

REPORTS and ESSAYS

Description versus Critical Analysis... *what to do; what NOT to do!*

An essay, report or dissertation isn't just a descriptive account (or paraphrase) of what you were taught in class or what you've been studying and reading about in the library! Description might well be a significant ingredient in what you eventually write; but cooking up a strong piece of academic work needs you to prepare and mix the various ingredients in an intelligent and experienced way, often adding a little something of your own.

Your Argument...

You must build an argument. This means giving the reader a clear sense of where you're coming from and where you're going. A common error is when something you say simply appears out of nowhere. *You* might know where the point came from and why it's there, but how can the reader, unless you explain? When constructing an argument, then, it can help to think about how you'd give directions to a lost stranger. It's no use mumbling "Oh, I think it's over there somewhere..." pointing in several directions at once! Better to say something like: "It's a huge brick building, just a couple of roads away. Turn left through this gate here (no, not the small one; *that* one by the oak tree) and walk about fifty metres; then turn right at the T-junction and go half a kilometre or so. It's a square, red monstrosity on the left. You know you've gone too far if you see a Police station near a bridge..."

Or maybe think of your argument in terms of an orchestra. All the required parts have to be there, at proper strength. Each set of instruments has to play in a structured way, at the right time and with an appropriate degree of emphasis. It's your job, as the conductor, to get all that right, making sure that each part of the orchestra is fully aware of all the others.

Backing up your Argument; being analytical and critical...

Supply ample evidence, at all times, that you've understood the set task and are making a thorough assessment of the main facts, issues and ideas involved. In this, strive to be analytical and critical. For your piece to be analytical, examine your researched facts / ideas carefully; determine their nature so as to draw out the essential features; and (importantly) explore and explain the various relationships between them. Being critical (in the *academic* sense) means making well-informed judgements based on this analysis. So, interpret your material and give a reasoned evaluation of it, making justifiable decisions about the relative importance of the many facets of your subject. It really won't help you (or your word count!) to have a huge bibliography if you can't demonstrate any discrimination regarding what you've read. So, don't present unsubstantiated (or unreferenced) ideas and facts or general / vague "I think..." statements. "I think..." isn't critical analysis; it's mere opinion.

To be properly critical, you must make a wide investigation of existing literature, comparing various views and their associated data. If an idea or fact is disputed, evaluate the different positions taken by the authors involved. Wherever you can, use the literature *itself* to make judgements on your behalf: after all, 'what you think' is *already* on show, via the particular sources you've decided to focus on, how you select and treat the ideas they contain, and what you choose to quote. If appropriate, and where it's been earned, you can of course have your say; but if you've done most of your talking through the mouths of expert authors and academics, then that final pinch of your own spice will probably taste much better.