

Magnificent Sunrise: Critical Writing Explained

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Critical reading, critical use of texts, critical writing ... it all seems so, well, CRITICAL and it is *critical* to get it right.

Being critical is not a problem for most people but criticality in academic studies can be quite elusive for beginning academics. Descriptive pieces of work are far more commonplace but, regardless of the amount of time, effort and energy put into writing a descriptive assignment, it will not be easy to catch achieve those top marks on an Early Childhood degree.

The aim of this short article is to highlight to Early Childhood and Foundation Degree students the difference between critical and descriptive writing, that they may surpass their own 'personal best'.

'Describing' brings the topic to life for the reader. Through descriptive writing the reader 'experiences' the writer's experience. However, an ability to describe a subject well does not necessarily require understanding of it. For example, I describe thus an experience enjoyed whilst travelling to work one morning, '... the magnificence of the sunrise as it mocks the billowed clouds of industrial pollution'. But I show no *understanding* of what the sun is, why it rises, where, when or how it rises nor its impact on the earth, people around me or even my mood. When you read my work you find no evidence that I understand 'pollution', its causes and effects, or the policies in place to prevent, control or even encourage it. You may assume that because I don't *show* understanding I don't *have* understanding.

When marking *your* work, I am looking for *evidence* of understanding more than an ability to describe – and that raises the bar higher (into 50s marks). By the time you get into the 60s your understanding appears in writing as *clear and objective*. It becomes clear and objective when you have a real grasp of the issues. To rewrite the 'magnificent sunrise' description in a way that shows *clear and objective* understanding, I would need to read widely about the how, when, why, what of the sun and related issues. Questions will arise in my head as I read vignettes, journal articles and book chapters on each and a new understanding will form which I am soon ready to put down on paper. Usually for me, this means doodles and diagrams, flow charts, concept maps, then – and only then – sentences and paragraphs.

You will have your own preferred way of recording your thoughts on paper. Interestingly, thoughts and knowledge seem to grow and evolve as you write. Talking to someone about your thoughts encourages growth too. It is a bit like putting ideas into a 'grow bag'. So now I'm in the 60s but I want to be in the 70s with my marks. Here's where it's all becoming rather *critical*.

To *write* critically we need to *read* critically. Now the 'new understanding' that formed in the 60s becomes one that evidenced my ability to make judgements about the texts I have read. Do I agree with the author who disagrees with the researcher? Why? What is *my* view on the issues? Where and how did the researchers get evidence to support their thesis or argument? What is my argument? How is my argument backed up or substantiated?

Want to be more critical?

Read another approach to developing a reflective and critical reading and writing style by one of our members on the TACTYC website <http://www.tactyc.org.uk/pdfs/Reflection-Appleton.pdf>.