

How to Read and Write Critically

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Alex Baratta

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Different Ways to Show Your Criticality

More than just an argument

You will probably find that once you get to university, if not before, the skill of being critical is often linked to making an argument. Chapter Three will cover this in more detail, but for now, it is important to understand that while making an argument is indeed a very crucial aspect of demonstrating criticality, it is just *one* aspect. There is much more to being critical than making an argument. This is one aspect of this book that perhaps sets it apart from others on the market. This is not meant to be a selling point, but just my way of letting you know that you need to consider the formula for being critical from more than just a singular perspective connected to making an argument, important though this is. The examples which follow in this section are just to give you an idea; more detail will be provided in the chapters that follow. But for now, let us consider a few scenarios, all of which will require you to think critically, but for different purposes.

Scenario 1: Making your own argument

In this case, you read through an academic text and hone in on a specific idea/theory/concept put forward by an author. Asking yourself what this means to you may well lead to an opinion formed on the validity, or not, of what the author says. From here, you formulate your own argument and present your points of

support for it. For example, what do you think of the statement that 'it is easier to learn a foreign language in childhood than in adulthood'. Here's where the formula for being critical kicks in – *what does this statement mean to you?*

- How do we truly know that it's easier to learn a foreign language in childhood than in adulthood? What evidence do we have?
- Does the statement mean that adults can never truly master a foreign language? If so, then how do we explain those who have done so? We need to know more about their circumstances that allowed them to learn a foreign language proficiently.
- Does 'learning' a foreign language necessarily have to mean becoming proficient in it? What is the measuring stick here to determine 'learning'? Even a few sentences of a foreign language can be sufficient if used on holidays, for example.
- Perhaps adults, often burdened with work, money issues, and raising a family, have less time to devote to language learning, and thus, it can create additional stress – might infants and young children learn language easier because they often have less stress in their lives if compared with adults?
- Is there a cut-off point to determine 'children' and 'adult'? For example, by 'children', what is the age range we are referring to? Likewise, what is the age range for 'adult'? How about teenagers – how do they fare with language learning?
- Might some adults actually find learning a foreign language somewhat easier than children, in that they already understand more explicitly the building blocks of all languages, such as subjects, objects, verbs, nouns, verb tense and so on.
- Is language learning easier in childhood largely because it is more systematic, such as learning it in a classroom? Many adults may not necessarily learn a language this way. In fact, we need to truly understand more points before the claim under discussion can be stated so boldly. For example:
 - What is the age range under discussion?
 - Where and how are the learners actually learning the foreign language(s)?
 - What is the motivation for learning a second language, whether child or adult?

As you can see, the ideas above are varied and there is no doubt we could go even further. Likewise, I'm sure you have come up with additional points to consider based on the statement. If some of the points above did not come to your mind, this is fine. They don't have to. Interpretation is subjective to a large extent and the same text – whether a sentence is long or an entire book – is not going to be interpreted the same by everyone who reads it, as I had mentioned. Also, what we have above, while evidence of having read critically, are rather disorganised points at present. This is fine of course! It is entirely natural to have a bunch of otherwise disconnected ideas and thoughts as the first step of critical thinking, much like mind mapping.

The next step is to look within your thoughts and from there, organise them – or some of them – into a coherent whole. You probably couldn't focus on all of the bullet points above because when discussing a subject as part of your academic

assessment, you need to maintain a unified focus (more on this in Chapter Three). This means that not only do you need to have a clear and consistent focus from start to finish, it also means that you need to support it with relevant topics. Finally, you should try not to cover too many topics in your assessment but, instead, go for more in-depth discussion of fewer topics. In other words, go for depth over width. A lot to consider, I know. But for now, let's go to the next stage and organise a specific focus, more than one in fact, based on the bullet points above.

Focus 1: A Comparison Between Children and Adult Learners

The assessment focus could be squarely on a comparison between children and adults who learn a foreign language. This would benefit from much-needed clarity to begin with, such as defining the age range of both groups. From here, the assessment could explore specific contexts in which both children and adults learn a foreign language, based on the various academic literature that the writer engages with:

- Primary school children learning a foreign language in the classroom.
- Adults learning a foreign language in a classroom.
- Reasons for study.

Here, we have at least a sense of like for like, in that learning is taking place in a classroom. This means that we can make a better comparison in that learning for both groups is taking place as part of formal learning, as opposed to self-study. Children's reason(s) for studying a foreign language in primary school are largely centred on such study being part of the curriculum, certainly for their first foreign language. For adults, however, there might be more variety in terms of why they study a foreign language – this can include personal desire, a need to study for a university entrance exam, or work-based reasons. This alone can mean that adults might have more motivation, in some cases, if they believe that proficiency in a language can lead to better career prospects.

The truth is, we could keep going and going with this. But for now, I have hopefully demonstrated the journey initiated from a single sentence – *it is easier to learn a foreign language in childhood than in adulthood* – to the resulting ideas that come from a critical reading of the sentence.

Focus 2: A Discussion of Nature Versus Nurture in Language Learning

The focus above, though not explicitly stated as one of the bullet prompts that followed critically reading the statement, ties in with a key argument within language learning – are we genetically predisposed to learn a language or do we

simply learn in a more general way, by repetition and reinforcement? This focus often applies more to the acquisition of our first language, but there is no reason why it couldn't be applied to the learning of a foreign language after we've otherwise mastered our first. However, applying a specific theory or concept to an area in which it is not usually applied is a large part of critical thinking. Again, it starts with asking yourself what the source means to *you*. As an example, if you feel that Marxist theory can be legitimately applied to biology, then go for it. This is an example of application which in itself is an example of being critical – once again by first asking what the subject means to you and how it is then interpreted.

I'll stop here and suggest you think of an additional focus based on the bullets above or, better yet, based on any bullet points you came up with that I did not.

Focus 3

Scenario 2: Supporting someone else's argument

As I have mentioned, making your own original argument in your assessments is but one aspect of demonstrating that you are being critical. But it is by no means the only way. More to the point, if you do make an argument, you need to make sure that you take the necessary time to explain and illustrate your points in detail. Indeed, it is the time you take to explain why you feel the way you do that demonstrates criticality, and this is true whether you disagree – or agree – with a theory/author/concept and so on.

In fact, consider the following scenario. Imagine you read the ideas of a given author whose views and/or theories are considered out of date, or even largely dismissed. But what if you agree with them and from here

make a detailed, logical and objective account as to why you agree. In this case, the fact you agree does not make the strength of the argument any less than if you were to disagree. Again, agree/disagree – both show evidence of being critical as long as you clearly explain *why* you agree or disagree.

However, it doesn't make your agreement any less if you find yourself agreeing with an author with whom everyone else within the discipline tends to also agree. Once again, it's how clearly, deeply and informatively you explain the reason for your agreement or disagreement that will show your reader the extent to which you are being critical.

Scenario 3: Considering why your research project is necessary

When you are involved with a research project for which you are in charge of selecting the subject under investigation – for example, a dissertation or thesis – then you should make sure that in chapter one, you include a rationale for your study. This is especially important the higher up you go, so a PhD thesis absolutely needs to have a clear sense of why the research being undertaken is valuable, but even an undergraduate dissertation will be stronger with a rationale and should include one.

The rationale is an answer to the question 'why should we care about your research?' It's a way of justifying the need for your research in objective terms. This means going beyond a personal interest in the subject and instead focusing on the bigger picture. Now, within the Humanities and Social Sciences – **though always check with your lecturer/supervisor** – declaring a personal interest in the subject under investigation need not be off limits as part of your rationale. In fact, it can enhance it. A personal interest may sometimes involve professional experience, such as having taught English overseas for several years and thus being in a good position to bring such experience to a dissertation focused on intercultural communication in the classroom. However, personal experience should be the starting point for a rationale, not the end point. Use personal experience, if deemed relevant, to then lead into a more objective reason(s) for undertaking your study. You might consider additional prompts to help you write your rationale, such as *how will my study benefit the subject area? How can it address problems in my field of study? How can it improve individuals' lives? Can my study address policy?* A rationale is important enough to have its own section in your dissertation's introduction chapter and one to two paragraphs is sufficient. Let's now have a look at two rationales – one average and one decidedly stronger:

Rationale 1

The focus on professional development amongst high school teachers within this dissertation stems from a personal interest, as well as experience having worked as a teacher for two years in a local primary school. During my time, it became clear that under the guidance of a firm, but fair, principal, teaching staff – the principal included – were encouraged to seek opportunities for professional development provided by the school, as well as suggest others. Staff learned new skills, such as the inclusion of online teaching in their work, as well as new languages via a language exchange amongst staff. There were additional aspects of this overall professional development and as a result, the school improved overall, recognised with a rating from OFSTED¹ of ‘outstanding’, with the previous rating having been ‘requires improvement’. This demonstrated to myself, and other staff, that under firm leadership, necessary improvements can be made to a school which was indeed in need of such improvement. While leadership is an important topic of study, this dissertation will focus on professional development specifically, as this is an important focus as a means to reveal what is involved in terms of the potential obstacles and the strategies to overcome any obstacles. Further, my school also demonstrated that with collective professional development and working as a team, the school as a whole – namely the students – will benefit, and not just the staff.

Thoughts: The initial focus on the writer’s personal and professional experience is wholly relevant and provides a useful backdrop to the dissertation that follows. The writer offers experience that explains why he/she wishes to look into this further, whether it involves interviewing teachers at a local primary school or some other method of collecting data. There is also a clear point made through the rationale above, namely that professional development is not just about the individual but, instead, individuals seeking professional development and working as a team to put such development to good use. In this case, it is a means to improve a school’s rating. There might have been a few references to previous studies to help provide a bit more academic strength, but this is otherwise a competent and convincing rationale.

Rationale 2

The focus on professional development amongst high school teachers within this dissertation stems from a personal interest, as well as experience having worked as a teacher for two years in a local primary school. During my time, it became clear that under the guidance of a firm, but fair, principal, teaching staff – the principal included – were encouraged to seek opportunities for professional

development provided by the school, as well as suggest others. Staff learned new skills, such as the inclusion of online teaching in their work, as well as new languages via a language exchange amongst staff. There were additional aspects of this overall professional development and as a result, the school improved overall, recognised with a rating from OFSTED of outstanding, with the previous rating having been 'requires improvement'. This demonstrated to myself, and other staff, that under firm leadership, necessary improvements can be made to a school which was indeed in need of such improvement. While leadership is an important topic of study, this dissertation will focus on professional development specifically, as this is an important focus as a means to reveal what is involved in terms of the potential obstacles and the strategies to overcome any obstacles. Further, my school also demonstrated that with collective professional development and working as a team, the school as a whole – namely the students – will benefit, and not just the staff.

The results of just one school cannot be generalised to others necessarily, but the importance of professional development is certainly not tied to just one school either. For schools in need of improvement, collective staff improvement is vital as a school can only address its deficits if the staff work together as a team to do so. Obvious though this might be, it is nonetheless put forward as a key factor for primary schools in order to raise standards and, indeed, to maintain them. Given the gap in educational attainment, child poverty levels and failing schools, it is argued that while no school can change societal inequalities, schools can nonetheless seek to address them in the classroom. In this dissertation, I will focus on this topic by revealing how improving standards for learning in the classroom begins by improving one's standards as a teacher and working with other teachers on this goal collectively.

Thoughts: This takes the first rationale to the next level, by adding an extra paragraph in which more objective information is provided. In this case, the information pertains to national issues with educational attainment gaps, which the writer's school seems to have addressed. Some references to previous studies would add even more weight to help back up some of the writer's key points above, such as 'Given the gap in educational attainment, child poverty levels and failing schools'; references to studies or government reports (even better perhaps) to support the fact that child poverty and failing schools are issues would have added credibility. Nonetheless, this is a strong rationale. It's not better than the first merely because it's longer. It's quality, not quantity, that counts. But if more writing is needed in order to provide more necessary detail, and here support, then so be it.

As part of a strong rationale, the starting point is to problematise the subject you want to research. This means finding/addressing an issue within the field,

if not making a less obvious issue more explicit for the reader. In the second rationale above, it is clear that the writer has unpacked the subject area and, in so doing, identified a problem that is in need of investigation – child poverty – which is suggested to be a factor behind lower educational attainment. While this might not sound particularly original or surprising, this does not make it any less important to investigate. Moreover, the writer is taking these two issues and addressing them both through collective professional development at primary schools. Also, the reasons *why* the subject is in need of investigation are made clear for the reader. This is what makes the rationale convincing.

Problematising topics

Let's have a look at the way a topic can be made 'research ready' by first finding the issue within, as referenced in the section above. This is where the rationale for your dissertation/thesis is born – indeed the entire impetus for conducting research in the first place.

Topic of research: Mental health in schoolchildren

Problem: This has been exacerbated by the recent lockdown due to coronavirus, and yet, we still don't know what the long-term effects will be, even after children return to school.

And? This dissertation will investigate mental health issues in secondary school children and how they might have been exacerbated by the recent lockdown due to coronavirus.

Why should we care? Mental health is an ongoing problem for many in society, and given that this has been reported as having been affected by the lockdown – for people of all ages – it makes sense to investigate further. This will allow for more insights to be drawn and for teachers and parents alike to be able to find solutions for their children's mental health issues, certainly as part of education. Studies of this nature are perhaps in their infancy and more needs to be done to fill this gap in order to address the mental health issues that could last beyond lockdown when children are back in school.

Given that coronavirus is less than a year old as I write, then there might not necessarily be a great many studies in this area. However, finding a gap in the literature is not, in itself, a rationale for conducting a study. You need to say why the gap *needs* to be filled. The text above does this, and while it is not a finished rationale, it is on its way.

At this early stage, you can hopefully see that being critical does not always mean arguing at all. It involves interpreting a source text, interpreting an idea, or interpreting a subject area for your dissertation, as seen above. By asking what the source text/idea/subject area and so on means to you, this helps to lead into

an interpretation, and from here, you then give your input. So while making an argument of some kind is a large part of academic culture, it is not the only way to demonstrate that you're being critical. On the other hand, you might feel that everything is, broadly speaking, an argument. After all, the rationale above is essentially saying 'here's why my dissertation needs to be written' – is this not an argument of sorts? And as we'll see in the next section, justifying your choice of methods, such as the decision to use interviews in a research study, is also a means to argue; in this case, you're saying 'this is why I think interviews are so important for my study'. If you want to conceptualise the skill of being critical as a skill that is tied to argumentation, whether direct or indirect, that's fine. Or by all means stick with my approach, in which I present interpretation – itself regarded on a broad level – as the key to being critical. In the end, it doesn't really matter how you regard criticality, as long as you know what to do to produce it for your academic assessments.

Scenario 4: Explaining the reasons for your methodological choices

Another common reason for using your critical thinking skills is when you explain to the reader the methods you have chosen for your dissertation/thesis – often this focus is in Chapter three of your dissertation. Again, there are two points to consider in terms of being critical. One, by interpreting the ideas you read, then the plans you make for your assessments and the words you actually type on the page show that you are being critical. It takes a good think about things to arrive at reasoned answers and solutions, and in this case, by asking 'what does this mean to me?' – with 'this' referring to a methodological choice – you can arrive at a clear and convincing understanding. Thus, by asking yourself, for example, why you have chosen to use interviews and not questionnaires, your explanation – justification, in fact – for this choice will sound convincing to the reader.

Two, you can also see how this process of consideration does not involve an overt argument per se. Yes, you are arguing why, for example, interviews work better than questionnaires for your particular research project. But this may not be how you otherwise considered 'argument' in the first place (more on this later). As I mentioned, feel free to conceptualise 'argument' in a much more inclusive sense if this helps you understand criticality, in which case, we can argue against an author/theory as much as we can argue for a methodological choice. But whether you view it this way, or indeed place interpretation as the key means to conceptualise criticality, the main thing is to demonstrate that you are being critical.

As an example, consider the following:

As Jones (2018: 7) states, ‘semi-structured interviews, and interviews in general, allow the researcher to probe participants’ thoughts, feelings and beliefs, so crucial in coming to an understanding of a given topic’. This is crucial to my own research on the subject of working-class identity in UK society for the following reasons. First, it is argued that it is those who identify as working-class in the first instance who are best placed to inform others on the topic of what makes them working-class in their own minds. Second, class identity is something that needs to be informed beyond the literature per se. That is to say, we need real people to inform us as to what can otherwise be rather abstract theory on the subject of class. In this way, the approach taken is letting the group in question define itself.

As you can hopefully see, the above writing is critical without the need for an overt argument as to why semi-structured interviews are the best choice. Instead, the writer is explaining *why* semi-structured interviews are the best choice *for his/her research*. In doing so, the writer is justifying the choice that was made, and **justification** is a large part of being critical when explaining your methods (everything from the sample you chose to the data collection tools you used), as well as other areas – such as the theories/studies you refer to in your literature review (next section).

Scenario 5: Explaining the reasons for your choice of literature

In your dissertation or even in a more ‘standard’ essay of 2,500 words or so, justifying your decision to focus on a particular theory or concept and/or a specific author is also a way in which critical reflection is seen. Again, it is a case of essentially saying, ‘I’ve given it some thought and here is why theory X and/or author Y are the most relevant choices for my essay/dissertation’. A bit of advice I often give my students is ‘write for idiots’; in other words, spell out each and every decision you make for your assessment, more so dissertations which inherently involve a great deal more decision-making to begin with. This blunt advice refers to the need to tell us **what you did and why**, wherever applicable. No, your lecturers are not idiots of course, but we’re not mind readers either. So unless you take the time to explain – hence, justify – the choices you made, we won’t know why you did what you did. And this can lead to your reader essentially having to guess your rationale for the choices you made. But if you make it clear for us, this helps to ‘sell’ your choices as we can see the detail and logic involved with them. As I will return to later, it’s a case of **the more you**

explain, the less they complain. In other words, take the time to talk your reader through your decision-making process – from methods used to literature referred to – and this means that even if your readers don't agree with your choices, they will agree with the rationale behind the choices you made.

So here's a brief example:

This essay will largely rely on the socio-constructivist theory of identity, as this illustrates the fact that individuals exhibit, and own, multiple identities and with this comes implications for what is considered 'appropriate' behaviour or not. Thus, an individual might be, in the space of just one hour, a father, husband, and manager, each of which comes with its own societal norms for behaviour.

Just one sentence above nonetheless provides a logical justification for the choice to focus on a particular theory. Sometimes, all it takes in fact is one or two sentences to provide that much needed justification – hence, evidence of criticality – which subsequently provides your assessment with a bit of depth.

Scenario 6: Illustrating a broad concept

From my experience, a lack of illustration in students' assessments is one of the biggest issues and an issue that reflects a lack of criticality. Yet it's one of the easiest ways to be critical and help your reader understand your train of thought. When I refer to 'illustration', I simply mean providing the reader with examples of the topic you are referring to. I use the word 'illustration' and not exemplification, however, as I think that the very nature of this word – *illustrate* – is suggestive of being clear and vivid, and this is something you need to achieve in your assessed speech and writing. The key here is again to ask what the topic in question means to you as the starting point to then illustrating it. Beyond this, you should also be clear on what exactly needs to be illustrated. In this case, whenever you refer to a broad word/theory/concept within your discipline of study, you should provide an illustration to follow as much as possible. Because if you don't, then your writing will sound very abstract and be hard to fathom.

First, I would consider the terms used in your discipline which would indeed reflect a certain broadness – that is, they could refer to many different ideas, applications and definitions, and as such, by giving the reader a concrete illustration, it's your way of saying, 'Here's what I think'. Let's start by considering key terms as used in academia which reflect this broadness – add some of your own too:

Globalisation

Bilingualism

Scaffolded learning

Haploid

Psychodynamic

Ableism

A handful of words, from a handful of academic disciplines. Before we explore this further, don't forget that the same words can also be used very differently amongst disciplines. If we say that an experimental drug is 'controversial', then this means it could have life-threatening effects, or at least undesirable side effects. If we say, however, that *the belief that Korean is related to Hungarian is controversial* (as part of Linguistics), then this is very different.

Anyway, any time you refer to a broad word/concept and so on, whether a technical word or not, illustrate it. This doesn't mean giving a definition necessarily, but instead providing an example. But please make sure that the examples you provide are not merely cut and pasted from your class handouts and/or what the lecturer told you in class. Make sure the examples are your own, even if they were inspired by textbook reading in the first instance. If indeed the examples you provide are yours – from your *own* thinking – then the examples you give will have five benefits:

- They will make the content of your assessment more concrete and less abstract.
- They will help the reader (and marker) follow your train of thought.
- They will indeed act as evidence of your own critical thinking.
- They will act as support.
- They will prove you truly understand the topic under discussion.

Again, if the examples are immediately recognised by the lecturer as his/her ideas, then bullets three and five above are cancelled out automatically; how can a lecturer be sure you really understand and are being critical if you're simply telling them what they told *you*? You need to demonstrate that you are thinking for yourself!

Also, support does not simply mean referring to previous studies, or using quotes or paraphrase, though this is certainly a large part of support. Think about it – if you give the reader your own original examples of a broad concept, then this helps to provide a very visual means to then help them understand the subject better. This is also why bullets one and two are catered for by the provision of your own examples. Let's now see the differences between writing without, and then with, adequate illustration.

Example 1

Discrimination is unacceptable because it goes against the societal push for equality and diversity. We need to accept all people, especially those who might share a workplace with us. Laws are needed to create a fairer culture.

Thoughts: First, what are the broad words, whether technical or not, in the sample of writing above? That is to say, what words are used which by themselves could apply to many different things/ideas/subjects? It is precisely because of their broad nature that we need a concrete illustration with which to make the discussion easier to follow. Certainly, words such as *discrimination*, *societal*, *workplace* and *culture* mean so many different things that the reader, unless you spell it out for them, will have to fill in the blanks. Instead, this is *your* job.

Now have a look at the revised versions below.

Example 2

Discrimination is unacceptable because it goes against the societal push for equality and diversity. As but one example, prejudice based on those who are, or are perceived to be, disabled can be seen on many levels, reflective of the many ways the word 'disabled' is currently recognised in law. We need to accept all people, especially those who might share a workplace with us. Indeed, the workplace is perhaps one of the most relevant areas for addressing this prejudice, because excluding blind co-workers from group meetings or assuming someone in a wheelchair has an impaired intellect are but two examples of prejudices, even unintentional ones, that need to be addressed. For this reason, laws are in place in many countries, such as Australia, Bahrain and Finland to name but a few, which seek to protect the disabled from work-based prejudice in particular, seen with the Equality Act (2010) here in the UK.

Thoughts: Again, it's not a case of quantity – it's about *quality*. The addition of extra material directly above helps the reader have a firmer grasp of the subject under discussion precisely because we have evidence that the writer has a firm grasp – this is seen with original examples which together help to illustrate broad words such as *discrimination*, *workplace* and *society*.

Example 3

Discrimination is unacceptable because it goes against the societal push for equality and diversity. In terms of prejudice based on disability, this essentially

places otherwise ‘able-bodied’ people as the norm, and in doing so, all those who fall outside this category are potentially treated less favourably. Thus, we have a societal dichotomy, of those who can walk, versus those who are in wheelchairs; those with limbs and those without; those with vision and those who are blind. Moreover, we need to understand this prejudice as applied to those who otherwise seem ‘normal’, but who might otherwise have learning difficulties. We need to accept all people, especially those who might share a workplace with us, as it is within the workplace where the sheer variety of people from all walks of life and backgrounds often come together, united in a common goal to get the job done.

Thoughts: The example above adds illustration by means of providing three examples of what would be considered disabilities and goes even further by suggesting a schism in society of, broadly speaking, disabled versus non-disabled. An illustration is then provided by means of conceptualising the workplace as a centre for people from many different backgrounds, which would involve diversity at other levels too (e.g. race, class, gender, etc.). A reference to a previous study or a quote would add even more depth (more on this later in the book), but for now, we have two examples which address the benefits of providing illustration for otherwise broad words.

So the next time you find yourself using a word in your assessment that has broad application/understanding within your discipline and/or society as a whole, provide an illustration. This will help you to help the reader, as well as giving the reader evidence that you understand the concept fully.

Example 4

It is common for infants to produce errors when acquiring their first language.

OK, which word do you think is broad – once again, I define ‘broad’ very specifically in terms of words which could refer to multiple things and are therefore prone to potential confusion in the mind of the reader. Not because he/she doesn’t ‘get it’, but precisely because the reader won’t know what it means to *you* unless you tell them with the aid of your illustration.

Broad word: *Errors*

You don’t need to be a linguist to know what an error is with regard to speaking a language, whether your own or someone else’s. But what kind of errors are we talking about exactly? Grammatical? Phonological? Lexical? Pragmatic? You might also argue that *infants* is a broad word, but surely it’s not broad/abstract to the extent that you can’t pin it down to a central idea – namely, that infants

are perhaps those who are aged from 1 to 4. Likewise, the words *first language* are broad in the sense that they could refer to potentially any one of the thousands of languages spoken in the world. But this is not what I mean by 'broadness'; I use the word 'broad' to refer to concepts/ideas/words which could refer to many different things, not necessarily to many different kinds of the same thing. Thus, *errors* can be applied to different categories, but *first language* can refer to just one thing – language – and this is clearly conceptualised, whether English, Russian, Korean, Tamil, Basque and so on.

The illustration that now follows the original sentence makes it clear for the reader:

It is common for infants to produce errors when acquiring their first language. This can be seen with hypercorrection, in which we find constructions for English speakers such as *I caught a cold*. Here, a grammatical rule is being over applied to irregular verbs which are, of course, the exception to the rule.

Do you see the difference? Let's compare with what could have made for a less effective transition; in this case, by moving from one broad term to another, without any intervening illustration:

It is common for infants to produce errors when acquiring their first language. This is the case across all world languages and errors are thus a predictable aspect of language acquisition across cultures. We can thus expect an infant who otherwise has no language learning difficulties, to nonetheless produce errors when using his/her first language.

In the example above, there really isn't any other broad word in need of illustrating. *Cultures*, like *first language*, is referring to a singular entity. Though this doesn't mean that you needn't provide an illustration for this word, it is more imperative to illustrate the word *errors*.

'Critical thinking' is actually a misleading term!

Critical thinking is a term often used at university, and yet, it is not entirely exact. This is because lecturers don't know what you're thinking – we can't read your thoughts. This is the reason why it is vital to illustrate broad terms and concepts that otherwise will be referred to in your assessments, as I have just stressed. Otherwise, we won't know what your understanding is of said terms/concepts/theories and so on. For this reason, you need to always tell us what is in your mind. This will allow us to see evidence of just how critical your

thinking actually is, via critical writing (e.g. exams, essays, reports, PowerPoint slides, etc.) and via critical speaking (e.g. for an oral presentation). Critical thinking, then, is your business and is between you and you. You need to tell us what's in your mind as part of your assessment because it is only then that we will know the extent of the criticality that goes on as part of how you process information – whether it is derived from textbook reading or any other source. And very often, but not always, critical thinking is generated from critical reading. I had mentioned this earlier and again, it's a process which can be linear (sometimes!):

critical reading = critical thinking = critical writing

As I also mentioned, however, the process of getting from your information source (e.g. a journal article) to demonstrating your criticality is sometimes anything but linear, and instead, inspiration can strike when you're otherwise engaged in some other (non-academic) activity. Don't be surprised, then, when endless reading of academic texts on a given day results in very little, if any, critical thinking, versus times when you wake up first thing in the morning and have a great new idea for your research project or perhaps an original angle from which to discuss your essay's topic.

When you think about it, exams are one example of assessment in which you might depend on sudden inspiration. After all, you have a time limit of just 1 to 2 hours usually in which to say what you need to say and then that's it – time's up. For some, the time limit equates to pressure which can, in some cases, create inspiration and students then come up with some good insights. For others, this might not be the case, and for others still, there is no pressure as an exam is over fairly quickly, whereas an essay takes weeks to craft and perfect. Some prefer the extra time that comes with essay assessments, others would prefer not to drag things out and, instead, just get it 'over and done with' in an exam. But whichever type of assessment you prefer, chances are you will have a mixture of assessments throughout your time at university, to include some practical assessments perhaps, depending on the discipline.

But the main point is again that it is what you say, or write, as part of your assessments that proves to the marker that you really understand the material and, ideally, have something new to contribute in the process. So take those critical thoughts of yours and transfer them to the page, exam booklet, PowerPoint slides and/or your own voice – this is the ultimate dissemination of critical thoughts.

Note

- 1 OFSTED stands for The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, and works to assess the quality of schools in the UK.

Summary

This chapter has served to set the scene with regard to the skill of being critical. The main point again is that being critical can involve argumentation, but it is not tied to this skill alone. Instead, it is initiated with asking yourself what a given idea/topic/concept and so on means to you – what do you make of it/how do you interpret it? And interpretation is indeed the key word, as a means to help you begin the critical thinking process. So whether you're engaged with menu analysis to decide which of two restaurants is the better choice for dinner; whether you're deciding on an easier commute to work but with a higher price tag for a house closer to work, versus a lower price for a house farther away from work; or indeed, whether you're analysing the finer points of Marxian theory, all of these scenarios involve critical thinking. And all of these examples involve interpretation. Just as being critical is not tied to argumentation alone, neither is it a skill tied to academia alone. So harness this skill and its various parts when you're engaged with non-academic pursuits and start to apply it more and more to your assessments. Because the approach taken to real-world criticality (e.g. the pros and cons of a Samsung vs. an Apple) is the same as academic criticality (e.g. the pros and cons of wearing a school uniform, as part of a sociology assignment).