

Sheffield  
University  
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# How To Be More Critical And Less Descriptive: A Student's Perspective

**Written by Dr Sarah Brooks and James Kenny**

1st Edition Critical Analysis Toolkit University of Sheffield Management School ©



# Welcome from The University of Sheffield Management School

There are many skills that are required in life and one of these is the ability to think critically. During both undergraduate and postgraduate studies, you will be asked to critically analyse and critically evaluate but you might receive feedback from a tutor which suggests that your work is too descriptive and not critical enough. In order to guarantee marks of over 60% in assignments and examinations, it is important to demonstrate a high level of critical awareness and this toolkit is designed to support that goal.

This Critical Analysis Toolkit (CAT) has been developed by the University of Sheffield Management School to provide you with a number of tools and techniques to help you think, read and write more critically. Although the toolkit is designed primarily to support your independent learning over time, it can be used as a quick reference guide for when you are developing assignments and revising for examinations.

The toolkit comprises four stages which can be mastered in any year of your university studies. Each stage is designed to give you the ability to demonstrate a greater awareness of critical analysis than in the previous stage. Furthermore, the ability to think, read and write critically will help you to solve problems more creatively, which is not only an academic skill, but also one of the top employability skills prized by employers.

We hope that you enjoy working through the Critical Analysis Toolkit and we welcome any feedback you have on how we can make it even better.

With warm regards

*The University of Sheffield Management School Education Team*

This toolkit has been made possible through generous funding from The University of Sheffield awarded to Dr Sarah Brooks. It has also been made possible through the support of Andrea Ward, Dr Alex Wright, Charlie Patterson (graduate) and Celia Anderson.

# Overview of this toolkit

The idea behind this toolkit was borne from discussions with students struggling with critical analysis. Driven by a strong desire to provide a simple way of supporting students, James Kenny, a final year undergraduate student and Dr Sarah Brooks developed a series of stages of development within this toolkit, each one designed to build new skills appropriate for the different stages of a student's development. The toolkit was written by James as if he were telling current students what he would have liked to have known if he were to have his time at university again.

# **Stage 1**

## Critical Analysis Toolkit

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# Introduction to Critical Analysis

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The first thing to note, your schooling up to university may have a totally different style of writing compared to that which is expected at university level. The main differences can be highlighted below;

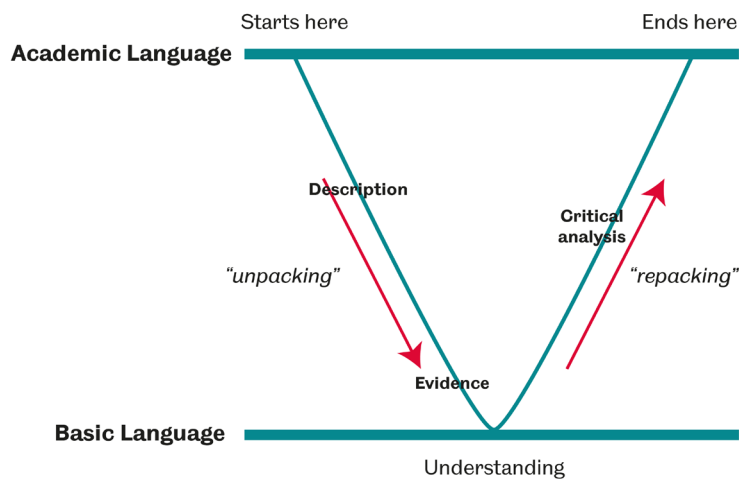
- Schools focus, generally speaking, on what is known and agreed on. Universities may use what is known and agreed on as their starting point, however, universities are principally concerned with what is not known and not agreed on. What is known and agreed on is **Descriptive**. *E.g.  $5 \times 5 = 25$  and the Battle of Hastings was in 1066 are both 'descriptions' in the sense that they restate facts.*
- If you are asked to critically analyse something, it means that you must consider and evaluate the claims made by the theorists, "experts", official bodies, journalists etc. that you have read, asking yourself if the basis of these claims are sound and whether they apply or are relevant to the situation you are examining.
- PEEL is not enough at university! PEEL is a commonly used acronym to structure arguments in a school essay. It stands for Point, Explain, Evidence, Link back to the question. However, this is only **half** the job at university. This is considered descriptive, and can not get you beyond a 2.2, there needs critical analysis to be incorporated.

**First thing is first,  
if you are not getting your desired grades at  
the start of first year... DO NOT WORRY.**

This means it is perfect for you to practice university style writing, understanding where you're going wrong and improve on this. This toolkit will be a referral guide, with useful tools, techniques and pointers on critical analysis, to help you achieve your desired grades.

# Semantic Wave

An incredibly helpful tool for structuring arguments, beyond PEEL, is the semantic wave. This really helps to structure arguments and can be applied to a wide range of academic situations. This wave represents the different stages of understanding and applying academic sources of information, as well as how you then apply these sources to your own academic work.



**PEEL is still valid here.**

1. You make your **Point** (where you start)
2. You then **Explain** your point (in the description),
3. Bringing in **Evidence**,
4. Then you **Link** back to the question showing understanding.

**However, as discussed, this is only half the job.**

To gain the desired 2.1 and above, there needs to be “repacking”, which is where the critical analysis comes in. Not just accepting the given argument and evidence, being critical and bringing in other theories that contradict the original argument and criticise it. Ideas are unpacked, evidence and examples are explored, then the ideas are repacked using your own words to summarise and connect. It is easy then to visualise how all your paragraphs fit together, and how the essay has a coherent connecting thread that runs through it.

Feedback from assignments may include “too descriptive” or “needs to be more critical”. This basically means you’ve spent too much time on the unpacking part, using up valuable words of your word count. Description is essential, to set the scene. However, as discussed, repacking is the first stage that we encourage university students to look at developing.

# Socratic Questioning

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Next to be explored in more detail, is how to get back up the repacking slope, and critically analyse. Many individuals struggle through university life to achieve the higher grades, due to the lack of knowledge on critical analysis, and failure to develop through university.

**This skill is a hugely important part of the university journey.**

Not only this, it's also widely recognised in employment, and is used on a daily basis. Furthermore, employers look for problem solving skills when assessing if you're the right fit for the job.

Developing critical analysis skills consequently improves this skill, as you consider every option, weigh it up effectively and improve decision making and problem solving.

To become critical, there is a tool called "Socratic Questioning" which is extremely helpful to assist with the repacking. Socratic questioning is a rigorous evaluation technique that can be used to test claims and assumptions. It is named after the Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, who encouraged his students to reach their own conclusions by questioning and examining ideas, rather than accepting ideas and information at face value.

### Seeking Clarification

- How does this relate to the topic?
- What else do you need to find out about the topic?

### Probing Assumptions

- What is the claim based on?
- Can the claim be checked or verified elsewhere?

### Probing Evidence

- What is the evidence or proof?
- What examples are provided?
- Are the evidence and examples valid, reliable and sufficient?

### Questioning a Viewpoint

- What are the alternative views or opinions?
- What are the strengths/weaknesses of the claim?

### Questioning Implications

- What might this mean in practice?
- What are the likely consequences?

### Questioning the Question

- Why is the question important?
- What other questions might also be relevant?



These questions allow you to ask yourself about what you have stated, to become critical and build out your points, to a university-accepted “Ends Here” via repacking.

A quick example using Socratic questioning:

## **What is the most effective leadership style on employee performance?**

Inceoglu et al., (2018) claim Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory of leadership is the most effective theory for understanding how leadership shapes employee performance.

This is a brief statement, with no critical analysis or evidence. Using the “What is the evidence or proof” question it might look like this:

Research found LMX produces better relationships with employees, which in turn improves performance and gives employees more autonomy and responsibility, improving their well-being (Martin et al., 2005).

Now using the “Are the evidence and examples valid and reliable” question it might look like this:

However, it's argued the studies lack validity due to limited research, with questions asked only leading to positive outcomes to support the claim, and therefore reliability suffers.

If we now look at “Are there any alternative views or opinions” question:

On the other hand, LMX can be seen to have a negative effect on employee performance, if some individuals see or perceive unequal resource distribution and injustice created (Hooper & Martin, 2008).

Finally, the “what might this mean in practice” question:

This implies that it's therefore difficult to assume a set style of leadership to achieve effectiveness, and according to this view, different styles affect individuals differently.

From the simple statement “Inceoglu et al., (2018) claim Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory of leadership is the most effective theory for understanding how leadership shapes employee performance”, using 4 Socratic questions, we have been able to build out our argument, which has resulted in using critical analysis and repacking the point.

These are relatively brief comments to give an idea, and points would need to be unfolded more than this, however it gives a good idea how Socratic questioning works in practice.

More information and advice about critical thinking is available from 301 Academic Study Skills by clicking on the following link. <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/301/study-skills> and searching for critical thinking.

# Key things to consider when critically analysing a claim

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As well as Socratic Questioning, the following pointers will help with your writing. Sometimes your analysis will be focusing on one particular text/author/claim. When conducting this analysis, there are several things to be mindful of, that will help you to create a well-rounded discussion of the topic:

- 1** Avoid introducing your ideas by stating “I think” or “in my opinion.” Keep the focus on the subject of your analysis, not on yourself. Identifying your opinions weakens them.
- 2** Always introduce the work. Do not assume that because your reader knows what you are writing about, you do not need to describe relevant theories or methods.
- 3** Other questions to consider: Is there a controversy surrounding either the passage or the subject which it concerns?
- 4** What is the overall value of the passage?
- 5** What are its strengths and weaknesses?
- 6** Support your argument with detailed evidence from the text examined. Do not forget to include quotes and paraphrases which are appropriately referenced.
- 7** Remember that the purpose of a critical analysis is not merely to inform, but also to evaluate the worth, utility, excellence, distinction, truth, validity, beauty, or goodness of something.
- 8** Your review should provide information, interpretation, and evaluation. The information will help your reader understand the nature of the work under analysis. The interpretation will explain the meaning of the work, therefore requiring your correct understanding of it. The evaluation will discuss your opinions of the work and present valid justification for them.

So far, we've looked at what critical analysis is and the difference between university writing and school writing. We have then brought in a technique to help structure points (Semantic Wave), and looked at a tool to improve critical analysis, and build out points (Socratic Questioning). Finally, we have introduced key points to consider when critically analysing.

# Employability

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Finally, we look to illustrate the importance of critical analysis and critical thinking not just in university, but moving into employment.

**Critical thinking is one of the transferable skills that you will develop at university but it is valued very highly amongst employers making it a very important one to focus on during your time at university.**

Recently, employers have stepped up in their search for certain skills when employing individuals.

For example, in psychometric testing and online testing for graduates, a main thing they look for is problem solving skills. This links heavily to critical thinking. By improving your critical thinking/analysis skill at university, this can boost your chances of passing these psychometric tests, and therefore getting employed.

We look more deeply around critical thinking in Stage 2, with different techniques to improve critical thinking (and therefore problem solving) in every day life, and taking critical analysis to the next stage.

# **Stage 2**

## Critical Analysis Toolkit

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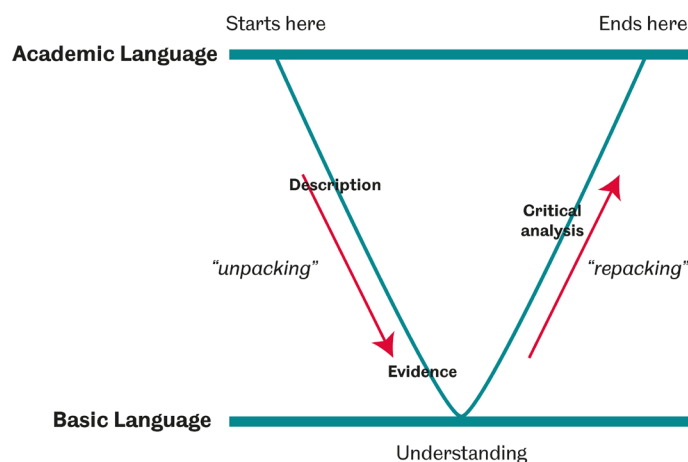
Students generally find moving from first year to second year of their degree difficult as there is an expectation to be more critical in their writing. This is also the case from undergraduate degrees to postgraduate degrees - as degree levels enhance the expectations for being more critical increases. It might be that you have feedback about not being critical enough in assessments in first year or in your early postgraduate assessments. Where in those early stages students can 'get away' with limited critical analysis because it's a relatively new concept that they will lack any experience in, for second year degree student it is essential to continue to build your critical analysis skills.

## Recap of Stage 1 of the Toolkit

Firstly, before we commence, let's recap on stage one.

We looked at;

The difference between school and university writing, demonstrated by the Semantic Wave of structuring points.



PEEL is not enough at university. You are encouraged to develop the next level of writing through the stages outlined in the toolkit.

We then looked at HOW to be critical, using a technique called Socratic Questioning.

### **Seeking Clarification**

- How does this relate to the topic?
- What else do you need to find out about the topic?

### **Probing Evidence**

- What is the evidence or proof?
- What examples are provided?
- Are the evidence and examples valid, reliable and sufficient?

### **Questioning Implications**

- What might this mean in practice?
- What are the likely consequences?

### **Probing Assumptions**

- What is the claim based on?
- Can the claim be checked or verified elsewhere?

### **Questioning a Viewpoint**

- What are the alternative views or opinions?
- What are the strengths/weaknesses of the claim?

### **Questioning the Question**

- Why is the question important?
- What other questions might also be relevant?

These questions allow the writer to 'not just accept the given' and explore different options/opinions, which therefore builds out points, using critical analysis.

We then used this in practice, using an example. (see Socratic Questioning, part of Stage 1 of the toolkit)

Then we moved on to look at the key things to consider when using critical analysis.

Finally, we looked from an employability perspective, emphasising the point that although it may be an extremely useful skill whilst at university, it does not stop there. Being critical and having problem-solving skills can benefit individuals moving to employment. For more information, look at the employability section in Stage 1.

## **Introduction to Stage 2 of the Toolkit**

Firstly, there's many aspects that are involved in criticality. The first thing we will explore is Critical Thinking. From this, we will explore what it actually is, and the techniques to be a critical thinker, including the process-driven technique, and the intuitive technique, with examples.

We will then look at sources, and where to look for different journal articles, textbooks etc. This is important as many individuals really struggle where to find journals that they can build arguments and points around.

Finally, we explore reflective writing, and how to improve this in your second year.

# Critical Thinking in Everyday Life

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Critical thinking is a skill which is extremely beneficial when used to write critical analysis, as it allows you to understand logical connections between ideas, identify the importance and relevance of ideas, and come to a sound justification of your beliefs.

When thinking critically, we are setting out actively to understand what is going on by using reasoning, evaluating evidence and thinking carefully about the process of thinking itself.

Let's now compare this to uncritical thinking. Uncritical thinking is simply where you accept whatever has been told to you. e.g – “Taylor’s theory of scientific management is the most effective theory to improve productivity”. An uncritical thinker would just accept this. However, a critical thinker would evaluate the evidence behind this (is there any literature to support this? Any evidence against this?), it would look at the other theories of increasing productivity, and compare and contrast. A critical thinker would approach with questionability.

## Questionability & Objectivity

Questionability is refusing to accept something at face value, and instead asking questions to understand the full picture. Critical Thinking skills usually involve trying to grasp a situation as objectively as possible. Objectivity is the understanding of a situation from more of a neutral perspective.

This means set aside your own personal feelings and preferences, discussing both sides of arguments, identifying difference of academic opinions/theories.

Although this is only realistically possible to a certain degree, due to our minds naturally being more biased towards certain things due to it being rooted in who we are, our life experiences and how we feel. However, there's always more than one side to an argument.

## There's two sides to thinking critically; the Intuitive Technique and the Process-Driven Technique.

Below are different examples of when the critical thinking techniques should be used.

# Intuitive Technique

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This technique is best used in a situation where there is a socially relevant and known topic being thought about. For example, the topic does not need much research, and ideas can be generated from this simple process. Let's take a look at this particular question, which is linked to the end of the previous section, discussing there always being two sides to an argument.

*“Smoking is good for you. Critically discuss.”*

First off, and the first impression, is that we think this statement is false. So how can we critically discuss it?

Intuitive technique is a discussion with ourselves/others, raising arguments and points that ultimately allows us to weigh up different arguments.

Asking ourselves can smoking be good for you?

- We can argue that some may think it is in terms of the fact that smokers believe it is a stress reliever. Stress results in poor well-being, which in turn, has a negative affect on work performance, and job satisfaction.

Now let's flip it, now looking how smoking can be bad for you...

- We know smoking is bad for you, as there's so many scientific tests to show the health effects it has on an individual. Arguing this point is a simple and heavily evidence-based argument.

Looking further into how it can be bad for you, are there any other ways it could be bad for you?

- The cost of smoking is fairly significant. The price is to discourage smoking, however because it's addictive, people will pay the money. This means that people spend a lot of money on smoking and the expense could put them in trouble financially.
- However, we could then argue that this only affects the poorer individuals, and not everyone...

Finally, could we argue another positive of smoking?

- We are presuming here that the smoking is smoking tobacco. One thing that has been proved to be a health benefit is cannabis. Many modern experiments have proved the medical benefits of smoking cannabis (Dillon, Gates & Swift, 2005).

Good	Bad
Stress Reliever	Health Effects on Individuals
Smoking Cannabis' medical benefits	Cost of smoking... but not everyone affected



# Process-Driven Technique

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## Critical Thinking Stairway

The Open University (2009) outline a useful 'stairway' to help students understand the skills in thinking critically.

The lower steps are the basics that support moving to the higher-level thinking skills that can underpin taking a critical approach.

1

### Process

Take in the information (i.e. in what you have read, heard, seen or done).

2

### Understand

Comprehend the key points, assumptions, arguments and evidence presented.

3

### Analyse

Examine how these key components fit together and relate to each other.

4

### Compare

Explore the similarities, differences between the ideas you are reading about.

5

### Synthesise

Bring together different sources of information to serve an argument or idea you are constructing. Make logical connections between the different sources that help you shape and support your ideas.

6

### Evaluate

Assess the worth of an idea in terms of its relevance to your needs, the evidence on which it is based and how it relates to other pertinent ideas.

7

### Apply

Transfer the understanding you have gained from your critical evaluation and use in response to questions, assignments and projects.

8

### Justify

Use critical thinking to develop arguments, draw conclusions, make inferences and identify implications.

# Sources – where to look

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Many people, like myself, really struggled when searching for arguments and wider arguments/ criticisms to particular theories. In this section, we aim to give pointers on where to actually look to build out your assignment.

## Use Journals within Journals

Firstly, and this may seem straightforward, however incredibly effective, is once you find a journal that introduces a theory/ argument you want to find and can use to build out one of your points, they usually use many references. Some references are useless, however others, which are more relevant to what you're looking at, won't be. With this, you should go down to the reference list, find out the name of the journal article, and find it using Star Plus. This will allow you to acquire a broader understanding around the point/ topic. In some cases, writers also look at potential criticisms for theories they have presented. From this, we're able to understand different sides of the theory/ argument, which really helps us "re-pack" our points.

From one useful journal, we're able to build out a full argument and use critical analysis in our assignment.

## Recommended Reading

The module guide always has recommended reading and core readings, with each lecture being from a particular chapter (that will state in the lecture slides for example). This is really useful, as the textbooks don't just give one view, they give multiple views. This is perfect when trying to develop arguments, using relevant theories and look to bring in different and contradicting theories. Remembering the first point, whatever they reference will usually be good quality material, which can be used to build more knowledge and a broader picture.


# Reflection

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Reflection can be described as “a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and appreciation” (Boud et al., 1985 p.19 as cited in Mann, Gordon & McLeod, 2007 p.597). It is a skill which can help you develop critical awareness.

In essence, reflection is about thinking about our own thinking (and practice). There are two types of thinking:

1. Thinking about what we know, what do we want and how to get there.
2. Thinking about what something means.




## Questions for reflection over a specific choice

*The following questions can help you generate different viewpoints.*

- Why did you make the choice you made?
- How did you feel?
- What have you enjoyed most about it and why?
- What have you enjoyed least about it and why?
- What were the other options? How did you feel about them?
- What have you learned about the process?
- What do others think about the options you had?
- Anything you would have done differently?

Asking these questions allows us to build a broader picture of the way we think about things. Doing this, you're not just looking at it from one view, you're considering other views, other options and therefore thinking critically about your own thinking.



## Daily self-reflection can help you become...

- A better critical thinker
- An effective writer
- Improve problem solving skills
- Help with employment

# **Stage 3**

## Critical Analysis Toolkit

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## Recap of Stage 2

Stage 2 looked to develop and delve deeper into criticality as a skill.

Firstly, we looked at critical thinking and how it can benefit individuals on a daily basis, and help when writing critical analysis (refer to Critical Thinking section of Stage 2). We then went on to look at techniques to think critically, the intuitive technique, with a written example, and the process-driven technique, again with an example.

We introduced the concept of reflection as a way of helping you develop different perspectives and finally we also explored how to discover the best possible literature to include in your work.

## Introduction to Stage 3

This stage of the toolkit will drill into more detail from what has been explored in Stage 2, from the “where to look” section. It includes the ABS list, which will be explained more later on. We will then look at building your argument, as a final year undergraduate student is required to develop and build different arguments in more detail and an improved level of critical analysis from previous years. We will also look at an employer’s view of the critical thinking skill, from Barclays. This includes how to develop the skill and how it’s used in the work place.

But first, we are going to explore different angles of critique. This includes 4 boxes, which will assist individuals when they “hit the wall” when looking to evaluate evidence or critically analyse a piece of work.

## Angles of Critique

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There are a number of ways in which an article can be critically analysed. These questions work in the same way as Socratic Questions, and look to achieve the same goal.

**Demographics – these are useful things to look at to see if a theory might be applied successfully in a different situation.**

- US or UK? East or West?
- Ethnicity
- Age
- Tenure
- Organisational level (employee or manager?)
- Language
- Gender
- Level of education

**Method – are the findings as robust as the authors claim?**

- Statistical method – correlation or causation?
- Sample size
- Sampling method
- Meaning of items
- Reliability and validity
- Descriptive or inferential statistics
- Socially desirable responses
- Reflexivity
- Bias
- Qualitative method

**Context – was the method appropriate for the aims?**

- Was it done with an appropriate sample? e.g. students or business people
- Would you have done it differently?
- What about timing?

**Practice – does the theory predict the behaviour?**

- Was the predicted behaviour observed in line with the theory?
- Does the theory explain the behaviour?
- What else might have been happening?

Let's take a look at an example, and using the above, we can pick a few of the questions to critically analyse.

The theory of career progression by Miller and Form (1951), briefly states that; individuals are moved through a 'career' by society which expects different things at different stages.

- preparatory work period – socialisation into work patterns (do as you are told, don't question, respect authority).
- initial period – young worker initiated into work through part-time employment
- trial period – first full-time job to next ...
- stable work period
- retirement period.

**Now let's look at the above angles of critique, and picking a few, let's critically analyse.**

**East or West?** – If this theory was mainly derived using Western thinking around careers, can this be transferable to Eastern culture? This may not be the way it works in other cultures.

**Gender** equality does not mean the same in all cultures. In many societies, gender refers to males and females, but in other societies and cultures, the definition is much larger, taking into account Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Intersex groups.

**Findings** – how were these findings formulated? For example, **Sample size and demographics.** The career presented by Miller and Form is what some consider as a straightforward, and desirable career, with no potential 'hiccups' or bumps, it appears to be a smooth career. This generally does not happen for many people.

**Does the theory explain the behaviour?** – Everyone's lives are different. The presented theory does not take into consideration many things. Life events could affect individuals' careers. The theory also, for example, does not consider people getting fired from their jobs. Another example of what the theory does not consider, is individuals having a change of career choice in life, and going back into education. One of the reasons for this could be that life was very different in 1950 and so the differences may be down to changes in society.

From the theory, we have already managed to briefly critically analyse using some of the boxes above. In an assignment we could really unpack and repack the theory using critical thinking techniques, and the above questions. (Don't forget Socratic questioning from Stage 1 toolkit!)

# Sources – where to look

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Many people, like myself, really struggle when searching for arguments and wider arguments/criticisms to particular theories. In this section, we aim to give pointers on where to actually look to build out your assignment. This was discussed in Stage 2, however, we will recap this, and go into more detail, looking at the ABS List.

## Use Journals within Journals

Firstly, and this may seem straightforward, however incredibly effective, is once you find a journal that introduces a theory/argument you want to find and can use to build out one of your points, they usually use many references. Some references are useless, however others, which are more relevant to what you're looking at, won't be. With this, you should go down to the reference list, find out the name of the journal article, and find it using Star Plus. This will allow you to acquire a broader understanding around the point/topic. In some cases, writers also look at potential criticisms for theories they have presented. From this, we're able to understand different sides of the theory/argument, which really helps us "re-pack" our points. From one useful journal, we're able to build out a full argument and use critical analysis in our assignment.

## Recommended Reading

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## **ABS List**

The ABS list is a guide to understand the different range and quality of journals in which business and management academics publish their research. It gives clear clarity on which journals to aim for, and what the best work in the particular field is. It's ranked from 4\* (the best and highest quality journal) then to 4, 3, 2, 1 (the lowest standard). When finding journals and articles that seem useful, it's good to check them against the ABS list. If they are of the higher-end quality, then theories and arguments used will also be of a higher standard, and therefore better to use in assignments. Going back to the first point, references used in the higher standard of journal, will also be of high standard. So by collecting a few articles together, and using the critical thinking process-driven technique, we are able to build out higher standards of points and a broader/ wider picture of the topic.

## **Building an argument**

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The most important voice to get across in your writing is your own; it is how you can show the reader what you are thinking, what your views are and how you have engaged critically with the topic being discussed. You can do this by building an effective and persuasive argument for your reader.

### **Structure your argument**

Guide your reader through your argument in a logical way. Think about what questions your reader might have. If you can answer these questions through your argument, it will seem more convincing.

You can then work towards a conclusion by weighing the evidence and showing how certain ideas are accepted and others are rejected. Your conclusion should make clear where you stand.

# Employers' View

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## Barclays

Barclays are very keen highlighting the importance of problem solving skills, and therefore critical thinking. They produced an advert in February 2018, emphasising “problem solving is a key skill to set you up for your future career”. They are very passionate about developing problem solving skills, through their ‘LifeSkills’ website. They recommend ‘stages to develop problem solving’ which is very similar to the “process-driven” technique of Critical thinking, in Stage 2 (Under the Critical Thinking section). Barclays 6 steps look like this:

1

### Identify

What’s the problem? Make sure you’re clear on what lies at the heart of the issue. Seeing what it looks like is the best place to start.

2

### Break it down

Everything looks scary whole. Split the problem into manageable chunks and address each piece separately before trying to reach a solution.

3

### Observe

Look for patterns. Things that keep happening could be causing the problem. Are you repeating behaviours that prevent you from moving forward?

4

### Think freely

At this point, take a step back and keep the big picture in mind. Pause, reflect and remind yourself of what you’re trying to achieve.

5

### Apply

When you think you might know what’s wrong, try a few different options. You won’t know whether something works unless you try it out.

6

### Evaluate

What have you learnt? What would you do differently?

The website has many problem-solving lessons and tips, such as a student sheet for problem solving, and many links to help with interviews, online assessments etc. to equip you in your search for a graduate role. Search Barclays LifeSkills for more.

# **Stage 4**

## Critical Analysis Toolkit

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A particularly important difference with this stage of the toolkit and is an expectation from all postgraduate students compared to undergraduate students is the level of detail. Students are required to go into more depth within their assignments /exams. Therefore, the level of critical analysis required becomes more apparent and important. Building on from stages of the toolkit 1, 2 and 3 we aim to delve deeper, presenting more tools, templates, techniques and tips to assist with those studying for a Master's Degree.

## Useful Templates When Writing

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When writing, individuals may feel they struggle with correct wording for their writing. So let's take the following question and answer as an example (Graff and Birkenstein, 2014):

### “Should tea-making be a skilled trade? Critically discuss.”

**In recent discussions of** tea-making, **a controversial issue** has been whether milk should be added to a cup of tea before adding tea or after adding tea (TeaDrinkersAnonymous, 2016). **On the one hand, some argue that** adding milk before the tea makes the tea weaker. **From this perspective,** adding milk first is likely to be attractive to those who don't like the taste of tea (TeaDrinkersRule, 2017). **On the other hand, however, others argue that** putting the milk in after the tea allows it to brew to its fullest extent (WeAreTeaPeople, 2019). **In the words of** Queenie, **one of this view's main proponents** “expensive tea bags should only be used by those who know how to treat them with respect” (2020, p.17). **According to this view,** those serving tea in cafes and restaurants should be trained to the same exacting standards as baristas serving coffee (TheTeaTrade, 2018). **In sum, then, the issue is whether** tea-making should become a skilled trade or an unskilled role to be carried out by anyone.

When you read the above example you could use the following template to deconstruct it. This template is helpful in providing some suggestions for how to write a paragraph which demonstrates critical analysis.

In recent discussion of...a controversial issue has been whether...On the one hand, some argue that...From this perspective...On the other hand, however, others argue that...In the words of .... one of this view's main proponents...According to this view...In sum, then, the issue is whether...

There are a number of reasons why using a template is helpful. The first reason is that “a controversial issue has been whether” implies you, as the writer, are accepting that there’s more than one side to this argument. You are, therefore, showing the marker that you’re going to critically analyse the issue. Next, we are introducing one side of the argument with the “on the one hand, some argue that...”, again implying that “some” is not “all” and there’s going to be other arguments, showing critical analysis. Then we bring in the other side of the argument, repackaging the point, using critical analysis.

So you might notice from the template, we’ve allowed ourselves to be critical, we’ve followed the semantic wave which has helped to structure our point. Looking further into this, and becoming even more critical, this piece of writing has assumed one thing. That everyone has milk with their tea. There’s various teas i.e. Green tea, flavoured tea, or even black tea which do not require milk. Therefore, we could add this in and become even more critical.

## Argument Building and Mapping

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For a postgraduate student, building and mapping arguments becomes more important, as you’re encouraged to include more of your own voice, and opinion. The most important voice to get across in your writing is your own; it is how you can show the reader what you are thinking, what your views are and how you have engaged critically with the topic being discussed. You can do this by building an effective and persuasive argument for your reader.

Arguments therefore contain mainly, **two** things.

1. A Conclusion – What am I trying to persuade the reader to accept?
2. Reasons - How am I trying to persuade the reader?

Now, let’s break the two down.

# Conclusions

Every postgraduate student should know what a conclusion is. Your conclusion, and a solid conclusion, should be clear, concise and persuasive to the reader.

An effective exercise, once you've done all your reading and research, is to write down this question;

*What is my conclusion?*

Then, in a few sentences, answer this question. Remember, it needs to be clear, concise and persuasive. If you are then happy with it, and you are happy that this is what you want to persuade the reader to accept, this can then form the basis of your final conclusion at the end of your assessment/exam.

# Signalling

How can I best signal to the marker that I am trying to do the sorts of things that demonstrate independent critical reasoning?

Examples:

- 'Consideration of these sources leads to the conclusion that ...'
- 'In conclusion, the analysis demonstrates that ...'

# Reasons

You cannot have a conclusion without reasons. Remember, conclusions identify what you want to persuade the reader of. Reasons are how you aim to persuade the reader.

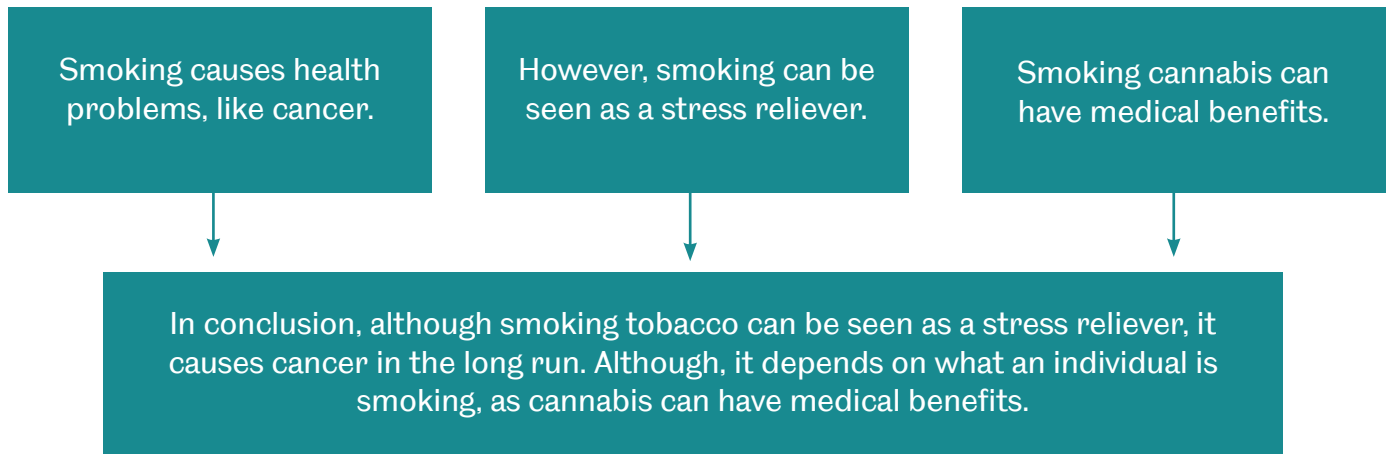
A good way to develop reasoning skills and portray high reasoning in assessments is by **argument-mapping**. The basic structure is;



This in itself enables you to critically analyse arguments effectively. You can pick out the main elements of the argument and reach a judgement on whether there are sufficient reasons, whether they are relevant and whether they are sufficiently persuasive.

## Example

Let's look at an example question. "Smoking is bad for you. Critically discuss."



To develop our arguments further, and bring in a technique we should be very familiar with by now, we will add another layer to the argument map. We try to provide **evidence** for the reasons. We can use argument maps to **evaluate and critique** the strength of an argument. This can point out hidden or unexplained assumptions or outline where we need to see further evidence to be better persuaded. To do this, we can use Socratic questioning.



From the original statement “Smoking is bad for you”, many individuals take this as a given. However, through argument-mapping and Socratic questioning, we’ve broken it down, allowed ourselves to think critically about the statement, brought in alternative views and critically analysed, and even broken down the question and its potential meaning (i.e. Smoking could mean numerous things, e.g. cannabis smoking).

Argument-mapping, therefore, allows us to analyse the argument, by breaking it down into different reasonings. It then allows us to be critical and evaluate the different reasons, through the Socratic questioning and adding on a third layer. It also allows us to bring together different sources of information into a single narrative or argument. Maps allow us to see how we are integrating diverse information into a single argument.

## Including your own voice in your writing

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Your voice will emerge through your discussion, interpretation, and evaluation of the sources. Here are some ways you can establish your voice in your writing:

1. Make your unattributed (not referenced) assertion at the start of paragraphs followed by evidence, findings, arguments from your sources to show where your ideas have come from.

**Example:**

“To date there is no well-established tool to measure divided attention in children. Current methods used to assess divided attention usually involve a variation of the Cognitive Performance Test (CPT) with an additional task included e.g. counting or listening to auditory stimuli (Salthouse, 2003).”

2. Explicitly tell your reader what the connections are between sources.

**Example:**

“Smith (2009), however takes a different approach...”

3. How strong your agreement/disagreement/cautious agreement with sources.

**Example:**

“Smith’s (2009) findings show a clear...A serious weakness with this argument is...The research suggests...”

You can also use verbs to show your agreement or disagreement with other authors’ arguments.

**For example:**

“Stevenson (2015) correctly identifies...”

“Stevenson (2015) fails to consider...”

“Stevenson (2015) reveals...”



# Reflexivity

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An advanced form of reflection is reflexivity. It shows that you understand how people and events have an ability to impact the world around them. It is an important concept to take into account whilst you are doing your MSc dissertation.

When applying it to yourself, practical reflexivity is a form of existential questioning. It is a questioning of one's self and can take place in the moment of action or retrospectively. For example, how did your study design shape the outcome of the study? Practical reflexivity allows us "to understand ourselves, our ways of relating to others, and how to participate in our social world" (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004, pp. 35-36). It allows us to choose who to be, how to act and speak. Through the questioning of one's beliefs and assumptions, one is challenged to consciously take into account how these beliefs and assumptions affect how one relates with others in one's day-to-day life (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004). By showing that you understand who you are, how you see the world and how your view might be different from others, you have an opportunity to show a deep critical understanding of events that take place. If you can also then show how your view affects others or shapes what takes place, this is an excellent way to evidence criticality.

You can also use reflexivity to consider what might be happening in situations in which you are an observer.

For example, a manager is in their office and an employee comes to talk to them. It is 5pm and the manager senses that the employee is upset. The manager really wants to go home because it's been a long day. The manager decides to hide in their office until the employee has gone away and then sneak out the back door. The day after the manager hears from others that the employee has called in sick because they are stressed by a situation which occurred the day before. On learning more about the situation, the manager realises that they could have solved the problem there and then, relieving the employee of a sleepless night.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What could the values and beliefs of the manager and employee be?
- What has been the manager's impact on the employee?
- What has been the subsequent impact of the manager and the employee on the business?
- How does this situation make you feel as an observer?

When demonstrating reflexivity, there should be no judgment attached to how the manager acted or how the employee acted. There is no right and wrong. It is simply about showing that you understand the wider impact and that everything is part of a system - nothing takes place in isolation.

## Sources – Where to look – Google Searching

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Many people, like myself, really struggled when searching for arguments and wider arguments/criticisms to particular theories. In this section, we aim to give pointers on where to actually look to build out your assignment. For postgraduate level, the quality of journals needs to be of a better nature. Unlike undergraduate level, the journals/books have to be of the top quality nature, and therefore, your arguments and evidence can be that of a higher quality.

### ABS List

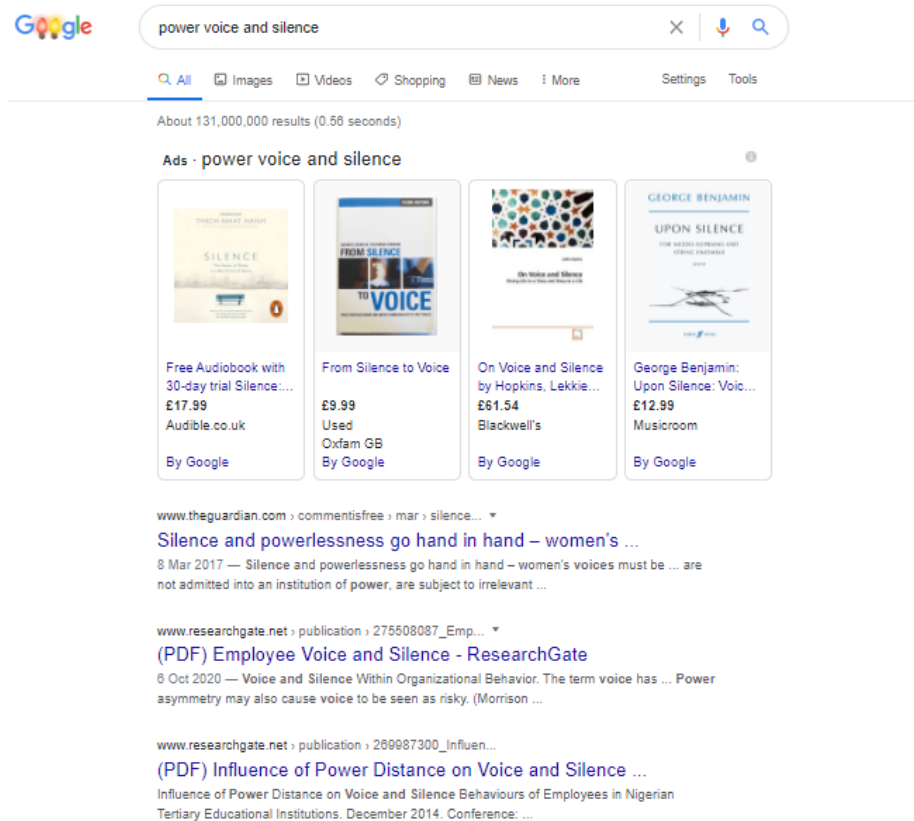
The ABS list is a guide to understanding the different range and quality of journals in which business and management academics publish their research. It gives clear clarity on which journals to aim for, and what the best work in the particular field is. It's ranked from 4\* (the best and highest quality journal judged on reliability, validity and theoretical contribution) then to 4, 3, 2, 1 (the lowest standard because they do not necessarily make a theoretical contribution). When finding journals and articles that seem useful, it's good to check them against the ABS list. If they are of the higher-end quality, then theories and arguments used will also be of a higher standard, and therefore better to use in assignments. Going back to the first point, references used in the higher standard of journal, will also be of high standard. So by collecting a few articles together, and using the critical thinking process-driven technique, we are able to build out higher standards of points and a broader/ wider picture of the topic.

# Where to find the ABS List?

The easiest way to find it, is to Google it. It's compiled by the Chartered Association of Business Schools. The most up-to-date version should come up on their website.

## *Important Note – Evaluating results generated by Google and Google Scholar*

Google Scholar will give you only academic references, whereas Google will give everything. As an example, when inputting the words Power, Voice and Silence, we can illustrate the difference. Google will signpost you to lots of non-academic material (newspaper articles, websites etc.) which you may find helpful, to learn more about the topic. However, these references are unlikely to be suitable for an academic assignment. On the other hand, Google Scholar will provide you predominately with academic references. Your job is to work out which references are the best quality, and decide if they are helpful for your argument.



An example of a Google result is above.

Google Scholar

power voice and silence

Articles About 1,300,000 results (0.07 sec) My profile My list

Any time Since 2020 Since 2019 Since 2016 Custom range...

Sort by relevance Sort by date

include patents  include citations

Create alert

**Speaking *silence*: The social construction of *silence* in autobiographical and cultural narratives** [PDF tandfonline.com](#)  
*R Fivush* - *Memory*, 2010 - Taylor & Francis  
 ... *Silence* as loss of *voice* and loss of *power* is virtually always seen as negative. In ... oneself. From this perspective, when *power* gives *voice*, *silence* is oppressive, but when *power* gives *silence*, *voice* is justification. Master narratives ...  
 ☆ [Cited by 335](#) [Related articles](#) [All 10 versions](#)

**[book] *Voice and silence* in organizations** [PDF utoronto.ca](#)  
*J Greenberg, MS Edwards* - 2009 - books.google.com  
 ... in a relatively less powerful position and managers being in a relatively more powerful position ultimately discourages upward expressions of *voice*. They also contend that these differences in *power* facilitate and exacerbate two perceptions that drive *silence* among employees ...  
 ☆ [Cited by 190](#) [Related articles](#) [All 4 versions](#)

***Voice* lessons: Tempered radicalism and the use of *voice* and *silence*** [PDF wiley.com](#)  
*WED Creed* - *Journal of Management Studies*, 2003 - Wiley Online Library  
 ... Current thinking about *silence* and *voice* in organizations shows a much greater sensitivity to the complex interplay of *power*, pluralism and agency in organizations (eg, Ashford, 1998; Creed and Scully, 2000; Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Meyerson and Scully, 1995) ...  
 ☆ [Cited by 103](#) [Related articles](#) [All 6 versions](#)

***Silence* and the dynamics of *power***  
*EW Morrison, NB Rothman* - *Voice and silence in organizations*, 2009 - books.google.com  
 In this chapter, we seek to unpack the role of *power* in explaining why employee *silence* is so common. The theme of *power* has been an undercurrent in the *silence* literature. However, the underlying psychological mechanisms by which *power* operates have not ...  
 ☆ [Cited by 134](#) [Related articles](#)

An example of a Google Scholar search is above.

Clearly, Google Scholar provides more relevant responses for an academic assignment. The next job is to work out which is the best quality journal article to use to show a good understanding of the topic. Do this by looking at the name of the journal, and referring back to the ABS list. Certainly for a postgraduate, the reference list should mainly comprise 3 or 4\* journals.

# Useful Sources of Information

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## Stage 1

Edge Hill University: Critical Analysis Explained [online]. *Edge Hill University*.  
<https://www.scribd.com/document/251505347/AW-Guide-Critical-Analysis-Explained>

Hooper, D.T. and Martin, R., (2008). Beyond personal leader–member exchange (LMX) quality: The effects of perceived LMX variability on employee reactions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(1), pp.20-30.

Inceoglu, I., Thomas, G., Chu, C., Plans, D., and Gerbasi, A., (2018). Leadership behavior and employee well-being: An integrated review and a future research agenda. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 29(1), 179-202.

Martin, R., Thomas, G., Charles, K., Epitropaki, O. and McNamara, R., (2005). The role of leader member exchanges in mediating the relationship between locus of control and work reactions. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 78(1), pp.141-147.

Southeastern Louisiana University: Critical Analysis [online] *Southeastern Louisiana University*.  
<https://www2.southeastern.edu/Academics/Faculty/elejeune/critique.htm>

The University of Sheffield., 301 Academic Skills Centre – Critical Thinking [online]. *University of Sheffield*. Available from <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/301/study-skills/everyday-skills/critical-thinking#tab02>

## Stage 2

Chatfield, T., (2018). *Critical Thinking*. London: Sage.

FutureLearn., (no date). Learning Online: Studying and Reflecting. [online]. *FutureLearn*. Available from:  
<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/reflecting-and-sharing>

Open University., (2009). Critical thinking: online guidance. [online]. *Open University*. Available from: <http://www2.open.ac.uk/students/skillsforstudy/critically-processing-what-you-read.php>

SkillsTeamHullUni., (no date). Critical Writing. [online]. *YouTube*. Available from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btUY6jTt2Ys&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btUY6jTt2Ys&feature=emb_logo)

### **Stage 3**

Barclays Life Skills., (2019). 6 Stages of Problem Solving [online]. *Barclays Life Skills*. Available from <https://barclayslifeskills.com/i-want-to-develop-my-skills-for-work/school/6-stages-of-problem-solving>

Miller, D. C., & Form. D.H., (1951). *Industrial Sociology*. New York:Harper Brothers

University of Leeds., (no date). Academic Writing [online]. *University of Leeds*. Available from [https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic\\_writing/8](https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic_writing/8)

### **Stage 4**

Cunliffe, A.L. and Easterby-Smith, M., (2016). From reflection to practical reflexivity: Experiential learning as lived experience. In Reynolds, M. and Vince, R, (eds.), *Organizing Reflection*. Oxon:Routledge. pp.30-46.

Graff, C., and Birkenstein, G., (2014) *They say/I say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (3rd ed). USA: Norton & Company Inc.

University of Leeds., (no date). Academic Writing.[online]. *University of Leeds*. Available from: [https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic\\_writing/8](https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic_writing/8)

# Conclusion

Congratulations! You have reached the end of the Critical Analysis Toolkit. By now, you should be reading, writing and thinking more critically and you should be seeing a sustained improvement in your assignment and examination results. Remember that critical analysis is an important employability skill and we are confident that the time you have invested in mastering the tools and techniques in this toolkit will provide you with an excellent start to your career. Good luck with your future endeavours. We wish you the best of luck.

With warm regards

*The University of Sheffield Management School Education Team*