



WHY DO WE CRITIQUE LITERATURE?



Evaluating literature is a process of analysing research to determine its strengths and weaknesses. This is an important process as not all published research is reliable or scientifically sound. Arguments and the interpretation of data can be biased or poorly justified. We use **critical thinking skills** to determine whether we have reason to trust what we see and evaluate how reliable something is.

Therefore, critically evaluating literature and ideas involves:

- Identifying other people's positions, arguments, and conclusions
- Weighing up opposing arguments and evidence fairly
- Recognising misrepresentation or misinterpretation of data
- Being able to identify false or unfair assumptions
- Recognising appropriate research methods and design
- Drawing conclusions about whether conclusions are valid and justifiable, based on good evidence and logical reasoning

It's important to note that being critical doesn't necessarily mean being negative: critical evaluation means identifying both **strengths** and **weaknesses** in information.

COMMON TYPES OF ACADEMIC LITERATURE

- **Argumentative or discussion-based articles:** present an author's ideas, arguments, or interpretations based on claims, supporting premises, and evidence from literature.
- **Research articles:** aim to demonstrate how research has been conducted and what it has found. They will have a clear aim and hypothesis, outline the methodology, and show and discuss results.
- **Academic Monographs:** a single-authored book published by an academic publishing house.
- **Edited Collections:** a multi-authored book about a particular subject, published by an academic publishing house.
- **Grey Literature:** documents and material that is published in non-commercial form, including government reports, policy statements, conference proceedings, geological surveys, fact sheets, maps, research reports, newsletters and more.



EVALUATING THE TYPE OF SOURCE

The first place to start is to determine whether the source is appropriate for your needs.

Some questions to ask yourself include:

- **What type of source is it?** Is it peer-reviewed? Is it from a database relevant to your discipline? If it's from a website, is it trustworthy and appropriate? Who is the intended audience?
- **Where is it from?** Is it a country or context similar to your own? Will the findings be applicable?
- **Who wrote it?** Are they an expert in their field? Have they published on the subject before?
- **When was it written?** Is it a seminal or ground-breaking work? Was it published within the last 5-10 years? How much has changed in your field since its publication?



CRITIQUING ARGUMENT

Most academic articles or books will put forward a claim or an argument of some kind. This might be explicit, such as those in argumentative papers, or the authors might use argumentative techniques in their discussion of data and results.

When critiquing an argumentative article or book, which do not follow a research report structure, you will need to critique **how the argument is made**. Some critical questions to ask yourself about the argument include:



- Does the author clearly state their argument or thesis?
- Does the author provide reasonable premises (supporting points) that will support their argument?
- Is the theoretical position or framework justified and does it seem appropriate?
- Does the author acknowledge assumptions or bias in their argument? If not, can you identify bias or assumptions?
- Is each supporting premise supported with credible and viable evidence?
- What literature are they drawing on? Have they overlooked anything?
- Does the author use problematic argument techniques such as slippery slopes or logical fallacies?
- Are any key issues overlooked?
- Does the author make any assumptions or generalisations?
- Does each point clearly and logically lead to the author's conclusion?

CRITIQUING RESEARCH ARTICLES

When critiquing research articles, it is useful to ask yourself questions about the purpose of each component of the article, and whether it achieves that purpose.

THE TITLE

The title should be descriptive enough to give you a clear idea about what the research deals with.

Ask yourself:

- Does the title clearly indicate what the research is about, without being extremely long or too short to be informative?
- Are the variables or theoretical issues and any relationships between them stated?

THE INTRODUCTION

The introduction should orientate the reader to the study by introducing the question/problem, introducing the background of the study, and clearly stating the background and rationale of the research.

Ask yourself:

- Is the research question/problem researchable?
- Is the problem important enough to justify the research?
- Is the background of the research relevant to the research question?
- Is the aim clearly stated and focused on one main idea?
- Do you have a clear idea of what the study tried to achieve?



THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review should give an overview of the available literature which frames or surrounds the problem being researched. It should look at the similarities and differences between the literature, as well as the strengths and limitations. It should illustrate how the current study fits into the existing framework of research or how it fills a gap in the literature.

Ask yourself:

- Is the literature review broad, yet focused on the issue?
- Is there historical as well as contemporary material to put the area of study into a context?
- Is there convincing evidence to support assertions?
- Does it fairly represent opposing views?
- Does the literature review use a theoretical framework?
- Does it reveal gaps in the knowledge which this research will fill?

THE METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This section should clearly state what the researcher did and how it was done, allowing the reader to evaluate the methods used, the consistency, the reliability of the study, its validity and whether it could be replicated. As a minimum, there should be a brief synopsis of the research approach taken.

Ask yourself:

- Is there a **clear rationale** for the chosen research approach, methods and/or instruments used?
- Is the **research method appropriate** for the research question?
- Was the **collection of data appropriate** for the research question?
- Was process of obtaining **ethics clearance** and how ethical standards were maintained clear?
- Is there enough information concerning the **participants**? Do they represent the research well? If any participants did not complete the study, was this explained? Were details of major demographic information made evident, e.g., geographical location, gender, age?
- Were any **instruments or apparatus** identified and described? If any apparatus were obtained or donated by a commercial source, was it stated?
- Were any **control features** in the research design stated?
- Are any **limitations** of the study discussed?
- Were any ambiguous terms used?

DATA ANALYSIS (also known as the 'Results and Findings' section)

This section should contain a summary the main results and findings in enough detail so that the reader can understand how the conclusions have been reached. In qualitative research, illustrative samples of data are frequently used. In quantitative data, individual scores or raw data are not discussed. All relevant data, including that which runs counter to the hypothesis, should be discussed. The reader should be made clear as to what the data provided means and why it is important.

Ask yourself:

- Were the steps involved in the data analysis explained and the strategies justified?
- Was the data analysis rigorous enough to substantiate the claims?
- Were all data taken into account? If not, why not?
- Are the presented results relevant to the research question?
- Do the tables and graphs (if any) make the data analysis clearer?



THE DISCUSSION

In this section, the implications of the research results are evaluated and interpreted in relation to the research question. This is where the findings and the selected theoretical framework come together. The discussion should contain a clear statement of support or otherwise of the original hypothesis or research question. The results of this study and those of other studies should be discussed, and any suggestions for improvements or further research are made here.

There should be no repetition of points already made in other sections.

Ask yourself:

- Have the results been interpreted in relation to the research question and aims?
- Have the results been discussed with reference to the research question, hypothesis (if applicable) and theoretical or conceptual frameworks?
- Have conclusions and/or recommendations been appropriately drawn from the data analysis?
- Did the researcher highlight the most important results?
- Have the results been used to support or refute the results of other studies?
- How relevant and useful are the results to practice?

CONCLUSION

This section should summarise the main points and indicate the usefulness of the research. It should not include any new information. Areas for future research may be suggested.

Ask yourself:

- Were the main points drawn out?
- Were fresh insights or a new perspective on the topic demonstrated?
- Have any recommendations been made based on the research?
- Were there any suggestions for future research?

REFERENCE LIST OR BIBLIOGRAPHY

This should contain a list of all sources referred to in the article (in the case of a reference list) or all sources actually accessed in preparation for the article (in the case of a bibliography).

Ask yourself:

- Are all sources cited clearly and with full bibliographic details provided?
- Has a wide range of works in the field been referred to?
- Does the list contain both seminal (classic) and more contemporary literature?

REFERENCES:

Ryan, F., Coughlan, M. & Cronin, P. (2007). Step-by-step guide to critiquing research. Part 2: qualitative research, *British Journal of Nursing*, 16(12), 738-743.

Stockhausen L. & Conrick, M. (2002). Making sense of research: a guide for critiquing a paper. *Contemporary Nurse*, 14(1), 38-45.