

Skills for Learning

Thinking and Writing Critically for Doctoral Students

Being able to think and write critically about research, arguments and findings – both other people's and your own – is one of the most important skills required in completing a doctorate. Being critical does not mean "criticising" in a negative way, but instead involves carefully reading and thinking about an argument or theory, and adding your own considered judgement and arguments about its strengths and weaknesses.

How to Read Critically

When first approaching a text or argument, you might find it helpful to consider the following:

- Who is saying this?
- Why are they saying it?
- What is the basis on which they are saying it?
- Is this basis sound?
- What is the particular perspective from which the subject is approached?
- What have others said about this work?
- How does what it says relate to your research question or problem? (Brewer, 2007, p. 138)

You then might like to consider the particular approaches, techniques, assumptions or definitions used in more detail:

1. Key terms: how do the authors define any terms or ideas they use that are central to their argument? Are they explicit in their explanations, and do you agree with their definitions?
2. Techniques or methods: can you critique their methods or approaches to the research? How do they justify the choices they have made? Can you identify an alternative approach which may have been more appropriate?
3. Argument: do you agree with the arguments or points made? How well is the overall argument structured? Do the authors make assumptions or connections which seem tenuous or questionable?

Writing Critically and Indicating Your Own Position

It is important that you don't just describe other research, but that you critically evaluate it as part of your discussion. This will also help to make your own voice or perspective "heard", as this can sometimes get lost when you are talking about other people's findings or arguments. To do this, consider using evaluative expressions which will convey your viewpoint.

The research...

- ... neglected to consider
- ... disregarded
- ... overlooked
- ... has taken no account of
- ... has been limited to
- ... overestimated

It can be helpful to look out for phrases like this in other articles or texts that you read – pay close attention to how others write critically about academic research (Monash University, 2009).

Acknowledging Other Viewpoints

You also need to show that you have considered multiple perspectives – both when critiquing the findings of others and your own research. Rather than weakening your argument or discussion, this will demonstrate that you are able to acknowledge and understand alternative viewpoints, and it will also enable your discussion to become more sophisticated. Furthermore, it will prevent you from giving the impression that you think an argument is "right" or "true". Consider the following examples:

'84 per cent of teachers in the sample considered that there were insufficient sanctions in place to deter indiscipline in the classroom. This proves that most teachers find it very difficult to control their classes.'

'84 per cent of teachers in the sample considered that there were insufficient sanctions in place to deter indiscipline in the classroom. However, this would appear to be a far from simple issue, as preliminary interviews suggest that teachers have a diversity of views on the nature of appropriate sanctions.'

The second example still conveys the findings, but also considers that defining a sufficient 'sanction' might be problematic, as well as teasing out some more subtle problems with the research.

Writing Critically About Your Own Research

It is importantly that you critically evaluate your own argument and to write realistically about your findings. Where you discuss this in your thesis will depend on writing conventions for your subject area, but you will almost certainly want to address limitations of your research in your conclusion and anticipate any questions that might arise in your viva. You could use the following examples as ways in to thinking and writing about this:

- The findings of the research are restricted to ...
- This analysis has concentrated/focused on ...
- However, the findings of the research do not imply ...
- This should not be taken/read as evidence for ...
- The lack of ... means that we cannot be certain that ...

References

Brewer, R. (2007) *Your PhD thesis: how to plan, draft, revise and edit your thesis*. Abergele: Study Mates

Monash University (2009) *Indicating your own position*. Available at: <http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/hdr/write/5.7.6.html> (Accessed: 21 August 2016).



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