



Critical thinking

Critical writing

INTRODUCTION

The concept of developing an argument in your assignment writing is intrinsic to critical analysis. There are several aspects to developing an argument:

- examining and evaluating viewpoints presented in the literature
- developing your own position and arguments to support it, as well as
- attention to the structure of your argument.

GETTING STARTED

Critical analysis can begin with your approach to the assignment question. Recognising that there isn't just one right answer to an assignment question should help you to realise that you can take a number of approaches when preparing your assignment. Firstly, getting started with your assignment should involve analysing the question – what are you being asked to do? You also need to start thinking about how you could answer the question based on your lectures and tutorial discussions.

Often students are advised to look for the keywords when analysing assignment questions. However, the concept of keywords doesn't help you to differentiate aspects of the question. Scoufis et al (1999) suggest students identify three aspects of an assignment question: the topic area, the focus, and the instruction word. While the topic area can be described simply as the general 'about' of the assignment, and the instruction word is what you have to do, the focus needs a little more explanation. James et al (1999) describe the focus as:

... the framework for your discussion of the topic. It narrows down the topic area and focuses you on which aspects of the topic are relevant to the question ... It is crucial to explore the connection between topic and focus.

For example:

“Although we are sometimes justified in withdrawing or withholding life-sustaining treatment from someone who is terminally ill and suffering, we could never be justified in killing such a person.” Critically discuss this claim.

The **topic** is *withdrawing or withholding life-sustaining treatment from someone who is terminally ill and suffering* (ie debates about euthanasia).

The **focus** is *although we are sometimes justified ... we could never be justified in killing such a person* (ie what sort of euthanasia is justifiable).

The **instructional words** are Critically discuss.

With a complex question like this one you may find it worthwhile to rephrase the question. For example:

Can withdrawing or withholding life-sustaining treatment from someone who is terminally ill and suffering be justified? Under what conditions?

Is there a difference between withdrawing treatment, and killing someone?

ACADEMIC LITERACY

Part of the process of analysing the essay question is to make links between the assignment question and how the topic (here it is euthanasia) has been treated in your lectures and tutorials. Within what theoretical framework has the topic been discussed? In the case of euthanasia it may have been ethics, religion, or hospital management and funding allocations. Establishing a framework between the topic of your assignment and where this fits in the subject will help you in understanding what the lecturer is looking for in the assignment.

Initially you may agree with the proposition put forward in the assignment question above (*killing a terminally ill patient can never be justified*). However, extensive reading and consideration is likely to make you aware of the complexity of the issue, and that simple agreement in the context may be inadequate. For this reason it is important to keep an open mind when you are researching your assignment.

TASK 1 ANALYSING ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS

Can you identify the topic area, focus, and instructional word(s) in the following essay question? To check your response, see the key at the end.

(a) Why did the British establish a penal settlement at Botany Bay, Australia?

(Note: this question was an assignment set for an Australian history subject)

Topic area:

Focus:

Instructional word:

(b) Discuss the contributions of feminism to contemporary arts, emphasising the work of two or three artists.

(Note: this question was an assignment set for a creative arts subject)

Topic area:

Focus:

Instructional word

(c) Italy on the eve of 1860 has often been described as an unlikely nation. Why?

(Note: this question was an assignment set for a modern languages subject)

Topic area:

Focus:

Instructional word:



POINTS OF VIEW AND ESTABLISHING A POSITION

To develop and establish your own position in relation to your assignment question and to find the evidence to support it, you need to read widely and critically and think critically about what you find out. You will need to add up the weight of evidence to help you determine what your viewpoint will be, remembering that sometimes the evidence may not conclusively support one viewpoint or another. In such cases, your position must reflect that lack of evidence:

One of the things you may need to do in developing a position is to distinguish between opinions and facts in your research. At times, this can be difficult because a particular viewpoint or perspective can be so widely accepted that it is treated as 'fact-like'. Look at the following excerpt from a philosophy essay that answers the question 'Is euthanasia ever justified?':

This "intuitive" difference between killing and allowing to die can be explained as follows. The former involves actually initiating the sequence of events that leads to someone's death. The latter, however, only involves refraining to intervene in an already established course of events leading to death.

Gay-Williams argues that refraining to treat a patient, when the treatment cannot reasonably be expected to save his/her life, is not euthanasia at all. The patient is not killed, but dies of whatever disease s/he is suffering from. And the patient's death is not aimed at by the person who does not treat them. Instead, the decision is a medical judgment about the value of continuing a course of treatment that aims to avoid further pain, indignity and expense for the patient and his/her family and friends.

Rather than accepting the common definitions, the student introduces the viewpoint of an authority who questions the given assumption about passive euthanasia

The student closely examines Gay-Williams' argument, and establishes the significant implications of the argument for the essay question.

The student's wide reading in the area has also alerted her to related hypothetical situations, which allow her to evaluate Gay-Williams' argument critically. Through the careful scrutiny of this argument, and the examination of other evidence, the student is able to clearly state her position:

Where doctors believe they are acting in their patient's best interests, and the end result is the same (the death of the patient), I do not believe the methods used make any difference to the morality of euthanasia. ... I think the arguments of people like Gay-Williams are sheer sophistry. A doctor who discontinues a course of treatment because it is not believed to be in the patient's best interests, and foresees the patient will die because of this, does not intend his/her patient's death. Yet the doctor ceases treatment knowing that the patient will die. And the doctor has made an informed decision that this is the better course of action. The doctor who knows this, and nevertheless ceases treatment has hastened the death of the patient just as much as the doctor administering a lethal injection. It is unreasonable to separate the decision to stop treatment from the realisation that a patient will die when it is ceased.

The student uses logic to examine propositions and hypothetical situations to refute Gay-Williams' argument that passive euthanasia is not euthanasia at all. She states her position that active and passive euthanasia are very closely aligned.



It is evident that the student writer of this essay has researched the topic of euthanasia from a number of angles and has engaged in critical thinking to help develop a position, with the result that the position is a strong one.

Hypothetical situations were used as evidence for the position taken on the question above. The type of evidence that can be legitimately drawn on in other essays, however, depends on the discipline one is writing in; for example, English literature students will draw on textual evidence; history students on historical evidence; and students studying in applied disciplines are likely to draw on life experiences. The type of evidence you include is likely to be a mixture of the viewpoints of experts in the field as well as 'primary' evidence, such as the examples cited above. Here is an example of a student presenting a position in contrast to traditional views by drawing on historical evidence:

The debate as to the overriding motive for the choice of Botany Bay has long been contested. The traditional argument asserts that the primary reason for the settlement at Botany Bay was in reaction to the overcrowded gaols and hulks: New South Wales was to be a dumping ground for the convicts of Britain. Those in favour of this argument question that had this not been a problem, would New South Wales ever have been colonised by Britain?

Topic sentence

It cannot be ignored that Botany Bay was attractive for several reasons besides its apparent fertile soil and suitable climate conducive to the transportation and establishment of the convicts. Reports from Captain James Cook and Sir Joseph Banks, and proposals by James Matra, John Call and George Young all mention the strategic economic and naval advantages that Botany Bay offered. The more the British found out about Botany Bay, the more attractive the new country became. The question could be posed, if Britain were so desperate to solve the problem of overcrowding in its gaols and hulks, why wasn't the choice of Botany Bay examined years earlier? The cost of sending convicts so far away could be justified by the countless other advantages that could be reaped from the land down under. Thus, it can be asserted that "Transportation was the mode but not the motive of Britain's colonisation of Australia." (excerpt from Woodward-Kron et al 2000)

Use of historical evidence to support argument (note: student uses a secondary source rather than a primary one)

Recognising and examining the viewpoints of others, establishing your own informed position in relation to the arguments of others, and supporting this with sound evidence is at the heart of what developing an argument is. It is also part of the process of critical thinking and critical analysis.

STATING YOUR POSITION

So far we have established that critical analysis involves mounting an argument, and that this in turn involves examining the views of others and relevant evidence in order to establish your position on the topic – a position which needs to be clearly articulated. Where is this most apparent in an assignment? An essay's structure includes Introduction, Body, Conclusion. Part of the function of an essay's introduction is to state your position in relation to the question. This is called your essay's **thesis**, and it often functions as the outline of an essay's contents.



An example from Modern Languages:

(in answer to the question: Why was Italy seen as an unlikely nation on the eve of 1860?)

On the eve of 1860, Italy was seen as an unlikely nation because of the many obstacles that lay in the way of unification, the main ones being the dislike and distrust between the states and the “slowness of the great bulk of Italians to accept or even comprehend the idea of Italy.” (Mack Smith, 1968) There was also a lack of planning and common goals amongst the minority of the population that wanted a unified country and disagreement and dislike between the leaders of “*Il Risorgimento*”

*Thesis in relation to the question.
Notice that it also provides an outline
of the evidence for this view*

Your position also needs to be restated in the essay’s conclusion to remind your reader of your position on the question. Students writing a report also need to clearly state their position in regards to the case study issue or problem addressed by the report. This is most evident in the report’s abstract or executive summary, and in the conclusion and recommendations.

REFERENCES

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