

# **HOW TO BE CRITICAL IN YOUR ASSESSMENTS**



**SEED ONLINE STUDY SKILLS SESSIONS**

# CRITICAL THINKING

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- Actually, lecturers can't read your thoughts!
- The evidence of critical thinking is **critical writing** – what you write as part of your assessed essays and exams (or what you say as part of an oral assessment)
- The first step is **critical reading**
- **Critical reading** leads to **critical thinking** which leads to **critical writing**

# CRITICAL READING

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- The first step to remember is when you read your source texts (book, blog, journal article, website, newspaper article, etc.), don't just read – analyse
- Let the text guide you – in other words, don't feel you have to pull apart each sentence – instead, be guided by whatever word, sentence, paragraph or section that speaks to you
- Having identified text to analyse, the key is to then ask 'what does this mean to me?'
- And this is what being critical is all about:
  - **Interpreting the source material** and **making sure the interpretation is yours**, so not merely cutting and pasting lecture notes, the lecturer's comments, class discussion and so on

# PRACTICE IN CRITICAL READING

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- So, knowing that being critical is all about **interpreting the source material on your terms**, practice with the sentences below:
- A proposal was made in 2018 to tow an iceberg from Antarctica to Cape Town in order to combat the drought there, which had resulted in a lack of water.
- In the current trilogy of *Star Wars* films produced by Disney, we now find a great deal more racial diversity than in the original trilogy from 1977-1983.

# INTERPRETING THE ASSIGNMENT QUESTION

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- Students sometimes fall down at the first hurdle by not analysing the assignment question, and merely reading it. Let's practice:

**Discuss how social media has impacted on students' experiences of learning in the classroom**

- First, identify the **key words**
- Then, **interpret** them
- Finally, **put it all together**





# PRACTICE EXERCISE

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## **Discuss how social media has impacted on students' experiences of learning in the classroom**

*Discuss* – Show both sides, pros and cons. Have equal weight for both (e.g. 2 paragraphs of pros and 2 paragraphs of cons; otherwise, your essay will come across as biased)

*Social media* – Would you define this first? What types? How many? Clearly, it must be social media that is **actually being used in the classroom by teachers** – look at the question!

*Has* – Present perfect, not past tense. This means that social media is *still* having an impact, having started to do so at some point in the past = have a range of literature (e.g. 2009 – to the present)

*Impacted* – This could be good or bad, but it is rather strong and the question makes clear that some kind of impact has indeed happened – so you shouldn't argue otherwise (though this would of course be a very good example of being critical)

*Students'* – Plural, of course. Also, what level of students do you focus on?

*Learning in the classroom* – So not at home, then. Or would you include homework assignments? Does teaching come into play here?

# THE NEED FOR ILLUSTRATION

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- This is one of the biggest mistakes students make in their assessments
- They routinely refer to **broad words, theories** and **concepts**, but don't take the time to illustrate them
- Lecturers can't read your thoughts, as mentioned before
- So, provide an illustration for your use of broad words, theories and concepts – this refers to words which could have potentially several meanings and/or applications
- Look at the sentence below – which is the broad word?

***It is common for infants to display errors when acquiring their first language***



# THE BENEFITS OF ILLUSTRATION

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- First, **it reflects your critical thinking** (as long as the illustration derives from *you*, even if inspired by textbook reading/class discussion/lecture notes first)
- Second, **it helps guide the reader** and shows them your train of thought
- Third, **it acts as support**
- Fourth, **it makes the writing more concrete**, and less abstract
- Fifth, **it proves you understand** the material



# EXAMPLE

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It is common for infants to display errors when acquiring their first language. For example, hypercorrection often occurs, such as *I goed*.

- Thus, showing evidence of your critical thinking need not involve pages and pages (indeed, you can have pages and pages of nothing but waffle)
- Instead, aim for a few well-placed sentences in each of your body paragraphs
- These consist of illustrations of course, and.....

# MAKE QUOTES WORK FOR YOU!

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- Another mistake to avoid – not saying anything about the quotes you use!
- Again, **interpret** the quotes you use
- Don't just leave quotes hanging – even for the best quotes, **do something with them!**
- Four broad approaches: **agree, disagree, illustrate** or **explain**

# BEING CRITICAL: AGREEMENT

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## **Text (by 'John Doe', 2019)**

Our natural, unmodified accent is arguably the most authentic indicator of linguistic identity, in that its unmodified nature suggests that we are simply 'being ourselves'. However, we need to consider the perceptions others have with regard to certain British accents in the UK. If our accent is generally perceived negatively within society, it is conceivable that we might seek to modify it, more so when in social settings in which our natural accent would be especially prone to judgement; not wanting to be seen in a negative light can therefore contribute to shaping our linguistic identity.

## **Agreement**

Doe's (2019) comments about accent are indeed relevant. It is entirely conceivable that even in this day and age, certain regional accents are perceived negatively. As such, for those who speak with such accents in professional contexts such as teaching, for example, the price they might have to pay for being perceived as 'professional' may indeed involve toning down the more regional sounds in their accents.



# BEING CRITICAL: DISAGREEMENT

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## Disagreement

While Doe (2019) makes a valid point about the negative attitudes that still exist toward certain accents, there is ample evidence that accent diversity in Britain is alive and well and as such, we see more celebration of different accents than ever before. Given the regional variations heard on the BBC, for example, and celebrities who refuse to modify their accents, it is perhaps unsurprising that this linguistic defiance can be seen within everyday life.





# BEING CRITICAL: ILLUSTRATION

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## Illustration

Doe (2019) makes the comment that certain British accents, no matter how proud the ‘owner’ might be, can nonetheless come up against negative perceptions by others within British society. For example, while Received Pronunciation was for a long time the ‘standard’ British accent and still enjoys a degree of respectability, it can also be the case that speakers of accents perceived as ‘posh’ might be regarded as aloof and arrogant. Equally at fault, however, are attitudes toward broad accents tied to the North, often perceived by some as ‘common’ and leading to snap judgements about the speaker’s class- and education-level. It is these ideas in particular which might lead to perceptions of some individuals not being a good ‘fit’ for certain professions such as banking and teaching, unfair though such a perception is.

# BEING CRITICAL: EXPLANATION

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## Explanation

Doe (2019) is taking the subject of accent and perhaps expanding it to go beyond merely pronunciation. Instead, he is discussing the *societal connotations* of accent, which can of course be positive or negative. It is suggested that the central issue here is not necessarily how individuals feel about their own accents – important though that is – but more about how other people feel about individuals' accents. The clear implication is that, given a desire perhaps to fit within societal settings, accent modification may be a reality. As much as individuals may like, even celebrate their accent, they may not wish to be perceived by others as any less than they are.

# FINAL EXERCISE

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How do **you** interpret the following sentence?

**The NHS needs to put more priority on provision of services in local communities.**

What would **you** do with the following quote?

**Smith (2018: 56) argues that ‘film analysis is a means to understand the culture from which the film derives’.**

