

Critical Writing Overview

This handout will help students develop their critical writing skills. Critical writing requires students to incorporate a variety of opposing viewpoints into one paper. See the list of suggested topics below. Students will analyze data and opinions from experts in each field and will present a 6- to 10-page paper (plus a bibliography) covering the various viewpoints of experts. The paper can reach a conclusion, but it must be supported by data.

Where to start:

- choosing a topic for each of you;
- narrowing down your topic (this is not just a discussion of your topic—this is looking at various viewpoints about your topic);
- beginning to write your topic sentence (this may change once you do research).

Basic overview:

- Week 1: Choose topic/begin to write thesis sentence
- Week 2: Research/write first paragraph/have basic outline done
- Week 3: Continue research/write first section of paper
- Week 4: Continue research/write second section of paper
- Week 5: Review what is written/begin to edit papers/know when you are on track and sticking to the topic
- Week 6: Keep writing /edit/proofread what is written
- Week 7: Final week to write/edit.
- Week 8: Turn in paper.

What is critical writing?

- Critical writing is writing which evaluates and analyzes more than one source in order to develop an argument.
- Your writing will contain viewpoints from professionals and critics in the field you are writing about.
- You will be identifying the strengths and weaknesses of these viewpoints and the evidence authors use to support their thoughts (and maybe 'grey areas' in between, which are neither strengths nor weaknesses).
- This writing is not based on personal opinion, sentiments, or beliefs that cannot be backed up with research.
- You must consider whether the source is reliable, relevant, up-to-date, and accurate (and state why you believe your source is an acceptable source if challenged).

Your paper will:

- summarize the topic you are writing on;
- lay out the various viewpoints on your chosen topic (this will be a narrow topic);
- give a detailed analysis of each viewpoint chosen to discuss (you may have viewpoints that you choose not to include just for the sake of length of paper and time to research);
- summarize your conclusion/conclusions;
- provide a bibliography of all sources (I'll show you how to do this if you are unclear).

With descriptive writing, you are not developing argument; you are simply setting the background within which an argument can be developed. You are representing the topic as it stands, without presenting any analysis or discussion. Example: describing the educational options in our society without offering any critical thinking on how they fulfill the needs of our students.

With critical writing, you are actually participating in the academic debate. You are choosing reliable sources that offer opposing viewpoints. You are analyzing the reliability of those sources. You are weaving some into the argument you are presenting. You are proving why you reached the conclusion that you did.

Example: you can't just say homeschooling is the best educational option. You have to find reliable sources that support your thoughts by educational professionals. You have to outline other options (traditional schools, charter schools, Montessori schools, etc.), giving professional viewpoints about why those are good options but not the best option. You have to be able to support your conclusion based on professionals and critics in the field you are writing in. Example: a homeschooling Mom is not a professional in the field unless she has also worked as an educational professional and done research on the topic. Not that the Mom isn't wise and wonderful and well-qualified, but we are looking for people who have done in-depth research

or have extensive credentials in the community to support this paper. In other types of writing, a homeschooling parent may be an excellent resource.

It may be tempting to string together a lot of quotes to support your argument, thinking that the more quotes you include, the stronger your argument. It is important, however, to remember that you also need to interpret the quotes to the reader in your own words, and to explain their relevance and show how they relate to other evidence.

Your paper needs to have a line, or lines of argument, running through it from the introduction to the conclusion. You aren't just describing one viewpoint and then moving on to the next. You have to show how each thought relates to the next. It's like you are presenting both sides (or many sides) in one debate and tying all of the sides together by your analysis. This is done through introductory sentences and concluding sentences in each paragraph that tie it to the one before and the one coming after it.