse
- 2nd | understand
- 3rd | evaluate
- 4th | create
- 5th | remember
- 6th | apply



Bloom's Taxonomy



Critical writing demonstrates your ability to carry-out these higher-order critical skills by...

- **Creating** your own theoretical framework.
- **Evaluating** other scholars' work.
- **Analysing** their evidence or logic.

Descriptive writing demonstrates your **understanding** of a subject by showing that you are able to recap the main points.

Language of assignments (and feedback)

Understand

Grade	Mark (%)	All Levels			Levels 5 - 6 (Desirable in other years)	
		Evidence of Comprehension	Breadth and Depth of Knowledge	Irrelevant Material and Errors	Synthesis & Balance	Originality & Innovation
A	83	Very good, broad-based knowledge and understanding shown of concepts/ theories and their limitations.	Very good analysis, showing sound insight into the main issues around and relevant critical evaluation via logical arguments and good summary/conclusion.	No irrelevant material or errors. APA formatting conventions strictly adhered to in coursework with no grammatical errors.	Appropriate selection and combination. A logical flow of arguments, supporting/refuting research interpretations.	Very good evidence.
B	65	A good understanding of the relevant theories presented with lectures, with a balanced essay structure.	Good perception of the main issues. Descriptive but comprehensive, providing additional evidence from core readings not provided in lectures.	Minimal irrelevant material. APA formatting conventions strictly adhered to in coursework submissions. Some minor errors and tangential material.	Well balanced essay but somewhat descriptive. Some attempt at relevant evaluation, with logical flow of arguments.	Limited.
C	55	Sufficient for a logical presentation.	Only basic material included; several key points omitted, poor attempt at providing evidence.	Errors and tangential material included.	Imbalanced, lacking insight.	Minimal.

Understand

Apply

Analyse

Evaluate

Create

CRITICAL READING

When I read an academic text I:

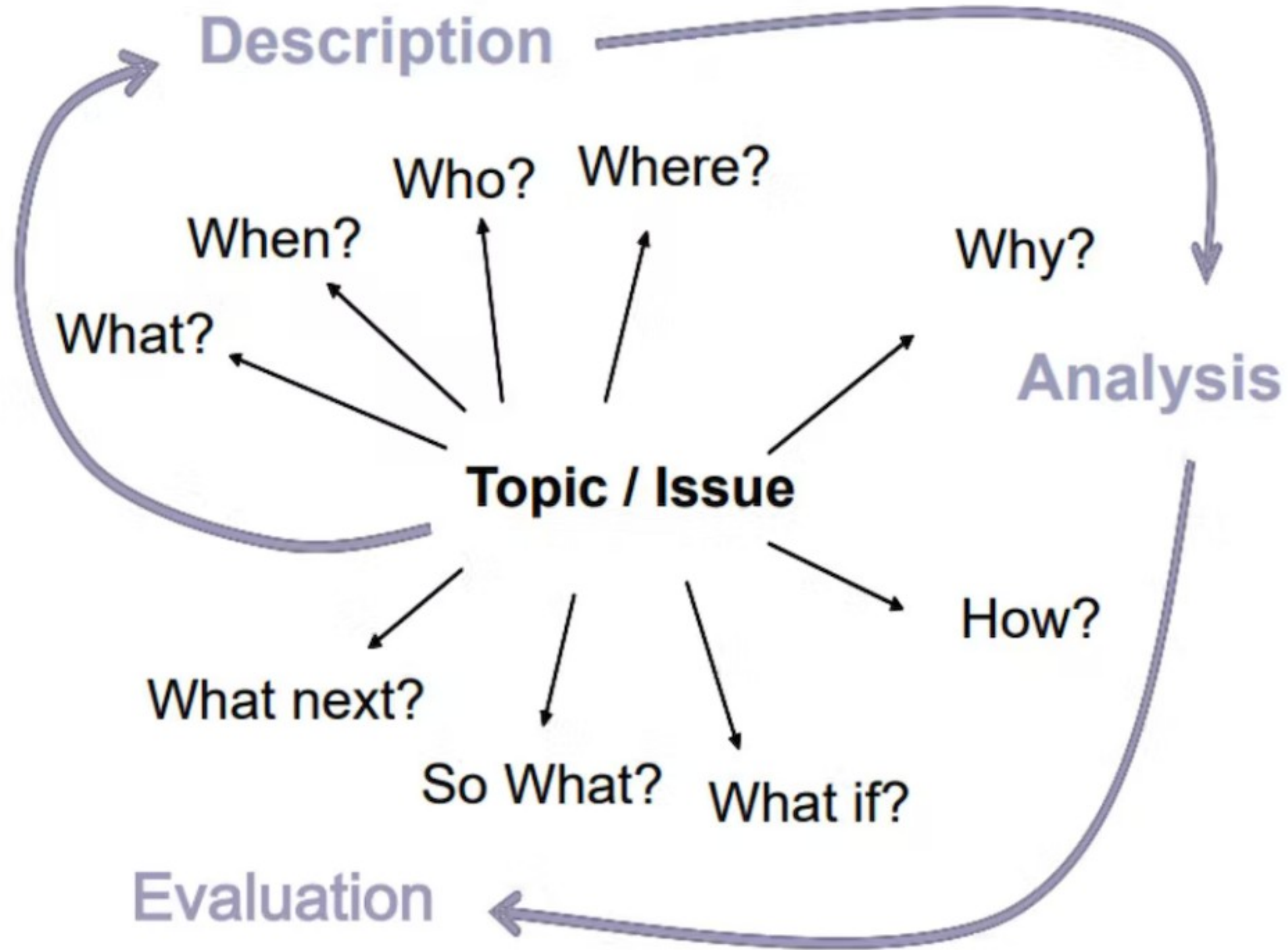
1. try to work out what the authors are aiming to achieve
2. try to work out the structure of the argument
3. try to identify the main claims made
4. adopt a sceptical stance towards the authors' claims, checking that they are supported by appropriate evidence
5. assess the backing for any generalisations made
6. check how the authors define their key terms and whether they are consistent in using them
7. consider what underlying values may be guiding the authors and influencing their claims
8. keep an open mind, willing to be convinced
9. look out for instances of irrelevant or distracting material, and for the absence of necessary material
10. identify any literature sources to which the authors refer, that I may need to follow up

Total score

What was your score for critical reading?



Asking questions



Different ways of questioning: Understanding

When we learn about a new subject, the first types of questions we ask are basic **comprehension questions**.



- **What is this text about?**
- **Who is writing this text?**
- **What is the author saying?**

Different ways of questioning: **Analysis**

Beyond that, **analytical questions** prompt us to connect pieces of information and analyse them as we're reading.



- **How do all the parts of this text fit together?**
- **Why has the writer chosen this framework?**
- **Is all of this information correct?**

Different ways of questioning: **Evaluation**

Finally, **evaluative questions** prompt us to think about the wider significance of a text.



- **What are the implications of this?**
- **What can be learnt from this?**
- **So what?**

Is this text descriptive or evaluative? Why or why not?

- Developmental research is a vital approach to understanding changes that occur in living organisms such as human beings as they progress through various stages of life. The most commonly used methods of developmental research are cross-sectional and longitudinal designs. 'Researchers use the cross-sectional method when the main objective is to evaluate behavioural patterns portrayed by participants from different age groups' (Marcus, 2019, p.145). Researchers may be interested in the relationship between age and social intelligence. They might opt to test participants grouped by age to see how well participants can recognize others' emotions.

Descriptive

Narrates an author's argument

- Developmental research is a vital approach to understanding changes that occur in living organisms such as human beings as they progress through various stages of life. The most commonly used methods of developmental research are cross-sectional and longitudinal designs. 'Researchers use the cross-sectional method when the main objective is to evaluate behavioural patterns portrayed by participants from different age groups' (Marcus, 2019, p.145). Researchers may be interested in the relationship between age and social intelligence. They might opt to test participants grouped by age to see how well participants can recognize others' emotions.

Introduces quotes without criticising/relating to author's own argument

Tends to use long quotes which could be paraphrased

Why is this paragraph more 'critical'?

A robust evidence-base supports the efficacy of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) in the treatment of paediatric OCD [8]. Further, there is early evidence that CBT for children and adolescents with ASD is efficacious in the reduction of anxiety symptoms including OCD [9, 10], as well as OCD specific symptoms [11, 12], although there is indication that these treatments may be underutilised in routine clinical care [13]. It remains unclear whether youth with OCD + ASD are being offered these recommended first-line treatments, and if so, whether their outcomes are comparable to typically developing youth with OCD. This study may provide insight into diagnostic and treatment practices for youth with OCD + ASD during routine clinical care, which has important implications for understanding detection, diagnosis and provision of support for this population. Further, this may provide crucial information for planning and delivering mental health services for youth with co-occurring OCD and ASD.

Critical writing

Uses topic sentences that relate content of paragraph to over-all question

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Integrates a variety of sources and the author's own thoughts in the same paragraph

Paraphrases instead of quoting where possible

Clear linking back to the argument

Martin AF, Jassi A, Cullen AE, Broadbent M, Downs J, Krebs G. Co-occurring obsessive-compulsive disorder and autism spectrum disorder in young people: prevalence, clinical characteristics and outcomes. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. 2020 Nov;29(11):1603-1611. doi: 10.1007/s00787-020-01478-8. Epub 2020 Feb 1. PMID: 32008168; PMCID: PMC7595977.

CRITICAL WRITING

When I write an academic text I:

1. state clearly what I am trying to achieve
2. create a logical structure for my account, to help me develop my argument and to help the reader to follow it
3. clearly state my main aims
4. support my claims with appropriate evidence, so that a critical reader will be convinced
5. avoid making sweeping generalisations
6. define the key terms employed in my account, and use the terms consistently
7. make explicit the values guiding what I write (where applicable)
8. assume that my readers can be convinced, provided I can adequately support my claims
9. sustain focus throughout my account, avoid irrelevancies and digressions, and include everything that is relevant
10. ensure that my referencing in the text and the reference list are complete and accurate, so that my readers are in a position to check my sources.

Total score

What was your score for critical writing?



Conclusion

- Using **feedback** will help define strategies to ensure you are working to a high standard and achieving your potential
- Much of “being critical” is about getting into the habit of asking questions like this – especially evaluative questions.
- By asking those questions while you’re **readings** and **writing**, you’ll find that you are producing more critical work — work that adds something to the conversation in your field.

Questions?

Support available

Getting support

Talk to your Adviser and/or tutor

Support with research and finding information

One-to-one support and workshops from Teaching and Learning Support - <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/library/academic-skills/accessing-support/>

Support with time management, academic reading and writing, maths, and statistics

One-to-one support and workshops from Teaching and Learning Support - <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/library/academic-skills/accessing-support/>

Support with wellbeing, stress etc

Advice and Counselling - <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/welfare/>

Support with academic writing

One-to-one writing tutorials with professional writers – RLF Fellows -

<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/library/academic-skills/accessing-support/rlf/>

Access academic support 24/7 from online tutors through Smarthinking

<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/library/academic-skills/accessing-support/smarthinking-online-tutoring/>

Feedback





Queen Mary
University of London