An argument should include a reasoned presentation of details which supports a particular position on a controversial topic. A critical analysis of an argument involves scrutinizing and assessing a piece of writing. According to The Aims of Argument by Crusius and Channel, in the critical analysis assignment the writer examines how an argument is put together and determines “how well the argument achieves its aim and whether it advances a position that merits respect” (16). Through the logical presentation of convincing reasons backed up by appropriate evidence, an assessment in a critical analysis states whether the author adequately supports the argument or claim. The analysis is based on the details the author includes, not on whether you agree with what the author says. Critical analysis papers are usually written in the third person, not using first person pronouns such as “I,” “me,” or “my,” or second person pronouns such as “you.”

This handout offers general guidelines for a critical analysis. Remember, always follow the instructor’s specific requirements first.

Elements of Critical Analysis: follow these steps

- Examine the **rhetorical context**, the situation prompting the author to write the article. Try to determine why the article was written. Is there an ongoing debate about the topic which has prompted this author to write the article? Is the article directed toward a specifically identifiable audience? If so, what characteristics, interests, and/or experiences would the readers in this audience have in common? Would they be likely to have any biases concerning the topic? What does the author hope to achieve by writing this article?

- Identify the **author**. What is his or her occupation? Personal background? Political leanings? Sometimes you will need to consult other sources to find information about the author, such as the internet or biographical dictionaries.

- Check the **title**. What does it tell you about the argument the author will be developing in the article?

- Look over the **format** of the article. Are there subdivisions that might indicate the structure of the argument?

- Determine whether the article is a **primary** or **secondary** source of information. **Primary** sources are original sources: documents, speeches, laboratory studies, field research reports, eyewitness accounts, observations based on personal experience. In **secondary sources** writers make comments about their observations of what others have said or done.

- Summarize the **main claim**, or **thesis**, of the article. What is the author’s main point? Although the author may not state the thesis explicitly in the article, you must include it in your analysis as a complete sentence. What **qualifiers**—exceptions—does the author include about the claim? (What words or phrases does the author include to indicate the claim might not hold true in every
situation or circumstance? That is, what are the circumstances under which the claim is true? Look for phrases such as on the whole, typically, usually, or most of the time.)

- Determine the author’s underlying assumptions. What ideas, beliefs, or philosophies does the author seem to accept as mutually understood between himself or herself and the audience? Are these assumptions valid?

- Identify and evaluate the reasons the author presents for the main claim. Are they valid and relevant to the main claim? Can you find errors or weaknesses with the connections the author is making?

- Identify, analyze, and evaluate the evidence given in support of the reasons. What kinds of evidence are given (data, anecdotes, case studies, citations from authorities, research studies)? Is the evidence sufficient, accurate, relevant, and credible? Question evidence in terms of both quality and quantity.

- Note refutations, the steps the author takes to anticipate objections and answer them in advance. Does the author present rebuttals to demonstrate clearly why these refutations, or counterclaims, do not undermine the basic argument?

- Note key terms. Does the author define such terms adequately? Would most readers agree with these definitions? What clarifications might be needed?

- Note analogies and comparisons. What connections does the author make between ideas and concrete examples? Are these appropriate? Are the things being compared truly similar?

Structuring the Written Analysis

A critical analysis paper often contains a summary of the article being analyzed, but the summary should be secondary to the analysis of the argument. Structure a critical analysis paper in standard format: introduction, body, conclusion. The introduction should clearly identify the topic, the article, the author, and the main claim and should provide a brief assessment of the argument (which will serve as the thesis). Body paragraphs—the main portion of the paper—expand on the brief assessment, presenting a detailed analysis of the argument by using the elements of analysis listed above, while a brief conclusion summarizes the evaluation of the author’s argument.

For more help, see other IUPUI Writing Center handouts: “Reading Rhetorically” and “The Rhetorical Triangle.”

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