

How to demonstrate critical judgement

What does critical judgement mean?

The terms *critical judgement* and *critical thinking* are both used to refer to more or less the same idea. In our everyday lives we usually think of being *critical* as meaning to say *negative things* about something or someone. However, this can be confusing because, at university, *critical* (or *to critique*) does not mean *say negative things about*, but more like *evaluate*. That is, to be critical or to critique something you need to evaluate or weigh up evidence and arguments and come to some judgement about them. That's why *critical judgement* is used in this guide.

Being critical, in the way that the word is used here, involves asking yourself questions about what it is that you are investigating and making judgements about words and ideas like how true, valuable or useful they are. It means you don't just accept ideas at face value, or believe that there is only one way of thinking about something. It also means recognising that, when you think critically and analyse and judge things from a variety of perspectives, there is usually not one 'right' answer or viewpoint. While there is seldom one 'right' answer or viewpoint, you do have to convince others that your viewpoint is credible and based on sound evidence that comes from the appropriate literature in your discipline/subject area.

How do you demonstrate critical judgement?

Let's say you have reached the point where you have thoroughly analysed the assessment task, done a lot of research and have collected and organised your information. By this time, you will have applied your *critical evaluation* skills to the information you have and you will have reached an opinion which is based on carefully weighing up all the evidence you have.

It's all fairly clear to you now in your own head. Unfortunately, just understanding something is not enough. To get through your degree you need to demonstrate to other people that you understand.

In order to demonstrate *critical thinking*, you need to show that you have:

- Collected relevant evidence
- Weighed up that evidence
- Organised the evidence
- Presented appropriate evidence to support the points you are making
- Organised your answer coherently and logically.

To find details of how to do each of the points above, check the [Writing at University Quick Guides](#).

Applying critical judgement to the process of doing an assessment

Be very careful when interpreting what is expected of you in assessment tasks. Even though in many tasks, the word *critical* is often not there explicitly, most academic assessments require you to take a critical approach even if it is not obviously stated in the assessment task.

So, how do you apply a critical approach throughout the whole process of putting an assessment together? Remember that almost all university assessments require analysis and many require persuasion (see [Writing analytically and persuasively Quick Guide](#)). The tips below aren't steps you do one after the other. You practise them all at once throughout the whole process of putting an assessment together.

1. Always aim to understand how individual pieces of information connect together.
2. Try to organise the pieces of information that fit together into groups or categories and give these categories an abstract heading (see [Understanding assessment tasks Quick Guide](#)).
3. Work out an overall picture of how these groups of information fit together in relation to each other and how they contribute to the big picture.

4. As you research, be flexible. As you order and classify information the overall picture might start to change. For example, some information in one category might contradict something else in the same category. This is something you need to resolve by applying critical thinking skills. Ask yourself questions like 'does the conclusion follow logically from the evidence?'; 'which article put the strongest case?' (Remember the strongest case is the one based on a sound interpretation of solid evidence.)
5. As you proceed you will be constantly weighing up different points of view as you discover new ideas and new evidence.

How do I structure critical analysis?

In *essays*, provide your thesis/position in the *introduction* and introduce (but don't develop) the main points you are going to be discussing. Make sure that paragraphs in the *body* of your essay are presented in a logical order and that you develop points in the same order that you mentioned them in the *introduction*. Use supporting evidence to show critical analysis and judgement. In the *conclusion*, say what you have found out along with an overview of the main reasons you have given for your viewpoint/answer.

In *reports*, state the purpose of the report in the *introduction*. Give an outline of the theory behind your analysis. Make sure that paragraphs (in the appropriate sections of the body, e.g. discussion section) show analysis and judgement. State your findings together with the reasons in the conclusion. Include any recommendations (if relevant).

For more details on how to structure essays, see the [Writing and planning an essay Quick Guide](#).

Check the [SCU Learning Zone](#) for more related Quick Guides.