

Tips for writing a critical essay

| | Do | Don't |
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| Reliable argument | DO Start from a reliable premise (e.g. smoking has been shown to cause heart disease and lung cancer) and arrive at a reliable conclusion (therefore it is reasonable to say that smoking is a health hazard) | DON'T Construct a faulty argument on the basis of a weak premise, e.g. There is a strong correlation between people's shoe size and the size of their vocabulary. Therefore having a large vocabulary causes your feet to grow. |
| Objectivity | DO Be sceptical of statements of fact, unsubstantiated comments, unbalanced arguments, bias, anecdotal evidence, and unreliable sources | DON'T Agree with or accept information, argument, theory or the beliefs of others without questioning, just because they seem like authorities – i.e. have published their written work. |
| Reasoned argument | DO Develop your argument to reflect your actual findings and reading | DON'T Decide what you think first and then twist the facts or refer to texts selectively to make them fit your claims. |
| Organisation | DO Present your arguments logically | DON'T Muddle everything together |
| Convincing argument | DO Analyse and discuss issues, looking at pros and cons, strengths and weaknesses, patterns and trends, connections and complexities, and aim to propose a convincing theory with some input of your own, derived from your research | DON'T Make unproven assumptions and generalisations, especially from anecdotal evidence or personal experience alone |

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| Using judgement | DO Challenge and/or reject others' theories if: a) you find them unconvincing and b) you can justify your response in scholarly terms, i.e. your objections are formed from your research | DON'T reject and refute others' work just because you don't agree with it |
| Acknowledging limitations | DO Account for weaknesses in your own argument, rather than leaving them for your reader to criticise – this will undermine your credibility, whereas pointing up your own faults will show thoroughness, and filling in the gaps will help convince | DON'T Ignore or overlook faulty logic in your own or others' work |
| Recommendations | DO Make recommendations according to the results of your study and your findings | DON'T Moralise or preach, rant, or tell people what you think they should do. DON'T allow emotions and/or personal views and opinions to cloud your argument |

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