

Developing your critical writing

Writing at postgraduate level is difficult. You have to demonstrate your knowledge, be critical and give your expert opinion whilst sticking to your word limit and hand in on time! And when you have multiple assignments due, it can become difficult to meet and maintain the standards required for postgraduate work. Below is a list of do's and don'ts for postgraduate writing; common pitfalls that most students make at some point in their academic career. The list is not exhaustive or subject specific, but does give you pointers on how to avoid general mistakes.

	Do	Do not
What to include	Answer the question. Keep referring back to the title, mentally and in your work	Forget the title/question set. Not answering the correct question is the quickest way to lose marks
	Contextualise. Give your reader necessary background only	Tell the reader everything you know about the topic
	Outline, trace or summarise briefly any data or detail	Include superfluous details, data etc.
	Define your terms, the problem etc.	Tip-toe around the issue or be unspecific or vague or general
How to do it	Show processes in a logical order	Muddle everything together
	Explain subtle points and finer details	Repeat or over-explain
	Be precise: clear direct and to the point. Be concise: distil what you say to its essences in your communicating	Be vague or waffle or include information that doesn't help answer the question (i.e. this is interesting but not relevant)
	Use definite, subject-specific, concrete language. Be consistent when using terms or explain if you need a different usage.	Use loaded or deliberately emotive language. Generally, colloquial expressions and phrases are not used in academic writing
	Use signposting language to help the reader follow your argument	Assume the reader knows how you think or why you are including certain information. Instead tell them explicitly why it is relevant, what it shows and why it is important
	Emphasise important points by giving them prime position in sentences or paragraphs	Bury key points in the middle or end of sentences

Give specific and appropriate examples to illustrate the points you make	Leave the reader hanging, instead explain your point then give a specific example stating how it is relevant
Show your reading and knowledge base by citing and referencing up to date and appropriate references	Copy and paste from text books, articles etc. Refer to anything you have not read yourself. You don't know if you/someone else has understood or interpreted the information correct or in what context it might be being used in
Develop your argument to reflect your actual reading and research	Decide what to think first and then twist facts or be selective when using references. Instead consider the whole topic/subject/argument
Analyse and discuss issues, looking at pros/cons, strengths/weaknesses, patterns/trends, connections and complexities	Make assumptions and unproven generalisations, especially from only anecdotal evidence or personal experience
Aim to propose a convincing theory/conclusion with some input of your own derived from your own research/reading	Rely solely on other people's work and conclusions
Anticipate and account for weaknesses in your own argument rather than leave them for your reader to criticise. Pointing out your own faults will show thoroughness	Ignore or overlook faulty logic or gaps in your own or others' work
Comment/pass judgement, giving a reasoned opinion based on sound evidence	Write descriptive and repetitious comments rather than giving an opinion
Consider and evaluate others' ideas, whether they align with yours or not	Ignore opposing arguments, this will weaken your own
Reject and refute others' theories if you find them unconvincing after thorough research	Agree with or unquestioningly accept information, argument, theory etc. of others' just because they seem like an authoritative source
Make recommendations according to the results of your study and findings	Preach or rant at your reader, no one likes being told what to do. Instead present them with a logical argument and convincing examples to persuade them