

Descriptive, Analytical, Critical/Evaluative, Reflective Writing Compared

Assignment instructions outline how to address an assignment topic and may indicate the writing style expected.

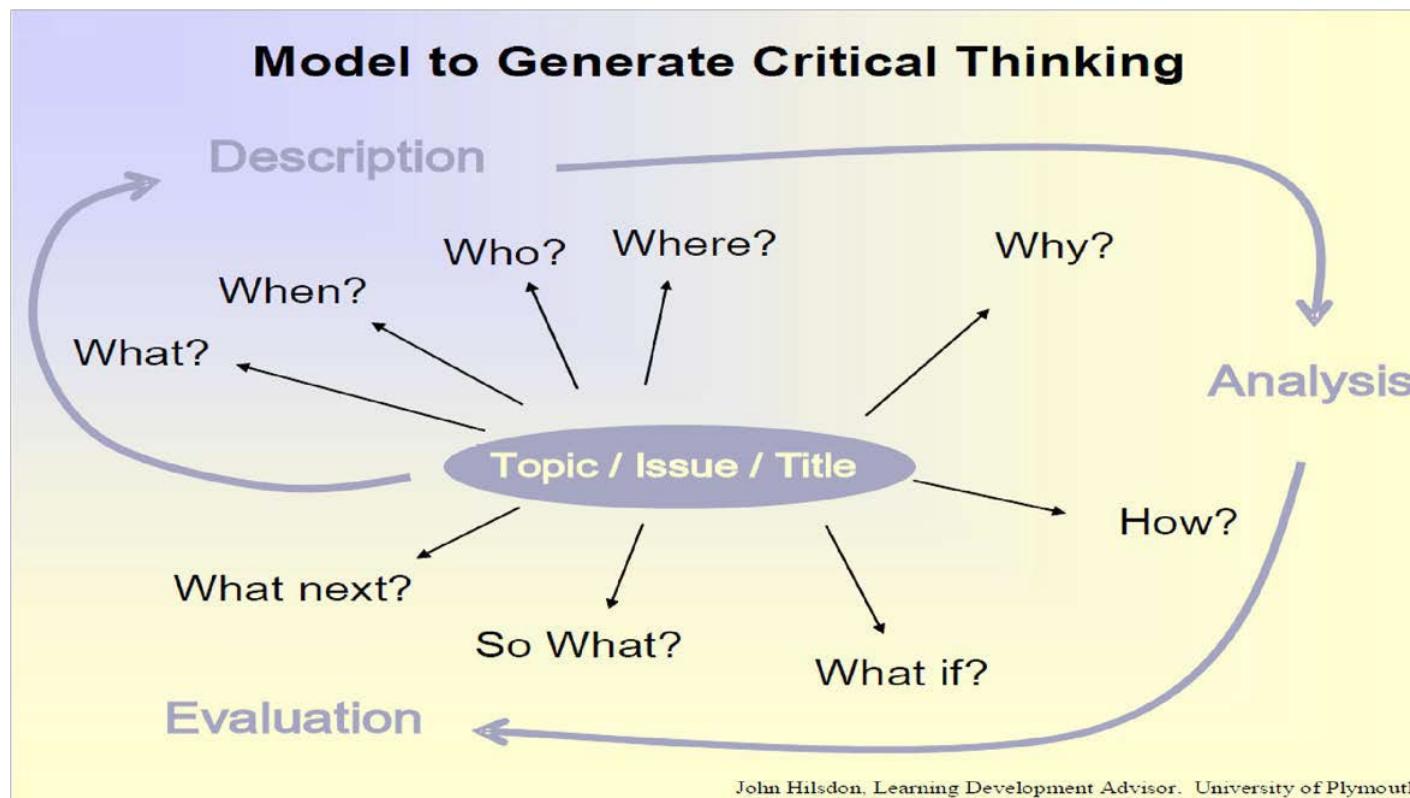
Writing styles compared

Descriptive	Analytical	Critical/evaluative	Reflective
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• provides introductory and background/contextual information• lists, catalogues, outlines the way things are• does not establish relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• explores relationships of ideas or parts of something• provides possible situations and alternative responses• compares and contrasts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• involves making a judgement on the quality of something• outlines implications and solutions, draws conclusions and makes recommendations• views something from many different angles, or questions something in order to ascribe value	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• uses a reflection or review model to document experience, learning or realisation that took place, and future steps/actions

The following model shows questions you need to ask of your research to help you think and then write in the appropriate style.

Figure 1

Model to Generate Critical Thinking



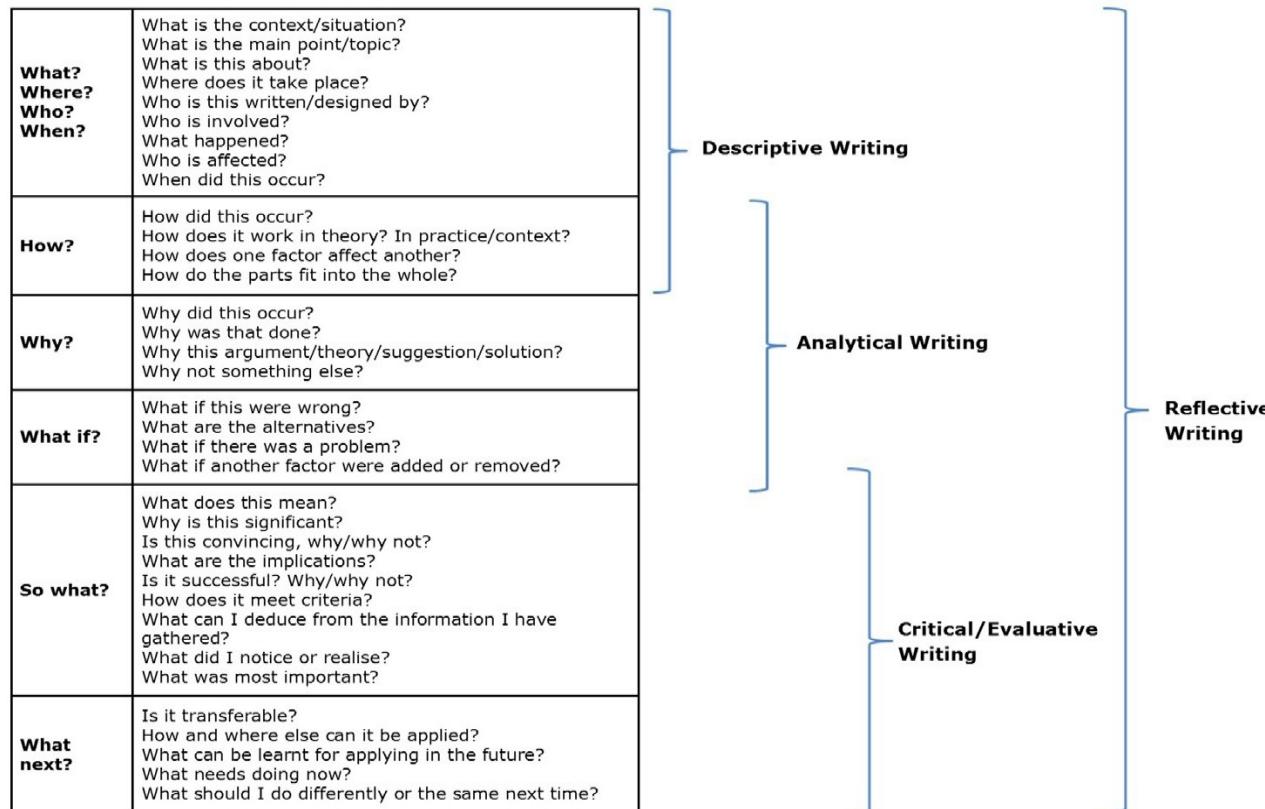
Note. From *Critical thinking*, by Learning Development with Plymouth University, 2010 (<https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/student-life/services/student-services/learning-development>). Copyright 2006 by Learning Development, University of Plymouth.

Think and write in the appropriate style

Use the following questions to help you think and then write in the appropriate style, or move your writing from one style to another. For example, if your writing is mainly descriptive yet you have been asked to evaluate, consider questions such as “Why is this significant?” and “What does this mean?”

Figure 2

Model to generate critical thinking



Note. Adapted from *Critical Thinking*, by Learning Development with Plymouth University, 2010 (<https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/student-life/services/student-services/learning-development>). Copyright 2006 by Learning Development, University of Plymouth.

Useful words and phrases for each writing style

These phrases and words may be helpful to get you started in the appropriate writing style. Also, refer to the [Sentence Starters, Transitional and Other Useful Words](#) guide.

Table 1

Useful Words and Phrases

Descriptive Language	Analytical Language	Critical/Evaluative Language	Reflective Language
The context is ...	Comparison ...and ...reveals ...	In order to identify ... it would be necessary to ...	This raised for me ...
Components of the model are ...	Application of this model to ... indicates	Given ... it can be concluded ...	For me, the most significant aspect was ...
This occurred at ...	The strengths are ...	The point ... is valuable ...	I felt/noticed/discovered/realised that ...
Key characteristics are ...	This occurred as ...	If this were applied to ...	The questions this raises for me are ...
The methodology chosen was ...	This was completed because ...	The significance/implications of ...	In future practice, I ...
	In contrast to ...	If ... could be applied to ... then ...	I found this relevant as ...
	Likewise/Similarly ...	The argument is convincing as ...	
	However/In contrast ...	This could be transferable/applicable to ...	
	The alternative to this is ...		
	If ... were altered/removed/added then ...		

Note: Adapted from *Reflective writing: A basic introduction*, by University of Portsmouth, n.d. (<http://www2.port.ac.uk/media/contacts-and-departments/student-support-services/ask/downloads/Reflective-writing---a-basic-introduction.pdf>). Copyright 2006 by Learning Development, University of Plymouth.

Writing style characteristics

Use the following chart to assess your writing and identify the changes required to ensure your writing reflects the appropriate style.

Table 2

Writing Style Characteristics

Descriptive Characteristics	Analytical Characteristics	Critical/Evaluative Characteristics	Reflective Characteristics
Set the scene.	Identify limitations/strengths of the context.	Evaluate the importance of the context.	Outline your new awareness/learning from this situation, what you would do differently next time and why.
Provide context.	Identify the importance of the timing of something and/or relevance of the context.	With justification, show what would occur if timing of something, and/or context were altered.	Explain what you have learnt about the significance of timing and context in your particular situation and show what you might change if in a similar situation in the future.
Give definitions.	Show how context influenced outcomes.		
Give information.	Explain how this information is/was used.	Explore other possible outcomes.	Show learning or realisation given the information, how you would use/apply this information, how it will impact your practice.
List details.	Show how something can be applied to a situation. Structure information in order of importance. Outline the impact of the information and relevant outcomes.	Outline the meaning/significance/ value of the information and how it could be used.	

Outline the method used	Draw comparisons between two or more items/methods.	Explain the significance and value of the method/options.	State how you would use the method/options in a situation, why or why not.
List the options selected.	<p>Explain why something occurred/ was done/was used.</p> <p>Identify strengths and weaknesses of the method/options.</p> <p>Illustrate how options/method impacted the event/outcome.</p>	<p>Make a judgement about the usefulness of the method/options in the current or other situations.</p> <p>Evaluate success of method/options.</p>	Explain what you now realise, stating what you would change next time and why.
Identify components of a theory or model.	<p>Show how a theory or model can be applied</p> <p>Compare and contrast theories and models</p> <p>Identify strengths and weaknesses of theories or models.</p>	<p>Explain what can be deduced or revealed when the theory is applied to a situation and justify your reasoning.</p> <p>Justify how each theory/model may lead to different emphasis or outcomes.</p> <p>Evaluate the success of a theory or model.</p> <p>Evaluate transferability to other situations.</p>	<p>State what was learnt from application of the theory or model, and explain why, where and when you would use this theory or model.</p> <p>State which theory/model you would prefer in a particular situation, and give the rationale for your choice.</p>
Describe what occurred, state what/when/how/where something happened.	<p>Discuss outcomes and show how and why these outcomes occurred.</p> <p>Identify strengths and weaknesses</p> <p>Draw logical conclusions</p> <p>Logically construct a case/argument using evidence.</p>	<p>Evaluate strengths and weaknesses.</p> <p>Explain significance and value of the event/argument/conclusions.</p> <p>Explore impact of outcomes, justify and evaluate these impacts.</p> <p>With justification, state if an argument is convincing.</p>	<p>Explain significance, relevance and value of the event for you, what you learnt and what you might do differently next time or in future practice.</p> <p>Outline what was most important to you, and why.</p>

Note: Adapted from *Reflective writing: A basic introduction*, by University of Portsmouth, n.d. (<http://www2.port.ac.uk/media/contacts-and-departments/student-support-services/ask/downloads/Reflective-writing---a-basic-introduction.pdf>)

Examples

Table 3

Example of Descriptive, Analytical, Critical/Evaluative, and Reflective Writing

Descriptive Writing	Analytical Writing	Critical/Evaluative Writing	Reflective Writing
"Dental caries is a chronic disease affecting approximately 45 per cent of New Zealand children with an increasing number requiring tertiary treatment under a general anaesthetic" (Johnstone, 2006, as cited in Shearman, 2011, p. 15).	"Australian mothers from a low income background were less likely to utilise preventative services . . . but they were more likely to be hospitalised and visit the outpatient clinic. It seems these families put off . . . seeking medical treatment for their children until their condition was very progressed. Similarly, . . . report that ..." (Shearman, 2011, p. 18).	"Future nursing recommendations include increased oral health assessments, improving access to primary health services, using multiple promotion initiatives ..." (Shearman, 2011, p. 21-22).	"This affects my own practice in the following areas: the manner in which I assess and relate to children, being aware of socio-political background differences to avoid judgemental attitudes, and encouraging health behaviour, by educating families appropriately for their needs" (Shearman, 2011, p. 21).
		"As part of their role as advocates, nurses should consider advocating in the community for their clients and increasing their political involvement to achieve health equality" (Shearman, 2011, p. 21).	"As a nurse, I need to be aware of my own cultural and social background when speaking to parents from a low socio-economic group, to avoid judgemental or accusing attitudes" (Shearman, 2011, p. 18).

Example Reference

Shearman, C. (2011). Dental health of children from a low socio-economic background: Socio-political nursing in the New Zealand context.

Whitireia Nursing Journal, (18), 15-24.

Table 4

Example of Descriptive, Analytical, Critical/Evaluative, and Reflective Writing

Descriptive Writing	Analytical Writing	Critical/Evaluative Writing	Reflective Writing
"The early childhood-school relationship has been researched largely from three positions" (Henderson, 2012, p. 20).	<p>"Learning how to 'fit in' seemed to capture the overall theme of this discussion and that the struggle was about navigating a relationship around the presences of an invisible barrier" (Henderson, 2012, p. 22).</p> <p>"The challenge to navigate into and through the invisible barrier and create greater visibility became a central feature of the project" (Henderson, 2012, p. 22).</p>	<p>"The debate in this project was significant, but it was this debate that allowed vulnerabilities to be exposed without which a rupturing of the invisible barrier may not have taken place" (Henderson, 2012, p. 24).</p> <p>"These questions must also go beyond just the early childhood school relationships, if boundaries between education systems are to be dissolved" (Henderson, 2012, p. 24).</p>	<p>"If the invisible barrier is taken [as] one of the forces acting across the relationship, in what ways can early childhood teachers explore the effects of the barrier in their conversations with each other, and with their school colleagues?" (Henderson, 2012, p. 24).</p> <p>"I would like to think it is possible to see this as a force acting across the relationship, rather than operating in just one direction" (Henderson, 2012, p. 24).</p>

Example Reference

Henderson, L. (2012). The early childhood-school relationship: Overcoming invisible barriers. *Early Childhood Folio*, 16(2), 20-25.

Material adapted from the following sources

University of Bradford. (2008). *Features of critical writing and descriptive writing*. <http://www.brad.ac.uk/learner-development/media/LearnerDevelopmentUnit/Documents/AcademicSkillsResources/CriticalThinking/2-Features-of-Descriptive-and--Critical-Writing-Activity.pdf>

Learning Development, University of Plymouth. (n.d.). *Critical Thinking*.

https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/1/1713/Model_To_Generate_Critical_Thinking.pdf

University of Portsmouth. (n.d.). *Reflective writing: A basic introduction*. <http://www2.port.ac.uk/media/contacts-and-departments/student-support-services/ask/downloads/Reflective-writing---a-basic-introduction.pdf>

Updated November 2021