

What is Critical Analysis?

Writing that makes important observations, and which explains the meaning and significance of those observations by using peer-reviewed evidence and/ or replicable research practices. Such writing can also provide informed and original solutions for complex problems.

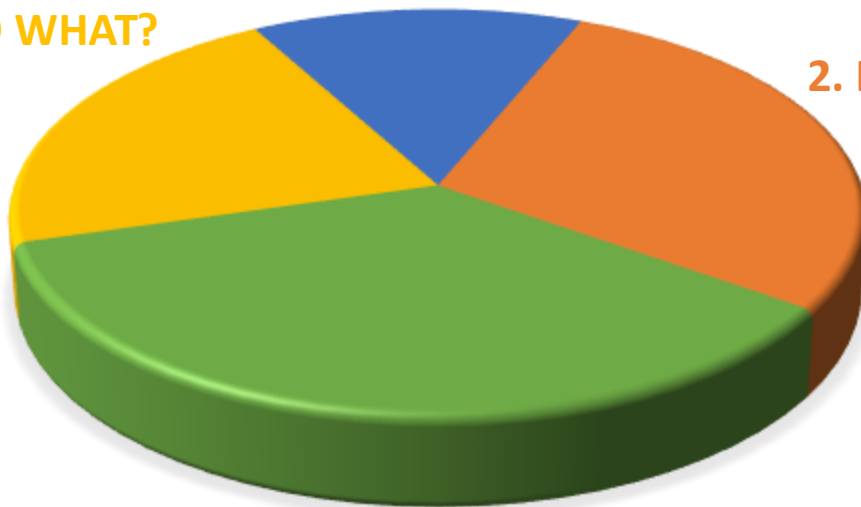
How Do I Conduct a Critical Analysis?

1. WHAT?

WHAT is happening? Identify a prevalent and observable trend, pattern, phenomenon, or paradigm. This observation is the cornerstone of our ideas.

4. SO WHAT?

SO WHAT that this is happening? Explain the consequences of this observable trend, pattern, phenomenon, or paradigm, and why it (and research about it) is important more generally. This makes the topic more applicable beyond the scope of just the assignment.



2. HOW?

HOW is it happening/ HOW do you know? Gather and synthesise evidence from peer-reviewed scholarship, as well as valid quantitative and qualitative data, which supports the observation. This helps to refine the scope of the topic and to prove our ideas.

3. WHY?

WHY is it happening? Analyse the potential meaning of the observable trend, pattern, phenomenon, or paradigm. You can use peer-reviewed research to help you with your interpretations. This deepens our understandings of the topic.

A Checklist for Critical Analysis

1. **WHAT:** Make an observation.
2. **HOW:** Prove and map your observation through evidence/data.
3. **WHY:** Interpret the meaning of your observation.
4. **SO WHAT:** Explain the importance of your observation.

Example 1

Contemporary political discourse is witnessing an increasing polarisation of public opinion along ideological lines, particularly on social media platforms. Studies have shown that social media users are more likely to engage almost exclusively with content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, leading to the formation of "echo chambers" (Cinelli *et al.*, 2021). This phenomenon is also evidenced by large-scale data analyses demonstrating that individuals cluster in like-minded communities and consume homogenous information, reinforcing group identity and intensifying partisan attitudes (Bail *et al.*, 2018). Prominent cultural theorists such as Sunstein (2017) suggest that this behaviour is driven by both algorithmic curation and psychological tendencies toward confirmation bias. Building on the work of Marwick (2011), this dissertation suggests that such polarisation is connected to the performative nature of online identities; individuals often express more extreme views in digital spaces as a way to signal loyalty to their in-group and gain social capital. Thus, polarization is not only a product of algorithms and cognitive biases, but also of social incentives embedded in digital environments that reward ideological signalling and public displays of group affiliation. The broader significance of this trend lies in its impact on democratic processes, as it fosters misinformation, erodes mutual understanding, and undermines the deliberative foundations essential to pluralistic societies.

WHAT?

HOW?

WHY?

SO
WHAT?

Example 2

Longitudinal studies across North America, the UK, and Australia have documented significant increases in psychological distress among students over the past decade (Evans *et al.*, 2018). These trends are part of the growing phenomenon of declining student mental health in higher education, which is particularly marked by rising rates of anxiety and depression among university populations. Without systemic responses, worsening mental health may impair student outcomes, widen achievement gaps, and challenge universities' capacity to foster inclusive and supportive learning environments. Researchers attribute this trend to a convergence of factors, including academic pressure, financial insecurity, social isolation, and the pervasive influence of digital technologies (Watkins *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, I argue that neoliberal reforms in education – emphasising performance metrics and competition – have exacerbated student stress and undermined collective well-being.

HOW?

WHAT?

SO
WHAT?

WHY?

Exercise 1

Read the short paragraph below. Can you identify which aspect of critical analysis is missing?

(**WHAT**, **HOW**, **WHY**, or **SO WHAT**).

While the global rise of “green gentrification” has created positive environmental upgrades such as parks, bike lanes, and sustainability projects, it has also resulted in increased property values and the displacement of lower-income residents. Empirical studies have traced this pattern in cities like New York, Barcelona, and Seoul, showing that neighbourhoods receiving ecological improvements often experience demographic shifts and rent hikes shortly thereafter (Anguelovski *et al.*, 2019). While aiming to create healthier urban environments can be beneficial, it is essential to recognise that these initiatives can deepen spatial inequality and exclude the very communities they intend to benefit, challenging the just and inclusive goals of sustainable urban planning.

Exercise 2

Think about your own experiences on the labour market, e.g. any part-time jobs in which you’ve worked. Write a short analysis about **contemporary working conditions for part-time workers**. Write 1-2 sentences for each of the following:

1. **WHAT**: Make an observation about the working conditions.
2. **HOW**: Prove and map your observation through evidence. You can do a quick Google search for the purposes of this exercise (usually, you would use evidence/data from UCD *OneSearch*).
3. **WHY**: Interpret the meaning of your observation. You can use research to help you support your interpretations. You can do a quick Google search for the purposes of this exercise (usually, you would use peer-reviewed research from UCD *OneSearch*).
4. **SO WHAT**: Explain the importance of your observation.

You can find the answers/ examples on the next page!

Exercise 1: Answers

Below you will see the same paragraph with the **WHAT**, **HOW**, and **SO WHAT** identified in the excerpt. This means that the missing aspect was **WHY**.

While the global rise of “green gentrification” has created positive environmental upgrades such as parks, bike lanes, and sustainability projects, it has also resulted in increased property values and the displacement of lower-income residents. Empirical studies have traced this pattern in cities like New York, Barcelona, and Seoul, showing that neighbourhoods receiving ecological improvements often experience demographic shifts and rent hikes shortly thereafter (Anguelovski *et al.*, 2019). While aiming to create healthier urban environments can be beneficial, it is essential to recognise that these initiatives can deepen spatial inequality and exclude the very communities they intend to benefit, challenging the just and inclusive goals of sustainable urban planning.

Scholars argue that this occurs because urban greening is frequently implemented through market-driven frameworks that prioritize investment and aesthetics over social equity (Checker, 2011). I further argue that green gentrification occurs because of the strategic use of environmental projects by city governments and private developers as tools for place-branding and economic growth. As this dissertation reveals, green spaces are often leveraged not for ecological purposes or community well-being, but to attract affluent residents, tourists, and investors by enhancing a city's image as progressive. In this context, environmental improvements become part of a broader neoliberal agenda that treats urban land as a commodity, where “greenness” adds market value.

WHAT?

HOW?

SO
WHAT?

MISSING
ASPECT:
WHY?

Exercise 2: Example

A notable phenomenon in contemporary labour markets is the proliferation of precarious work, characterised by temporary contracts, gig employment, and a lack of social protections. Data from the International Labour Organisation (2021) indicate a steady increase in non-standard forms of employment globally, especially among younger and marginalised workers. Scholars link this trend to structural shifts in the global economy, including deregulation, technological automation, and the erosion of traditional labour unions (Standing, 2011). I would further argue that the rise in precarious work is a result of the growing dominance of platform-based business models, which externalize labour costs by classifying workers as independent contractors rather than employees; this allows companies to scale rapidly while avoiding obligations such as benefits, job security, and collective bargaining rights. This rise in precariousness reflects a broader transition toward a “flexible” workforce, which sees employers prioritising adaptability over stability to remain competitive in volatile markets. This has a tremendous impact on economic security, social mobility, and mental health, raising critical questions about the future of work and the adequacy of existing labour protections in safeguarding workers’ rights and well-being.

WHAT?

HOW?

WHY?

SO
WHAT?