

What / How / Significance: Evaluating sources and applying critical thinking to your own writing

When you are reading source material or data you need to consider how to integrate critical analysis into your own thinking and writing practices.

Key questions to explore to read critically:

- What is the message or viewpoint of the text?
 - Can you evaluate the reasoning behind this viewpoint?
 - Question surface appearances and check for hidden assumptions or agendas
- Identify the evidence in the text – is it appropriate / reasonable, sufficient?
 - Identify the writer's conclusions
 - Decide whether the evidence given supports these conclusions

Apply these same questions to your OWN presentation of arguments and discussion

Remember: the key to writing critically is to always both ask and explain WHY something was done, explaining the significance of the fact, discovery, concept etc.

'What? How? Significance?'

'What' and 'How' are crucial prompts in ensuring that you and your reader can identify core factual (largely descriptive) information.

- **What? – who? when? where?** Have you identified and presented the factual information (supported by references / evidence / examples)?
- **How?** – have you identified the processes and methods used

However, 'Significance' is the most important element because addressing this can make the biggest difference to your marks in many assessments.

Understanding the 'significance' can help you distinguish between options on a multiple-choice exam (if you don't 'know' the answer); making it clear to your reader why something happened and the impact / consequences of it shows how you are able to evaluate the relative importance of events, processes, opinions, ideas and evidence.

- **Significance** – the most important aspect! (and often missed)

Question prompts for your writing to help you present critical analysis

- What are the consequences of accepting a point of view or action as being appropriate? – why / how do you know something is 'right'?
 - What is the relative importance of a piece of evidence, an interpretation, when compared to another?
 - Why do authors disagree / agree / change opinions over time?
 - What is the weight of evidence – how convincing is it?
- What is the impact of an action / inaction? – what could happen if you do something or do not do something?
- Can you identify connections between your evidence (points of view, examples etc)
 - How do they relate to each other?
 - To what extent are they similar / different?

Analysing and evaluating therefore involves:

“Questioning and appraising the quality and strength of the evidence base to reach an independent conclusion” (Biosciences lecturer)

Final checks for writing about significance

- When evidence or examples are included, is it clearly explained why they are included?
- Are different points of view presented - evidence for and against and/or different possible interpretations of evidence?
- Has the evidence been reasonably interpreted? Are the claims made backed up?
- Is there scope for a different interpretation / approach?
- Could readers ask “why?” or “how do you know that?” (Do you need a reference to a source or provide an example to illustrate it?)