

STUDYUP
KNOWLEDGE TO GO

50 YEARS
MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Critical reasoning

How to shift from description to analysis

For more information see: Cottrell, S. (2011). *Critical thinking skills: Developing effective analysis and argument* (2nd ed.). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

NEW

Learning outcomes

By the end of this session you will be able to:

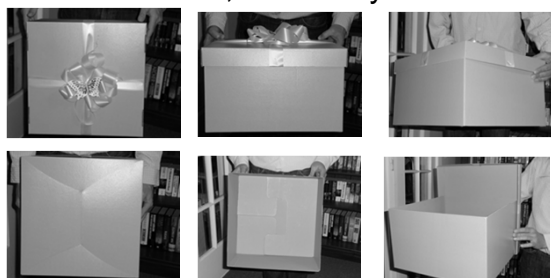
- understand perspective and the role of “polite scepticism”
- identify and evaluate an argument
- shift from description to analysis

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Look at this, what do you see?



If you look at something from a different angle, you'll get a different perspective.

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Polite scepticism

- The role of asking questions
- Not so much like this:

“Uh huh? Say what? What on earth are you talking about? That’s the biggest load of garbage I ever heard! What planet are you from anyway?”

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But more like this:

“What is your main point? What reasons do you have for thinking that? Under what circumstances would that be the case? Who paid for this research to be conducted?”

Sometimes you get perspective by asking questions.

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One story, different perspectives

- Whose perspective is this from?
- What does each person think happened?
- Who do they think is to blame?
- What might shape that perspective?

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Version one

One minute I was standing in the kitchen cooking dinner, and the next thing I know he's taken off with the car. MY car. What a b* s*! I told him he couldn't borrow it, but he grabbed the keys when I wasn't looking and took off. It's those friends of his that he's been hanging out with. They're no good. They don't have jobs, they've dropped out of school. I just don't know what they do all day. Get into trouble I guess. They don't even have decent haircuts. They're such a bad influence.

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Version two

I didn't steal the car. I only borrowed it. I asked mum too, but she didn't hear me. I wouldn't have even needed the car, but there was an emergency. Sean sent me a text saying he needed to be picked up, his uncle had too much to drink and was going nuts. He had to get out of there. Me taking the car wasn't a big deal anyway. I only had it for half an hour. I didn't scratch it or nothing. Mum's just going on about stuff like she always does. If she'd bought me my own car we wouldn't be in this mess.

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Version three

Mum's never enforced any rules for Logan. He gets away with murder. Well, maybe not murder. I hope not anyway. But stealing a car is getting close. And mum doesn't do anything. She might yell and scream a bit, but she doesn't actually DO anything. She keeps her keys where anyone can grab them. And right after he's done something bad like this, she turns around and gives him money for new clothes and stuff. She's always been like that. She always made lots of rules for me, but none for little Logan. No wonder he's turned into such a delinquent.

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One story, different perspectives

- Whose perspective is the first one from?

The mother of the boy.

- What does she think happened?

That her son took her car without asking.

- Who does she think is to blame?

His friends who are a bad influence.

- What might shape her perspective?

She is his mother and might be inclined to see the best in him.

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Version two

- Whose perspective is the second one from?

The son.

- What does he think happened?

He asked to borrow his mother's car when his friend was in an emergency situation.

- Who does he think is to blame? Why?

His mother. For not buying him his own car!

- What might shape his perspective?

He doesn't want to admit to any wrongdoing.

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Version three

- Whose perspective is the third one from?

The sister.

- What does she think happened?

That her brother stole their mother's car.

- Who does she think is to blame?

Her mother, for always giving the brother everything he wants and not punishing him when he does something wrong.

- What might shape her perspective?

That she feels the mother is more lenient towards the brother.

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What other perspectives could there be?

- The psychiatrist says: The boy has ADHD and is manic depressive - he needs drugs.
- The psychologist says: It stems from childhood issues; namely, the father leaving the family when the children were young and the mother feeling guilty about returning to work.
- The newspaper headline: "Schools failing our children: Hoodlums on the rise."

One scenario, many perspectives

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Many different perspectives in academia

- Postmodernists
- Feminists
- Marxists
- Conservatives
- Structuralists

Many different theories
and ideological
perspectives

In psychology there are different theories and paradigms:

- Cognitive, social, behavioural etc.

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Understanding perspective helps identify the author's position

"To be able to critique means being able to acknowledge that there is more than one way of looking at an issue" (Cottrell, 2011, p. 11).

Understanding perspective involves understanding:

- What are they saying?
- (Why are they saying it?)
- What are their reasons?

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Evaluating an argument

- Involves the same first steps:
 - What are they saying?
 - (Why are they saying it?)
 - What are their reasons?
- But then asking, are their reasons *good* reasons?
 - Is there any evidence?
 - Are the examples given truly representative of the whole area?
 - What are we not being told?
 - Are there other explanations?

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Mum's argument

- Her son took her car without asking because his friends are a bad influence.
 - His friends are having a negative influence on her son's behaviour because:
 - They don't have jobs.
 - They've dropped out of school.
 - They spend their days getting into trouble.
 - They have bad haircuts.

On the surface, not a very good argument.

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How about this version

His friends are having a negative influence on her son's behaviour because they have bad haircuts.

Henry (2011) argues that clothes and haircuts convey deep meaning about personal beliefs, ethics, and values. In particular, he asserts that haircuts that are associated with strong societal views (such as skin heads and mohawks) have an even greater influence on behaviour.

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Shifting from description to analysis

- Description is what happened (or what is the case).
- Analysis is why it happened and what it all means (significance).
 - Sometimes the why incorporates different versions of why (why it happened from different perspectives and theories).

The trick is finding the balance between description and analysis. Often a bit of description is needed to provide background or contextual information. However, there should be more analysis than description.

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Example of description

A family had a dispute over a car, which some members of the household felt was stolen. Whether the car was stolen or borrowed with permission is contested. Two members of the household felt it was stolen. However the accused (the son) argued that he asked permission to borrow the car and only needed it because of an emergency.

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Example of analysis

Brown (2011), a theorist from the postmodernist tradition, argues that conflict in families is the result of discombobulation between the generations. "Young people are embarrassed by their parents, and in turn, parents have no idea what planet their children are on" (Brown, 2011, p. 12). Slater (2009), conversely, takes a feminist perspective and argues that it is entrenched patriarchal values that lead to disputes among male and female members of households. The conflict between the children can be understood as the result of different social roles children are assigned in society. The teenage son, by not taking responsibility for his actions and blaming his mother, models his behaviour on being the "annoying teenage male" (Slater, 2009, p. 9). The younger female in the scenario, furthermore, acts the role of the "whinging older sister" within patriarchal society (Slater, 2009, p. 23).

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Make the shift

Descriptive writing

- States what happened
- States what something is like
- Says how to do something
- Says when something occurred
- Gives information

Critical analytical writing

- Identifies significance
- Evaluates strengths and weaknesses
- Argues a case according to the evidence
- Identifies if/why the timing is of importance
- Draws conclusions

From: Cottrell, S. (2008). *The study skills handbook*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan

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To recap

Perspective and the role of "polite scepticism"

- Ask questions to understand different perspectives.

How to identify and evaluate an argument

- What is their point? Why? Are their reasons **good** reasons?

How to shift from description to analysis

- Not just what happened, but **why** and what is the **significance** (what does it tell us, what does it mean? How can we understand the situation through the lenses of different theories or from different perspectives).

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