

Writing Assignments, essays and arguments

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I. Introduction

In the past a significant number of people across all years appear to have been confused by what lecturers want when they put in essay questions the words "critically analyse" or "critically evaluate"...

While it is the stock and trade of academics, very few seem to be willing to explain exactly what 'critique' in this context is to their students. At the post-graduate level we assume that you will know exactly what it is but clearly this is not necessarily the case.

The following provides an overview of what critical thinking involves; Definition:

Two senses to critical analysis and evaluation that you need to master:

- 1 In the context of reading articles
- 2 In the context of writing essays

To think critically is to analyse, and to evaluate the world around us and more specifically, in the context of university studies, the arguments set forth by academics, researchers, and commentators in lectures, notes and articles.

"Analysing" and "evaluating" are interrelated terms; that is it is somewhat difficult to separate them out as covering distinct processes. However in very bold terms each can be described in the following way.

Analysis is about breaking an argument or article down into its components or essential features in order to understand it properly.

It involves such things as:

- 1 breaking an argument down to its sub-parts;
- 2 identifying how each part of an argument relates to other parts and particularly how and in what direction the causal relationship between parts of an argument flow;
- 3 identifying whether the arguments used are deductive or inductive; that is:

Deductive is the conclusion to any sub-argument or, indeed, the overall argument drawn because it follows logically or necessarily from its premises;

eg All men are mortal

Rob is a man

Therefore Rob is mortal

(clearly from this example we can see that the validity of a conclusion in a deductive arguments depends upon the validity of its premises)

or

Inductive is the conclusion to any sub-argument or the overall argument drawn not because it logically follows from its premises but because the premises provide evidence in support of the conclusion (inductive) inductive arguments involve a leap from particular instances to general conclusions

e.g. # % of students in this room are female From this we may generalise with a small degree of certainty that of the population of students in Australia #% are likely to be female.

(validity here depends upon how representative the sample is of the population and of course how valid the premises are)

- 4 identifying premises and conclusions

Discussion of deductive and inductive argument clearly indicates that we must when analysing an argument attempt to identify the premises and conclusions. Premises means here: the reasons that the author uses to support the conclusions she or he makes

5 identifying assumptions (a type of premise that is not necessarily spelt out) eg about human motivation about structure and agency about the relationship between individuals and society about the nature of capitalism the nature and purposes of management about conflict about knowledge about values, goals and ends

- 6 identifying the context

such things as: who is the intended audience when was it written how does it relate to other points of view

is it part of the orthodox view is it an alternative perspective
7 identifying the authors intentions in setting out his argument
to challenge or support the orthodoxy to right a wrong or to refute a claim to advocate a course of action or
attack a particular approach etc.
8 if uses inductive arguments that rely on empirical research that
the author has conducted: what methodology did they use (eg quantitative or qualitative) and why.
Etc.

II. Evaluation

Clearly analysis is about understanding...

Evaluation should follow analysis and is concerned with assessing an author's article or argument. That is, it is about judging such things as the worth, strength, veracity, and efficacy of an article or argument.

That is, first you have to work out where the author is coming from, how his or her arguments hang together, what assumptions she or he makes etc. The next task is to draw conclusions about the extent to which you should give the writers argument(s) weight.

In very broad terms, the sorts of things that I think you should consider are: quality of the argument and the reasoning how well do the conclusions flow from the premises for deductive arguments do the conclusions logically flow from the premises for inductive arguments does the evidence really support the conclusions drawn or how representative is the sample is the methodology appropriate are there any contradictions between different parts of an argument or article are there any gaps in the overall argument how realistic, valid or logical are the underpinning assumptions;

quality of the structure and expression (i.e. question the writing style and the structure of the article) is the written expression clear, intelligible and interesting given the targeted audience how much rhetoric does the author rely on in order to persuade- that is, does he or she overuse language that tries to convince or sway us using the power of certain types of words is it really the content of the argument that is convincing or otherwise or is it the writing style how well is the article set out- does it flow or is it jumpy- again is it the quality of this structure that is convincing or is it the content; importance of the argument and the efficacy of the conclusions;

your own views about the issues, the premises and the conclusions; some arguments are watertight re all the above, but even so you disagree.

Now once you have done all this it is then that the real hard work begins. You have to construct an argument in reply.

But, for the sake of reinforcement let me make a few points about what critical thinking or arguing isn't:

it is not just about pointing out negatives its also about highlighting the positive; it is not description;

it does not involve bald assertions (The author's argument is false because it is obviously stupid.), dogmatic viewpoints, or unqualified generalisations (The recommendations will not work because they were devised by an academic and ALL academics are out of touch with the real business world);

it does not involve strings of rhetorical statements flowery language that is meant to persuade rather than convince; is not emotionless

if you feel passionate about something don't try to conceal it, try to express it in your writing but do back it up with rational argument. it does not involve strings of quotes

This discussion is applicable in a variety of situations. I may have given the impression that you use it mainly as a way to critique a single author's argument. But this is not the case, you are required to use it to critique groups of articles, a body of literature, or a whole tradition. Further, your essay questions often do not directly refer to a particular article or articles but require you to critique a particular contention or statement, e.g. your first assignment.

A number of ways of looking at assumptions.

Bolman & Deal's

Frames Perspective

A way of classifying different approaches to managing and understanding organisations. They identify 4 frames: structural, human resource, political and symbolic.

Structural Frame - The good manager sees and makes decisions by working from the assumption that:

1. Organizations exist primarily to accomplish established goals
2. For any organization, a structural form can be designed and implemented to fit its particular set of circumstances (such as goals, strategies, environment, technology, and people).
3. Organizations work most efficiently when environmental turbulence and personal preferences of participants

and the personal preferences of participants are constrained by norms of rationality. (Structure ensures that people focus on getting the job done rather than on doing whatever they please.)

4. Specialisation permits high levels of individual expertise and performance.

5. Coordination and control are essential to effectiveness. (Depending on the task and environment, coordination may be achieved through authority, rules, policies, standard operating procedures, information systems, meetings, lateral relationships, or a variety of more informal techniques.)

6. Organisational problems typically originate from inappropriate structures or inadequate systems and can be resolved through restructuring or developing new systems.

Managing organizations successfully is about rationally devising strategies that ensure the organization's structure fits the contingencies the organization faces in the environment.

Human Relations Frame - The good manager sees and makes decisions by working from the assumption that:

1. Organizations exist to serve human needs (rather than the reverse).

2. Organizations and people need each other. (Organizations need the ideas, the career, salaries, and talent that people provide, while people need the careers, salaries, and work opportunities that organizations provide.)

3. When the fit between the individual and the organization is poor, one or both will suffer; the individual will be exploited, or will seek to exploit the organization, or both.

4. A good fit between the individual and the organization benefits both:

human beings find meaningful and satisfying work, and organizations get the human talent and energy they need.

Managing organizations successfully is about ensuring the needs of the individuals working within organizations are met in a way that as a consequence makes organizations more efficient and effective at achieving

profit or high levels of productivity (which are means to fulfill some humans' needs).

Political Frame- The good manager sees and makes decisions by working from the assumption that:

1. Organizations are coalitions composed of individuals and interest groups (for example, hierarchical levels, departments, professional groups and ethnic groups).

2. There are enduring differences among individuals and groups in their values, preferences, beliefs, information, and perceptions of reality. Such differences change slowly, if at all.

3. Most of the important decisions in organizations involve the allocation of scarce resources: they are decisions about who gets what.

4. Because of scarce resources and enduring differences, conflict is central to organisational dynamics, and power is the most important resource.

5. Organizational goals and decision making emerge bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position among members of different coalitions.

Managing organizations successfully is about using power and politics to ensure scarce resources are distributed in a way that meets the often

conflicting goals of different groups (and your own most of all) while also meeting the needs of the organization.

Symbolic Frame: - The good manager sees and makes decisions by working from the assumption that:

1. What is most important about any event is not what happened but what it means.

2. Events and meanings are loosely coupled: the same event can have very different meanings for different people because of differences in the schema that they use to interpret their experience.

3. Many of the most significant events and processes in organizations are substantially ambiguous or uncertain - it is often difficult or impossible to know what happened, why it happened, or what will happen next.

4. The greater the ambiguity and uncertainty, the harder it is to use rational approaches to analysis, problem solving, and decision making.

5. Faced with uncertainty and ambiguity, human beings create symbols to resolve confusion, increase predictability, and provide direction. (Events themselves may remain illogical, random, fluid, and meaningless, but human symbols make them seem otherwise.)

6. Many organizational events and processes are important more for what they express than for what they produce: they are secular myths, rituals, ceremonies and sagas that help people find meaning and order in their experience.

Managing organizations successfully is about ensuring that the important meanings, symbols, and cultures in an

organization are ones that help the organization to grow.

Burrell & Morgan

Assumptions about the Nature of Social Science & Society

All theories of management and organization are based upon a philosophy of science and a theory of society.

Philosophical assumptions

Ontological assumptions: assumptions about the nature of reality.

“whether the ‘reality’ to be investigated is external to the individual -

imposing itself on individual consciousness from without - or the product of individual consciousness; whether reality is of an

‘objective’ nature, or the product of individual cognition; whether ‘reality’ is a given ‘out there’ in the world, or the product of one’s mind.” (Burrell, G. & Morgan, G. 1982, p1)

Two extremes of a continuum:

Nominalism ----- Realism (conventionalism)

Nominalism: the social world beyond individual cognition is nothing more than names, concepts and labels used to structure reality.

Realism: the social world beyond individual cognition is ‘real’, hard, tangible and relatively immutable.

Epistemological assumptions: assumptions about the grounds of knowledge.

“..about the grounds of knowledge - about how one might begin to understand the world and communicate this as knowledge to fellow human beings..about what forms of knowledge can be obtained, and how (or if) one can sort out what is to be regarded as ‘true’ from what is to be regarded as ‘false’...whether..it is possible to identify and

communicate the nature of knowledge as being hard, real and capable of being transmitted in tangible form, or whether ‘knowledge’ is a softer, more subjective, spiritual or even transcendental kind, based on experience and insight of a unique and essentially personal nature”. (Burrell, G. & Morgan, G. 1982, p1-2)

Two extremes of a continuum:

Anti-positivism ----- Positivism

Positivism: epistemologies that claim to explain and predict the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between constituent elements. Based on natural science approaches and the ‘scientific method’.

Anti-positivism: the social world is essentially relativistic. It can only be understood from the point of view of the individuals who are directly involved in the activities which are to be studied. The standpoint of the ‘observer’ is rejected; one can only ‘understand’ by adopting the frame of reference of the participant in action. Science cannot generate objective knowledge.

Assumptions about human nature: the relationship between human beings and the external world (be it society, biology, the natural world or God) Whether human beings respond in a mechanistic or even deterministic fashion to the external world or if free will is dominant. Whether we are products or creators of the environment - conditioned or conditioners; controlled or controllers; puppets or marionettes; fated or free; authors or characters; heteronomous or autonomous.

Two extremes of a continuum:

Voluntarism ----- Determinism

Determinism: we and our actions/decisions are completely determined by the situation or environment in which we are located.

Voluntarism: we are completely autonomous and free willed; we can choose how to act in the situation or environment in which we find ourselves.

Methodological assumptions: assumptions about how one investigates, collects or obtains ‘knowledge’ about the social world.

Different ontologies, epistemologies and models of human nature will incline social scientists towards different methodologies. Where one subscribes to a view that treats the social world as a hard, external objective reality, then collection is likely to focus upon getting data that allows an analysis of relationships and regularities between various elements of the social world. It involves the search for universal laws that explain and govern the reality that is being observed. If, on the other hand one subscribes to a view stressing the importance of the subjective experience of individuals in the creation

of the social world, then the principal concern is with collecting understandings of how the individual creates,

modifies and interprets the world around her or him.

Two extremes of a continuum:

Ideographic ----- Nomethetic
(qualitative) (quantitative)

Nomethetic: emphasis is on a systematic and technical approach to research with the focus on testing hypotheses in accordance with the canons of scientific rigour. It generally involves surveys, questionnaires, standardised research instruments and quantitative analysis.

Ideographic: emphasis is on getting close to the subject, exploring their world, history and context from their point of view. It is about generating subjective accounts and getting an inside rather than external view of the subject's reality. It generally involves such things as in-depth interviews, diaries and biographies.

The subjectivist approach Nominalism Anti-positivism <input type="checkbox"/> Voluntarism <input type="checkbox"/> Ideographic	The subjectivist-objectivist dimension <input type="checkbox"/> -----Ontology----- <input type="checkbox"/> -----Epistemology----- <input type="checkbox"/> -----Human Nature----- <input type="checkbox"/> -----Methodology-----	The objectivist approach <input type="checkbox"/> Realism Positivism Determinism <input type="checkbox"/> Nomethetic
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The nature of society (& organisations)Dahrendorf, 1959, pp. 160-2:

The integration theory of society...is founded on a number of assumptions of the following type:

- (1) Every society (organisation) is a relatively persistent, stable structure of elements.
- (2) Every society (organisation) is a well integrated structure of elements.
- (3) Every element in a society (organisation) has a function, ie., it renders a contribution to its maintenance as a system.
- (4) Every functioning social (organisational) structure is based on a consensus of values among its members...

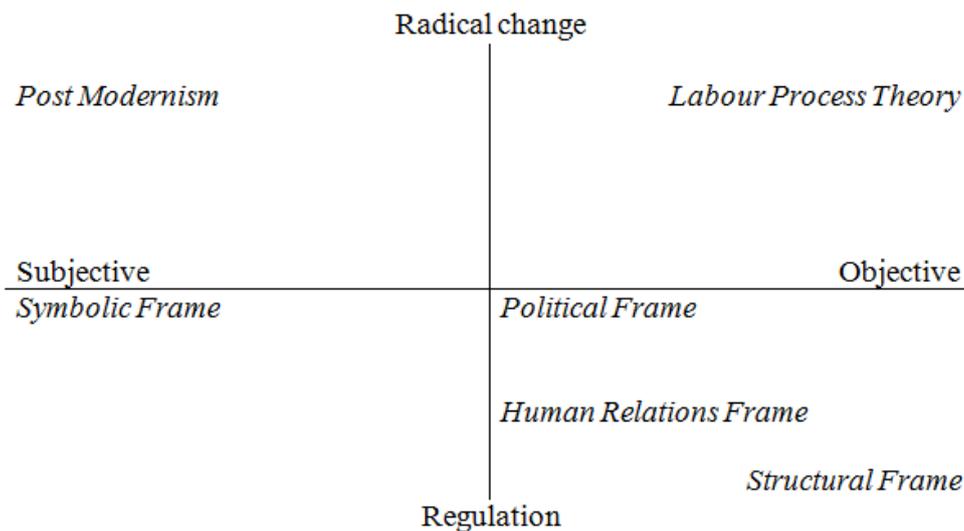
What I have called the coercion theory of society can also be reduced to a small number of basic tenets, although here again these assumptions oversimplify and overstate the case:

- (1) Every society (organisation) is at every point subject to processes of change; social (organisational) change is ubiquitous.
- (2) Every society (organisation) displays at every point dissensus and conflict; social (organisational) conflict is ubiquitous.
- (3) Every element in a society (organisation) renders a contribution to disintegration and change.
- (4) Every society (organisation) is based on the coercion of some of its members by others.

According to Burrell and Morgan, Dahrendorf's model does not go far enough: its too integrationist. So they introduce a sociology of regulation, sociology of radical change continuum.

At the polar opposites are:

- (1) Sociology of regulation: society including organisations at an underlying level are unified and cohesive. They tend to hold together rather than fall apart. Social cohesion and solidarity is the norm. Sociology and organisational theory is about understanding this unity and cohesiveness and about how best to regulate interactions and outcomes.
- (2) Sociology of radical change: society including organisations at an underlying level are radically changing generated by deep seated conflicts and contradictions that lead to inequality, alienation and modes of domination. Sociology and organisational theory should be about emancipating people from the structures and ideologies that control and dominate them and thus stunt their development.



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