

# The Essay Guide:

## Adopting a Critical Perspective

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### W2 Adopting a Critical Perspective

#### Your Opinion

Some students feel confused about whether or not they are supposed to put their own ideas and opinions into an academic piece of writing. The key distinction is between an unsubstantiated (not supported by evidence) opinion and a position supported by argument and analysis. Register (or academic 'tone') is also important. In other words *you are* expected to present your own argument, but this is an altogether different thing from the sort of value-judgements and the pre-received, unreflected opinions that make up a large part of our everyday conversation: 'A vegetarian diet is terribly bad for you.' 'The Brazilian team of 1970 were the architects of the modern game.'

Compare this weakly written example

This advertising campaign is a complete failure because it is too boring to appeal to young people, who are the target market. I think that it was a terrible idea to hire agency X for this campaign.

with this much better, substantiated one:

The fact that this campaign was withdrawn three months earlier than originally planned, and its rapid replacement by a completely different series of advertisements, supports the view that the campaign itself was ineffective and inappropriate. Agency X are well-known for their political party broadcasts, but in retrospect, the decision to hire them seems to have been a poor one as the campaign failed to appeal to the target market. I would argue that the key failures to engage a younger audience can be summarised in the following way...

#### Is 'I' acceptable?

Some students are unsure if it is acceptable to use 'I'. The above point about substantiating your opinion is the best answer, but writing style may also affect your reader's impression: 'I feel that that this interpretation is wrong because...' reads less well than 'Rather, I would

argue that...'. Some academic programmes insist that you do NOT use 'I'. If unsure, ask your tutor.

### A 'Critical Perspective'

To have a critical perspective on a subject means to be able to compare and discuss different attitudes towards and interpretations of that subject. Also, to understand the *background* of those attitudes and interpretations: the attitudes behind this attitude; the ideas behind this idea. To have a critical perspective requires a fair amount of reading on the subject.

If you are going to express an opinion 'critically', then you should show awareness of the different points of view that could be taken on the subject you are writing about, and explain why yours is the most compelling.

Look at the example below (not to be taken too seriously). The writer is aware that there are different ways of approaching the subject – in this case the fall of Thatcher.

Thatcher's fall can, of course, be explained in the positivist terms of Marr (1991) and Blake (1992); they argue that this was nothing more than the fallout from her disastrous Poll-tax policy, to which her political reputation had been tied, as well as a succession of stormy relationships with her chancellors. Other analysts have emphasised the matricidal nature of her sudden overthrow by the cabinet (Hawkins 1994, Jones 1994), arguing that as Thatcher aged and her ministers became (relatively) younger, she became less and less acceptable as the 'mother' of the Tory party.

The most penetrating interpretation, however, that all political careers are ultimately counterproductive, is Gray's position (2004). He points out the contradiction between economic liberalism and social conservatism: eventually, Thatcher gave birth to a society in which both she and her party were irrelevant.

### Writing analytically (good), not descriptively (bad)

This is a question of perspective and content rather than style. To write descriptively is to tell the 'story' of what happened; instead, your material should be held together by analysis.

Descriptive writing is:

- Trying to give an overview of the subject (eg a chronology of the industrial revolution);
- Describing the positions of different critics / writers on a subject *without* explaining the relationships between those positions;
- Simply writing about the subject (often due to not having a good essay structure)

Here is an example of descriptive writing, followed by a better, more analytical version:

The Bauhaus school and movement was established in Weimar 1919 by the influential young architect Walter Gropius. Walter Gropius was not more than 36 years old but he already had a reputation as one of Germany's leading young architects. Gropius was born in Berlin on the 18th of May 1883; his family had a strong educational background within academia and architecture. [Weak, descriptive writing]

In the vacuum of the post-war years in Germany, when there were obvious reasons to break culturally from the past, it is not surprising that authority was handed over to young and intellectual architects. Walter Gropius had both of these qualities, having been...[much better]

## Formality

The example of good writing above is written in quite a formal style. It is true that writing from a critical perspective requires careful control of your language, and this control might result in a dry, analytical, academic 'voice'. It is certainly not acceptable to use imprecise expressions, conversational style, or slang – at least not in a traditional academic essay or dissertation. If you want to submit an alternative piece of work, you will have to have this approved by your tutor. Also, you will have to find a way of satisfying the assessment criteria, which will probably include this critical perspective.

## Section Summary

**Your opinion is usually expected, but it must be substantiated (backed up)**

**It is important to evaluate the ideas you refer to.**

**Make points, don't tell stories.**

**Formal style is not required, but is often the most natural in which to write critically.**