

Tips for writing a critical essay

(from the University of Plymouth [critical thinking study guide](#))

	Do	Don't
What?	Answer the question. Keep referring back to the title - both mentally and in your work	Forget the title. It is amazing how many people do!
What?	Contextualise - give background to help your reader but include ONLY what is really necessary	Just narrate or 'splurge', telling the whole story starting from the big-bang and including everything you ever heard about the topic!
What?	Outline, trace or summarise briefly instead of including superfluous data or detail	Describe in too much detail or include all your data - unless specifically asked to. Reserve your main effort for the most important parts - the analysis and discussion
What?	Define your terms, the problem etc	Tip-toe around the issue, not being specific
How?	Show processes in a logical order	Muddle everything together
How?	Explain subtle points and finer details	State the obvious, repeat or over-explain
How?	Be precise, clear, direct and to the point. Be concise: reduce what you say to its essence in both your thinking and your communicating	Be vague or waffle, including detail that doesn't help answer the question Oversimplify or see things 'in black and white'
How?	Use definite, specific, concrete language. Use terms consistently - stick to one meaning for each, or explain if you need a different usage	Use loaded or deliberately emotive language Use colloquial expressions, phrases or clichés (e.g. the word 'get' can often be replaced by a more specific term appropriate to the context – e.g. 'purchase', 'arrive', 'achieve')
How? / Why?	Use 'signposting' to help the reader follow your thread: provide the reader with strong 'umbrella' sentences at beginnings of paragraphs, 'signposts' throughout, and brief 'so what' summary sentences at intermediate points to help your reader understand your comparisons and analyses (Gibbs and Gambrill, 1999)	Assume the reader knows why you are including the information you are. Instead tell them explicitly why it's relevant and what it shows, so that they can follow your line of thought without having to guess at connections you make in your head
How? / Why?	Emphasise an important point by giving it a prime place in the sentence or paragraph, or by reinforcing it with the language you use, e.g. 'Something which needs particularly careful consideration is...' or 'It may appear that x is the case, but evidence shows that what actually occurs is y'. Give specific examples to illustrate the points you make about how something happens in context.	Repeat the same information in the same or slightly different words in the hope that the reader will not notice that you are padding it out! On the contrary, the reader will definitely notice and will be bored!

Why?	Support and illustrate your claims with appropriate evidence and examples. Exploit the information you have, and show your reading with up to date and appropriate references	Copy and paste from texts books and articles. Refer to books, because they sound impressive, even though you have not read them
How?	Develop your argument to reflect your actual findings and reading	Decide what you think first and then twist the facts or refer to texts selectively to make them fit your claims.
Why?	Analyse and discuss issues, looking at pros/cons, strengths/weaknesses, patterns/trends, connections and complexities, and aim to propose a convincing theory with some input of your own derived from your research	Make unproven assumptions & generalisations, especially from merely anecdotal evidence or personal experience alone
Why?	Persuade & convince, showing why you think what you're saying is interesting, relevant and valid	Rely on persuasive language alone to make your point
Why? / What if?	Start from a reliable premise (e.g. smoking has been shown to cause heart disease and lung cancer) and arrive at a reliable conclusion (therefore it is reasonable to say that smoking is a health hazard)	Construct a faulty argument on the basis of a weak premise, e.g. There is a strong correlation between people's shoe size and the size of their vocabulary. Therefore having a large vocabulary causes your feet to grow.
Why? / What if?	Make intelligent suggestions, predictions, & hypotheses using appropriate language to show that what is said is only one possible interpretation or belief. Useful words are: 'highly likely', 'probably', 'not very likely', 'highly unlikely', 'often', 'usually', 'seldom', 'I doubt', 'I suspect', 'most', 'many', 'some', 'it could be said', 'it seems', 'evidence suggests'... Choose 'it could be' rather than saying 'it is'.	Make absolute statements unless stating a very simple non-debatable fact (like 'the Earth is a planet' – and even then it is better to say 'The Earth is considered a planet because...' to allow for the possibility that someone may one day prove otherwise or re-categorise it...)
Why? / What if?	Account for weaknesses in your own argument, rather than leaving them for your reader to criticise – this will undermine your credibility, whereas pointing up your own faults will show thoroughness, and filling in the gaps will help convince	Ignore or overlook faulty logic in your own or others' work
So what?	Comment / pass judgment, giving a reasoned opinion based on evidence analysis (Cottrell, 1999)	Write wishy-washy, descriptive and repetitious comments rather giving an opinion
So what?	Consider and evaluate others' ideas, whether they oppose yours or not	Ignore opposing arguments, as this will weaken your own
So what?	Reject & refute others' theories if you find them unconvincing – AS LONG AS you can justify your response in scholarly terms, i.e. your objections are formed from your research.	Agree with or accept unquestioningly information, argument, theory or the beliefs of others just because they seem like authorities – i.e. have published their written work.
What next?	Make recommendations according to the results of your study and your findings	Moralise or preach, rant, 'get on a hobby horse' or tell people what you think they should do