MA and MSc: 
Analysis, Critiquing Strategies and Synthesis

This workshop will:

- Teach you about the core concept of analysis
- Offer a process model of synthesis and how to achieve it
- Provide insights into critiquing and offer initial strategies
- Provide opportunities to begin practising your analytical skills

Teaching points:
1. What analysis is
2. How to be critical
3. Critiquing tools
4. What synthesis is
1. What analysis is

At the core of analysis, and being critical, is questioning. For analysis, it is about asking questions about how something works. To do this, you first have to deconstruct a ‘thing’, such as a concept, theory, or object, to look at its component parts and then consider how they inter-relate. There are two ‘depths’ of questions you ask.

The first ‘shallow’ layer includes descriptive questions:

- what something looks like
- what it is made of
- where it is
- who it is
- when something happened

The second ‘deeper’ layer also looks at the relationship between a thing’s constituent parts:

- how?
- why?
- what if?

Together, let’s answer this puzzle. I can answer yes and no questions.

_A man is lying injured in a field. Beside him is an unopened packet. How and why did he get there?_

**Activity 1:** Lateral thinking puzzle

If you know that one, try this one.

_In which direction is the bus travelling?_

What you have done by answering questions you devised is look for and identify new angles, and how to connect information to provide the answers. You will do the same when analysing research material to find fresh ways to link arguments, themes and information.
2. How to be critical

Being critical is, like analysis, about asking questions but these questions are not necessarily just about the 'something' itself but how it relates to the wider world. You use your experience, knowledge from previous study, and recent reading from a variety of sources to evaluate and make judgements about what you looked at during analysis.

These questions are at the ‘deepest’ layer:

1. so what?
2. what next?

These two relate to what the implications of the ‘something’ are; if it provides solutions or needs a solution to make it work; what conclusions you come to; and what recommendations you make for any next steps.

Being critical involves:

- Identifying other people’s positions, arguments and conclusions
- Spotting if the evidence can support alternative points of view
- Weighing up opposing arguments and evidence fairly
- Drawing conclusions about whether arguments are valid and justifiable, based on good evidence and sensible assumptions
- Being able to read between the lines, seeing behind surfaces, and identifying false or unfair assumptions
- Identifying flaws, gaps or other weaknesses in an argument or supporting evidence
- Recognising techniques used to make certain positions more appealing than others, such as false logic and insight to bear
- Presenting a point of view in a structured, clear, well-reasoned way that convinces others

One example is an...

Analysis of Manchester United’s success:

- Most Premier league wins = 13
- Most FA Cup wins = 11
- Highest number of top flight wins = 20
- UEFA Champions League Cup wins = 1
- UEFA Cupwinners Cup wins = 1
- Intercontinental Cup wins = 1
Possible reasons

✓ Continuity of manager breeds trust and security that no new systems are introduced
✓ Financial security and growth means afford excellent new players and keep existing players
✓ Recruitment of new players early in the off season ensures all players know their roles and positions well before start of the season
✓ Confidence in successful manager bolsters team even when not playing well
✓ Massive fan base ensures support anywhere in the globe

If you want to critique their success, you need to evaluate Manchester United against other teams, such as Liverpool and Chelsea, by looking at their record and possible reasons for their level of success. After answering all your questions, you then come to a conclusion, possibly making a final decision although that is not always a requirement. (United will always come out top!)

TALKING POINT

Let’s decide what questions we need to ask of this claim below.

Spectacles are the best method to correct myopia (short-sightedness) for children under 10 as they are easily accessible and cheap.

What is the basic proposition/s?

Do you have any issues with it?

What other questions could you ask?

How would you evaluate?
Possible conclusions:

**Activity 2:** E-learning and Higher Education

In pairs or small groups, read the following and answer the questions below.

*Higher Education learning should be exclusively E-learning. The days of 'the sage on the stage' or even 'the guide by the side' are gone. It’s now 'tutor on the puter'.*

What is the basic proposition/s?

Do you have any issues with it?

What other questions could you ask?

How would you evaluate?

Possible conclusions:
At post-graduate level, you are not just asking questions of what has been said or omitted, but also assessing what the sources you find are ‘worth’ to the field they are contributing to. You assess their value to the general area under discussion and judge the merits of a source based on its:

- provenance (how distinguished in the field is the author, when was it written and what is the context)
- reliability (in terms of evidence) in that the same or similar results would occur if the same tools or methods, without bias, were used
- applicability to a particular research focus that the writer/researcher had in mind

Understanding where knowledge comes from and why it has been generated rather than just what has been produced should also be considered by the post-graduate student.

Motivation: what, if anything, is behind the publication of a journal article or report? If the United Nations publishes a report, is it likely to criticise itself? Is it trying to persuade you of the efficacy of its policies and actions?

Ideology: literature may be aimed at and written from within an ideological circle which is unlikely to ‘see’ other viewpoints. If an article is published for a journal whose audience is generally liberal and Western, is it ‘leaning on an open door’ or pandering to that audience?

Be aware that this may happen; look at the context of the community the article, report, etc. has been written for and from as well as the context of the research field it contributes to.

Western liberal world view – bias?
3. Critiquing Tools

The critical analysis we have looked at so far has been on very short and direct claims. Of course, as a post-graduate student, you will be critiquing journal articles and other sources, and will need tools to assist you in systematically reviewing and evaluating research. They provide a methodical way of working through articles and recording your responses so that you can justify the topics and evidence that you use in your essays and assignments. These tools are designed to offer question prompts or criteria to critically analyse research studies in order to:

A) understand how research is done and what it has found out

B) assess the quality of research by questioning what has been written

There are a variety of critiquing tools available with some specifically for qualitative or quantitative research (please find below a list of sources for you to discover which may work for you.)

**Qualitative**


**Quantitative**


The tool below is appropriate for both qualitative and quantitative research in any discipline.
Does the title reflect the content?

Are the authors credible?

Does the abstract summarise the key components?

Is the rationale for undertaking the research clearly outlined?

Is the literature review comprehensive and up-to-date?

Is the aim of the research clearly stated?

Are all ethical issues identified and addressed?

Is the methodology identified and justified?

Quantitative

Is the study design clearly identified, and is the rationale for choice of design evident?

Is there an experimental hypothesis clearly stated? Are the key variables clearly defined?

Is the population identified?

Is the sample adequately described and reflective of the population?

Is the method of data collection valid and reliable?

Are the results presented in a way that is appropriate and clear?

Is the discussion comprehensive?

Are the results generalizable?

Qualitative

Are the philosophical background and study design identified and the rationale for choice of design evident?

Are the major concepts identified?

Is the context of the study outlined?

Is the selection of participants described and the sampling method identified? Is the method of data collection auditable?

Is the method of data analysis credible and confirmable?

Is the discussion comprehensive?
4. What synthesis is

Post-graduate study is about how you contribute to knowledge and understanding through research in your specialist discipline. This can be by either producing something new or finding a new angle on existing work. Part of this process is synthesis and your tutors will expect to see this in your written work and via your research project.

Don’t panic

It’s a fancy name for developing your own opinions and arguments, NEW KNOWLEDGE, out of the ideas, debates, arguments, theories and points of view of others you have read about, EXISTING KNOWLEDGE. It is choosing what is relevant, linking it/them to other elements, and interpreting it/them into something new. It is not simply summarising.

For example,

You are one of four friends that go out for a meal and watch a film, but one other friend is unable to go. You telephone this absent friend and tell them all about the night before.

You don’t merely report or summarise – at seven o’clock we entered the restaurant, at half past seven John ate his started and said ‘that sauce is really tasty’, at seven thirty five Michelle received a call, etc. OR we all went to an Italian restaurant, ate our starters, ate our main meals, etc.

You choose to tell your friend the bits that made up what you enjoyed and what you think your absent friend would like to know so he/she can share in your experience. It is about harmonising or interpreting what you ate, what you discussed, what you saw, etc. and creating something new. This is synthesis.

TALKING POINT

Let’s see if we can identify the point being made in the paragraph below concerning America’s involvement in South Vietnam.

1. Defenders of the war saw the conflict in terms of the forces of evil (communism) against the forces of good (freedom). Supporters of intervention believed that to refuse aid was to abandon the peaceful and democratic nation of South Vietnam to “communist enslavement” (“Public Hearings” 977). President Johnson painted a picture of a “small and brave” nation beleaguered by communist aggression. The president asked “only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their country in their own way” (Johnson, “War Aims” 976). Congress had already agreed;...in 1964, it
accused the communists of carrying out an unprovoked attack on American naval vessels and said that this attack was only part of a larger attack on the “freedom” of the South (971). Some of the fighting men tended to see the war in [the same] black-and-white terms... After witnessing some brutalities committed by the Viet Cong, one soldier wrote: “Those slobs have to be stopped, even if it takes every last believer in a democracy and a free way of life to do it” (“War of Atrocities” 974).

The point of the paragraph:

**Activity 3:** More American involvement in Viet Nam

In pairs or small groups, read the following paragraphs and identify the point of each paragraph. Once you have your list, what is the argument the writer has formed from synthesising points from existing literature?

2. Both Johnson and Congress insisted that the United States had no "territorial, military or political ambitions." In addition to saving the grateful South Vietnamese, a million of whom had "voted with their feet against communism" (Public Hearings" 977), America was reaffirming the world’s faith in its resolve. The free peoples of the world were counting on America to defend South Vietnam, said Johnson ("War Aims" 975-76), and to abandon Vietnam would be to shake their confidence in America and her word. The price of withdrawal would be the freedom of fourteen million people, the honor of our own country and eventually, the security of the free world,” said a Young Americans for Freedom representative in 1965 ("Public Hearings” 976).

Point of the paragraph:

3. [South Vietnam] had been independent only since 1956; and Ho Chi Minh was not trying to conquer new territory but to reunify the recently divided nation of Vietnam. The American view of communist “aggression” is given an interesting perspective by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who pointed out that to the Chinese the United States appeared to be the aggressor. The question "of who the aggressor is depends a good deal on who looks through what glass and how darkly, he argued (978). South Vietnam was no bastion of democracy, either. The South Vietnamese government did not hold promised democratic elections in 1956 because it knew that the communists had popular support in the country. Even the government admitted that South Vietnam’s political situation was “deeply serious” with “repressive actions” frequently being committed (”U.S. Policy on Vietnam” 128). The American-supported Diem government was so unpopular that widespread protests
against it led to a successful coup in 1963... United States was defending South Vietnam against the will of much of the population, and American motives were not as selfless or benevolent as the government claimed: the containment of communism is certainly a territorial and political ambition of sorts, and Congress viewed the security of South Vietnam as "vital" to American national interest. [The United States] was concerned mainly with defeating the communists at all costs, even if the country it was supposed to be defending was destroyed in the process.

Point of the paragraph:

4. In 1963 the White House believed that all its military goals in Vietnam could be accomplished by the end of 1965, predicting that only a few military advisors would be needed by then. When Congress was confronted with an apparently unprovoked attack by North Vietnam on two of its destroyers, however, it authorized the president to treat the situation as a war (even though it never declared war) and to send in unlimited amounts of men and supplies. From a few military advisors sent to Vietnam in 1961, the American troop commitment was to escalate to more than 500,000 in 1969. But even with such vast manpower, the United States was unable to inflict "permanent setbacks" against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. During the three years preceding the Tet Offensive, the U.S. Air Force dropped almost as much bomb tonnage on Vietnam as had been dropped by American forces during World War II (Slaughter Goes On" 13). In 1967, President Johnson claimed that the bombing was creating "very serious problems" for North Vietnam (Johnson, "Bombing" 972)... bombing was escalated for years, increasing civilian casualties. The United States was forgetting the lesson Hitler learned in World War II with his bombing of Britain: bombing does not break the resolve of the population - it strengthens it. The North Vietnamese newspaper Nhan Dan pointed out that the bombings only served to "further incense" the population of North Vietnam ("Slaughter Goes On" 13). In spite of all this, the American public was ready to believe the government's assurance of impending victory. It took the "devastating" Tet Offensive of 1968 (a coordinated attack...on more than one hundred towns and cities in the South) to impress upon it the reality of just how costly and difficult it would be for the United States to win the war.

Point of the paragraph:

Synthesised argument:
Another way of thinking about synthesis is that it is the opposite process to being critically analytic which is about dissecting what you have read into many parts and looking at them. Synthesis, however, is about taking all those ideas, arguments and theories, and filtering them into, usually, one new idea.

When you are synthesising, you also need to maintain attention to tiny details as well as maintaining a grip of the big picture, AND ensuring you keep an eye on how the relate to each other.

What do we mean by ‘big picture’ and ‘tiny details’? One example is Innocent who make smoothies. Their ‘big picture’ is to provide healthy smoothies in a fun way whilst considering the environment. This is dealt with by having the right structure, recruitment policies and building relationships. The ‘tiny details’ they pay attention to include the lids of their bottles say ‘enjoy by’ rather than ‘use by’.
Your 'big picture' may be to be a successful optician, computer analyst, physiotherapist, retail marketing manager, or any other career role. To get to your 'tiny details' you will need to break down what you have to do and how to get there.

A. Initial breakdown could be: gain experience in the field, complete Masters, network with others in field.

B. Taking complete Masters and breaking it down again: ensure adequate child/adult care in place: attend all tutorials and teaching sessions; attend all other support sessions: learn to use databases to access sources; etc.

C. Taking all other support sessions: find out what other support is available; discover where support services are based; find out what opening hours are; discover if need to book appointments; etc.

All the time you are organising these details, you need to be aware of how they fit into the ‘big picture’. When making connections and developing your own arguments, do not get side-tracked by a particularly fascinating theory or argument: it may be relevant to your research project but it takes more than one ‘thing’ to make a new and synthesised argument or idea.

It can be difficult to keep a track of the key elements you have read about and to make connections during the process of synthesis. There are many ways to plan or map your ideas — you can use a mind or concept map, use diagrams, use ‘family trees’, use pieces of paper stuck to a board, use specialist software. On every University computer, there is a software programme called MindGenius 3 (click on the start icon, click on all programmes, and scroll down to Productivity). This will help you to build a map of your ideas and can also be used to provide a structure for your literature review.

References


Farlex Incorporated. Huntingdon Valley: Farlex Incorporated


Lydia Lunning, L. *Writing The Literature Review*. Minneapolis: Waldon University [online] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpErYDb6PsY [Accessed 28.3.2014]


Wikipedia Foundation Incorporated (2014)


**Answers**

**TALKING POINT**

Man in a field

He is a parachutist and the packet is his unopened parachute.

**Activity 1:** Bus travel

It depends which end the door is on the other side. If the other side on the left, to the right in America and Europe; if the other side on the right, in the UK.

**TALKING POINT**

Myopia claim

What is the basic proposition?
Spectacle are the BEST method over all others because of their accessibility and price.
Key words: best, spectacles, myopia, under-10, easily accessible, cheap

Do you have any issues with it?
No information as to what compared against and what other possible comparative factors there may be.
No explanation of how easy ‘easily’ is and how cheap they are.

What other questions could you ask?
- What are the other methods of correcting myopia?
- Are they appropriate for under-10s?
- How easy are they to access for under-10s?
- How much do all the methods cost?
- Is this the same throughout the country? Are there ‘hot spots’?
- Why is this writer taking this stance? Is there a hidden agenda?
- How has the writer come to this conclusion – where is their evidence?
- Is there a wider issue to do with NHS funding and free glasses for children?
How would you evaluate?
Compare methods, and advantages and disadvantages, of all methods for under-10s across the country.

Possible conclusions:
A. The writer is correct in their opinion.
B. The writer is correct in their opinion but for different/additional reasons.
C. Spectacles are the correct option for some under-10s but other methods would be more appropriate for others

Activity 2: E-learning and Higher Education

What is the basic proposition?
- Traditional face-to-face teaching and University laboratory are no longer relevant teaching methods.
- On-line teaching and information is the only appropriate way to learn.

Do you have any issues with it?
- No explanation for the opinion.
- When does the ‘future’ start?
- No detailed information about which sort of e-learning is being referred to/does writer mean all?

What other questions could you ask?
- What do the three phrases mean?
- Why is the writer saying this? Who are they and is there any bias in their opinion?
- How has the writer come to this conclusion – where is their evidence?
- Is the writer talking about HE in colleges and universities?
- Is there a political agenda here? Is E-learning cheaper than other sorts of learning? Does it take less time to complete a course? More time so more money for Universities?

How would you evaluate?
- Look at the advantages and disadvantages of E-learning and other teaching methods
- Look at the enrolment, completion and success rates for students using E-learning exclusively, on a part-time basis and not at all.

Possible conclusions:
A. Agreement that students should be taught exclusively via E-learning.
B. Disagreement: different students benefit from being taught using a variety of methods.
America’s involvement in South Vietnam.

Point: America was sure that its military intervention in South Vietnam was morally right.

**Activity 3:** American involvement in Vietnam

Paragraph 2’s point:
The official position was that America was acting out of purely altruistic means.

Paragraph 3’s point:
In reality, the position of the United States was impractical and doomed to failure. South Vietnam was not the free state threatened by communist “enslavement” that the U.S. government described.

Paragraph 4’s point:
The military solution was seen as the correct one: the White House statement, while conceding that “improvements are being energetically sought,” asserted that the “military program in South Vietnam has made progress and is sound in principle.”

Synthesised argument:
A…combination of self-righteousness and arrogance blinded America to the realities of the situation in Vietnam.