

Academic essays and Critiques Genre Guide

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1. What are academic essays and critiques?

Academic essays ask the writer to develop ideas and demonstrate the ability to make coherent connections between arguments and evidence. The writer also needs to develop a personal proposition by employing critical thinking skills. Critiques ask the writer to develop an understanding of the area of study, and demonstrate the ability to evaluate and/or assess the significance of the area of the study.

Both academic essays and essays aim to encourage students to interpret central phenomena and claims in the related subjects and disciplines. Skills such as research, summarising, paraphrasing, evaluative, argumentative, and disciplinary and academic English writing skills are expected in both assignment genres. Yet, the structures of these assignment genres largely depend on the assessment focus and subject requirements. Therefore, it is important for students to strictly follow the conventions for the structure, style and content of academic essays and critiques in different disciplines, subjects and at different academic levels. For reference, Table 1 below summarises some of the characteristics of critiques and essays.

Table 1: Characteristics of Critique and Essay

Genre family	Critique	Essay
Purpose	To demonstrate/develop an understanding of the area of study and the ability to evaluate and/or assess its significance	To demonstrate/develop the ability to construct a coherent argument and employ critical thinking skills
Stages / components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Descriptive account with optional explanation ➤ Evaluation with optional tests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Introduction ➤ Series of arguments ➤ Conclusion
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Academic paper review ➤ Business evaluation analysis ➤ Business/organisation evaluation ➤ Financial report evaluation ➤ Product/building evaluation ➤ Programme evaluation ➤ Project evaluation ➤ Review of a book / film / play / website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Challenge ➤ Commentary ➤ Consequential ➤ Discussion ➤ Exposition ➤ Factorial

(adapted from Nesi & Gardner, 2011, p. 38)

2. Planning your academic essays and critiques

You should go through the following stages when planning your writing task (McMillan & Weyers, 2007, p. 29-36):

- (1) Analyse an assignment by breaking the writing task down into component parts: the instruction (i.e. the word or a command that introduces the assignment), the topic (i.e. the context of the discussion to be constructed), the aspect (i.e. the specific focus within the wider context of the topic), and the restriction (i.e. the limitation of the scope of discussion), for example:

Task: 'Healthcare Wearable Devices for Seniors - Impacts, Strengths and Limitations, and Future Development Trends'

Instruction: (evaluate and review) – you may find these instruction words in the assignment guidelines, if they do not appear within the topic.

Topic: healthcare wearable devices.

Aspect(s): impacts, strengths and limitations, future development trends.

Restriction: senior/elderly people.

For reference, a list of instruction words adapted from McMillan and Weyers (2007, p. 33) is provided in Table 5 of the Appendix in this genre guide.

- (2) Explore the topic in detail by creating a concept 'map' of as many related aspects as possible, reconsidering the instruction and planning your initial response to the writing task. This requires the use of your own critical thinking skills before being influenced by any literature. You have to analyse your own thoughts on what is important in this subject or topic.
- (3) Search for and select relevant material for reading. Take notes and read with discrimination, as you begin the necessary reading. Your understanding of the topic will be deepened when you read from basic texts to more specialised literature, which contains detailed information and analyses.
- (4) Adopt a structural approach. You could possibly map out your response to the writing task by adopting one of the following approaches in Table 2. It is sometimes possible to use one of these approaches within another.

Table 2: The seven most common structural approaches and their characteristics for written assignments

Chronological	Description of a process or sequence. ➤ entirely descriptive
Classification	Categorising objects or ideas. ➤ particularly useful in scientific disciplines ➤ starting from broad generalisation to the more specific
Common denominator	Identification of a common characteristic or theme. ➤ e.g. the task 'Account for the levels of high infant mortality in developing countries' suggests a common denominator of deficiency or lack. Thus, the topic can be approached under headings like 'Lack of primary health care/education/literacy'.
Phased	Identification of short-/medium-/long-term aspects ➤ sequential, i.e. following one after another in an orderly pattern
Analytical	Examination of an issue in depth. ➤ possibly for complex issues ➤ particularly helpful in constructing essays, reports, projects and case studies, or when themes or trends cannot be identified ➤ involves these five elements – situation^problem^solution^evaluation ^recommendation (optional according to the task requirement)
Thematic	Comment on a theme in each aspect.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ themes are the identifying characteristics, e.g. social, economic or political factors; age, income and health considerations; gas, electricity, oil, water and wind power.
Comparative/contrastive	<p>Discussion of similarities and differences (often within a theme or themes).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ e.g. you approach the task by writing the positive and negative aspects for the major stakeholders: Method 1 is to state the positive aspects of each stakeholder followed by the negative aspects; Method 2 is to state both positive and negative aspects of the first stakeholder followed by both aspects of the next stakeholders.

(adapted from McMillan & Weyers, 2007, p. 96)

As mentioned in Table 2, an analytical approach is usually adopted in essays or critiques. You then have to filter the information and focus on what is important to your topic by considering the following points:

- the key actors in a sequence of events;
- the important or necessary factors that explain particular situations;
- the explanations that support a particular view;
- the patterns identified, such as short-, medium- and long-term factors.

You have to be able to construct an argument, support your argument with evidence, and strengthen your position by drawing on the useful and relevant information from the literature you have read. Counter-arguments may be required depending on the topic, subject and discipline. It is important to present a well-argued case to support the view that you favour and finally express in your writing. Once your response to the writing task has been developed, you have to present it within a well-structured, logical and evidential framework.

3. Structuring your academic essay and critique

Table 3 presents the basic three-part structure of academic essays and critiques and summarises the functions or 'moves' of each section. Note that your subject lecturer may require you to include or change some of the sections and moves according to different assessment purposes, subjects and disciplines.

Table 3: Typical components of academic essays and critiques, with notes on expected moves and content in each section

Sections	Expected moves and content
Introduction (obligatory)	<p>Explain briefly the context of the topic/thesis; Provide background information on the topic/thesis; Define the professional or major terms; Explain your plan for addressing the topic/thesis in the essay.</p>
Main body (obligatory)	<p>Address the topic-specific issues or arguments of the thesis; Provide an analysis/evaluation of all related aspects/factors/matters, and support your arguments with evidence; Critically review the aspects discussed to emphasise your viewpoint; (optional) Provide insights into possible improvement/solutions to the issues of the topic/thesis discussed or the topic-related entity of your study.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engineering essays/critiques of product evaluation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Describe the importance of topic-specific data; - Describe the topic-related needs of different members of public user groups or the use of the key products to address different topic-related issues; - Select a specific user group for the target study (i.e. Restriction); - Identify and evaluate the working principles and applications of (a) different type(s) of the key products to achieve the aim of the topic/task; - Critically review the strengths and limitations of the key products for the targeted user group; - Provide insights into possible improvement of the products of the target study.
Conclusion (obligatory)	<p>Restate the question or task and the important features of the topic/thesis; Summarise the main arguments or the specific evidence you have presented in support of your views; State your overall point of view of the topic/thesis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scientific and Engineering essays/critiques could have an extra move at the end of this section: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - State your expectations/implications/predictions of the future development of the topic or the area of the study.
References /Bibliography /Literature cited	<p>Include all the references referred to or cited in the text from reliable sources, such as journal articles, books and well-recognised websites, strictly following the required and appropriate style and format. Alphabetically or in numbered format based on the style required.</p>

4. Writing body paragraphs

Below is a sample paragraph for an essay on climate change.

<p><u>Climate change has a serious impact on human health.</u> The changing of temperature and rainfall creates the effect of climate change on epidemic diseases very considerably across regions. Chau et al. (2010) indicate that climate change has caused an increase in extreme weather events, including extreme heat and unusual rainfall, which are closely linked to the incidence of diarrheal diseases. Mellor, Kumpel, Ercumen, and Zimmerman (2016) believe that anthropogenic climate change may also increase the rate of diarrhea in communities with inadequate water supply, sanitation or hygienic facilities. They predict that the prevalence of diarrhea will be increased by 4.9 in 2011-2030. <i>Climate change increases the risk of diarrhea significantly.</i></p>	<p><u>Topic sentence</u></p> <p>Sub-points supporting the topic sentence, with citations and elaboration of ideas.</p> <p><i>Concluding sentence</i></p>
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Body paragraphs may follow this structure:

Topic sentence	An idea about the topic which supports your final conclusion or answer. This is the focus of the paragraph
Evidence	Information supporting the idea in the topic sentence
Explanation	Your explanation or interpretation of the evidence
Concluding sentence	A link back to your topic sentence or to your overall conclusion (your argument or answer to the question), or a link to the next body paragraph

Notice the use of **citation** in this body paragraph.

- Sentences which are the author’s own original ideas do not have a citation, e.g.:

The changing of temperature and rainfall creates the effect of climate change on epidemic diseases very considerably across regions.

- Sentences which have information and ideas from other sources include a **citation**:

Chau et al. (2010) indicate that climate change has caused an increase in extreme weather events, including extreme heat and unusual rainfall, which are closely linked to the incidence of diarrheal diseases.

In this example, the ideas come from a group of authors, the first one having the surname of Chau; full details about the article or book written by this group of authors would be listed in the References at the end of the essay.

5. Language for essays and critiques

Academic essays and critiques usually adopt an academic writing style, even though their format, content and presentation may vary for different to subjects and disciplines. Academic writing is about conciseness and clarity, so it is important to keep your language simple, grammatical and objective when you express ideas.

5.1 Using appropriate verb tense and form

Table 4 summarises the appropriate verb tense and form for different functions or moves used in academic essays and critiques.

Table 4: The use of verb tense and form for the moves or functions in academic essays and critiques

Functions/Moves	Suggested tense/form
Describing data, theories or results of both the author's and other scholars' studies	Past tense
Describing established knowledge and theories, or existing situations	Present tense
Describing illustrations	
Reviewing and evaluating the aspects of the topic	
Defining professional and major terms	
Describing theoretical background and technical features	
Reporting results or figures	
Restating the task of the topic in the Conclusion	
Providing a context for later discussion	Future tense
Addressing the writing plan in the Introduction	
Explaining the applications or functions of topic-related entities	
Predicting the future development of the topic or topic-related entity	
Making recommendations	Conditional and subjunctive forms
Expressing a condition	Conditional form

(Reproduced from ELC, 2018; McMillan & Weyers, 2007; Silyn-Roberts, 2013)

5.2 Hedging and assertive language

When you are not sure how correct your explanations, inferences or implications are, or there are more than one possible factor or variable, you should avoid being direct and definite. This is called hedging. The following are some ways of hedging:

- The use of modals like *may, might, can, could, would*
- The use of introductory verbs like *appear to be, believe, indicate, seem, suggest, tend, think*
- The use of adjectives and adverbs like *possible/possibly, probable/probably*

Some examples are shown below:

- [1] *They may think that it is weird to wear such wearable. Therefore, when the patients of anxiety disorder wear Muse, the public may be reluctant to approach the users of Muse because they look strange and weird.*
- [2] *... the reminders and feedback to daily experience, as well as the intellectual identity of pressure and stress seem considerate and customized for users' healthy improvement.*
- [3] *If the GV [has] great fluctuations in glucose level, this could also indicate that the potential danger of the patient has increased, in other words, even more severe diseases could develop as a result.*

5.3 Academic style in essays and critiques

- Use formal language with consideration of subject and disciplinary conventions - avoid contractions of verbs and nouns; do not overuse first- and second-person pronouns, unless reflective writing components are involved, and your subject lecturer allows.
- Use punctuation carefully – do not use exclamation marks and rhetorical questions
- Keep sentences short and digestible – aim for an average 20 to 25 words per sentence
- Avoid very long paragraphs – as a general rule: one main idea per sentence; one theme per paragraph, start a new one if there is a natural break in your writing; the first sentence of a paragraph is known as the topic sentence, and introduces the theme of the paragraph
- Use the passive instead of active voice, in order to focus on the action but not the actor who performed the action
- Use sentence structures like 'It is...', 'There is/are...' to introduce sentences, with the appropriate tense; or sentence structures like 'This (NOUN) is...' or 'These (NOUN) are...' for more specific points with a clear reference to the noun phrase appearing in the previous statements. For example:

The heart muscles undergo a periodic contract to pump blood through. It is divided into five periods, which are P wave, PR segment, QRS complex, ST segment and T wave. These segments constitute the generation and propagation of a single heartbeat.

- Change the verb in the sentence into a noun, and then rephrase the sentence. For example:
 ... *their physical performance can be improved much faster...*
 ... *there can be a much faster improvement of their physical performance...*

6. Useful resources

On the essay and critique genres:

<https://elc.polyu.edu.hk/cill/topics/essays.aspx>

<https://elc.polyu.edu.hk/.../unit%203%20Critiquing%20arguments.doc>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skEn61J6c8s>

On hedging:

<http://www2.elc.polyu.edu.hk/cill/icoso/Using%20Hedging%20in%20Writing/index.htm>

On thesis statement and topic sentence:

<http://icoso.hkbu.edu.hk/writing/specific-writing-genres-or-skills/scorm-thesis-statement-vs-topic-sentence/index.htm>

On referencing and citation:

<http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/Referencing/>

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/resources.html

References

Books and journal articles

McMillan, K., & Weyers, J. (2007). *How to write essays & assignments*. Harlow: Pearson.

Nesi, H., & Gardner, S. (2012). *Genre across the disciplines: Student writing in higher education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Silyn-Roberts, H. (2012). *Writing for science and engineering: Papers, presentations and reports*. London: Elsevier.

Project deliverables

English Language Centre. (2018). *Developing an open platform for writing support in the disciplines across the faculties: Genre analysis of academic essays*. (Unpublished project deliverable). The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong.

7. Appendix

Table 5: The most common instruction words for university assignments and exams

Instruction word	Definition – what you are expected to do
Account [give an]	Describe
Account for	Give reasons for
Analyse	Give an organised answer looking at all aspects
Apply	Put a theory into operation
Assess	Decide on value/importance
Brief account [give a]	Describe in a concise way
Comment on	Give your opinion
Compare [with]	Discuss similarities; draw conclusions on common areas
Compile	Make up (a list/plan/outline)
Consider	Describe/give your views on the subject
Contrast	Discuss differences/draw own view
Criticise	Point out weak/strong points, i.e. give a balanced answer
Define	Give the meaning of a term, concisely
Demonstrate	Show by example/evidence
Describe	Narrative on process/appearance/operation/sequence...
Devise	Make up
Discuss	Give own thoughts and support your opinion or conclusion
Evaluate	Decide on merit of situation/argument
Exemplify	Show by giving examples
Expand	Give more information
Explain	Give a reason for/say why
Explain how	Describe how something works
Identify	Pinpoint/list
Illustrate	Give examples
Indicate	Point out, but not in great detail
Justify	Support the argument for...
List	Make an organised list, e.g. events, components, aspects
Outline	Describe basic factors/limited information
Plan	Think about how to organise something
Report	Give an account of the process or event
Review	Write a report/give facts and views on facts
Show	Demonstrate with supporting evidence
Specify	Give details of something
State	Give a clear account of...

Summarise	Briefly give an account
Trace	Provide a brief chronology of events/process
Work out	Find a solution, e.g. as in a maths problem

(Adapted from McMillan & Weyers, 2007, p. 33)