**Critical Reading and Writing**

**Aim:** To introduce students to what critical writing looks like and the relationship between critical reading and writing by offering them the opportunity to experience and apply the relatively abstract concept of criticality. This is often referred to and then seen by students as something so high level that it is almost out of reach, which creates barriers and which this session is intended to counter. Students’ application of the process uses the theme of decolonisation and the removal of slave trader statues. This material is intended to be a vehicle through which the academic skills are of developed, rather than it become the topic of the class. However, by using the sample reading, students are encouraged to consider nuances of social injustice and inequality that they may not have considered or encountered before, and for some of them to feel their experiences are acknowledged. This enables some students to bring their lived experiences into the classroom, but it is also intended to challenge other students’ perceptions of racial equity and inequity and open up conversations about this and the ways in which it can be addressed.

**LOs:** Explain what critical writing looks like

Analyse the links between your critical reading and writing

Apply strategies to extend your levels of criticality

**Level**: L6 - can be levelled down by using simpler paragraph samples and through extent of questioning processes

**Duration:** 2 hours

**Numbers refer to slides**

1. Just the title and LOs to be explained
2. 15 minutes for this, including discussion. Give them a copy of both paragraphs to discuss in pairs/small groups. It’s worth spending a fair bit of time on this because getting them to engage in what they understand as critical writing before being told what it is, gives them deeper understanding that they can build upon throughout the session - it’s very much a foundational activity for the whole session. Starting here is intended to get the students to reflect on their previous learning/understanding about critical writing, and for you to get a sense of their current levels of understanding as a baseline for where to focus the most during the rest of the session. It also acts as a point of reference throughout the session by allowing you to refer back to the paragraphs as examples when needed. For example, some students in the past have said something like the first is better because it’s more straightforward or because it has more references, which they think shows more engagement with reading/criticality – this is a chance to highlight that just summarising reading with lots of references isn’t analysis. I have also added the note about good academic style as many might say that makes it good (it isn’t a terrible example of writing so that they don’t get swayed in their discussions by that).

Once they have read and discussed, gather their thoughts, highlighting some key themes coming through, pushing for clarification or development where needed, or correcting when needed before showing them slides 3 and 4. You may want to add a ‘clean’ version of each paragraph as extra slides before the current slides 3 and 4 to use as a point of reference when discussing them. It doesn’t matter if all the points you’re looking for aren’t mentioned – slides 3 and 4 can be used to sum up their comments after discussion or to push them on further by explaining why the second paragraph is better, adding in comments about how you’d mark it even. Really, the main point is get them recognising how the first is descriptive and the second is critical.

The topic chosen for the sample paragraph is to engage them with some basic concepts around Othering as a way of raising their consciousness about racist tropes.

1. Descriptive paragraph broken down
2. Critical paragraph broken down
3. 5 mins. This should only need really need to sum up the previous activity and discussion, consolidating it all into these three main points by highlighting the comparison with a more descriptive approach.
4. Just a bridging slide to reinforce the foundational nature of reading, making the point that all of that critical analysis doesn’t just happen when they sit down to start writing – it’s part of the reading process.
5. 5-7 minutes. Just flag up at the start that there is no right or wrong answer and you’re not judging their views as such. With topics like this, there can be a feeling that they need to say the ‘expected’ thing and for us to show our (natural) judgement based on our own views so we want to avoid them feeling awkward or silenced – definitely not silenced! Remind them it needs to just be a quick immediate answer. Edward Colston statue in Bristol - ask them if they remember this (maybe whether they know what this is a picture of first), briefly place in BLM context (e.g taking the knee, George Floyd etc) so they know what this is all about – you don’t need to ‘teach’ them this, just ensure they know what’s going on. This is, however, opening up the removal of slaver statues as the central theme for the critical engagement during the session. This is to enable students to bring their lived experiences into the classroom (how do they feel when they see such a statue – comparing responses of students from different backgrounds/experiences?). It is intended to encourage some by considering how deeply racism and racial injustice exist in society and culture, to question unthinking acceptance of British history, to challenge the views of some whilst creating a safe space in which to explore and discuss these issues.

In terms of critical reading and writing, staring off by positioning themselves enables the foundation of an argument which they can test and develop as they read, and read more evaluatively as they progress.

1. Two minutes and something of a bridging slide again. We often use ‘zooming in and out’ to help students visualise a critical reading approach by relating it to something they’re familiar with, and it does tend to work as an approach to explaining the critical reading process. So, they need to zoom in to analyse the detail of something but then zoom out to see it in its bigger context to help them make sense of the ‘detail’, where it sits in broader trends, theories etc, and whether they need re-evaluate their view of it within that bigger context. The next two slides explain this further.
2. 10 minutes for this and the next slide. As critical reading is based on questioning, these questions can help them work through the process. You can explain why each of these questions may be significant or ask them why they think they are. Exemplifying with examples, especially of any reading on topics they may be familiar with, helps to grasp their meaning. It could be worth acknowledging that they won’t necessarily be able to say something in response to each of these questions for every source, and not all of them will always be relevant to what they want to take from a reading, but they should at least be aware that these are the type of things to be thinking about. It could be worth telling them that many students find writing these questions out and then answering each of them as they’re reading a very helpful approach – it focuses them on critical reading rather than copying out and requires them to sometimes move backwards and forwards between the questions, which makes their note-making more active and their notes more useful (they will be using a note-making handout getting them to do just that later on in the session).
3. As with the previous slide, explain the questions that help them to synthesise and develop their analysis further, relating it back to slide 3 that specifies synthesis as a starting point for critical analysis. I often explicitly use the imagery on the slides to help them – up close on the first leaf to see the veins etc but then you can see where it ‘hangs’, which tree it belongs to, which other leaf it’s close to etc in the second.
4. 20 - 30 minutes for activity in groups and following whole group discussion. This is very much the heart of the session and main learning activity. They could all read all three or different types of reading groups can be used. I would normally then work through the questions sheet for each article, getting their responses but really pushing them for more explanation, highlighting any differences or similarities between what students/groups are saying, maybe throwing in the odd alterative point to see how they respond. As you move onto the second and third, start to highlight the similarities and differences between them so that some sort of synthesis is built up through the discussion.

NB – there are two extracts from Olusoga to encourage some consideration of how a writer’s views can change over time and the role of context on their work, as well as politics, experiences etc influencing their arguments.

However, you organise it, it is intended to enable the students to start applying these critical questions. It’s only through trying to read in a way that is possibly different to how they have read before, that they can start to see how thinking about criticality in this way can transform their writing. Without this experiential element, critical reading just becomes too abstract but can also seem too difficult and out of reach. This shows them how they can think critically and reinforces the point about critical analysis not happening when they sit down to start writing. Using the critical questions is also to encourage them to be active in their reading and note-making because it needs them to move backwards and forwards through the questions as they read rather than see reading as a very linear process. Many students find using these questions as note-making frame when reading is very useful.

1. 5 minutes. This reading grid is worth explaining as a useful way for them to think about their synthesis as they’re reading and helps to move the session further into how they can practically prepare for a for any piece of written work. Again, this encourages a more active and critical approach to reading. The idea is that after they’ve finished each reading, they add it to this grid, or something similar (it could, for example, be in a more mind map format). It makes them go back to identifying main points, some evaluation and helps them to build up the bigger picture by noting down similarities and differences with other things they’ve read. They can move up and down it as they read more to add thoughts, especially the ‘how to use it’ section. They can start to see emerging themes, which can even be colour coded. These themes will form the foundation of their plan as they will be able to see which points could be discussed together or, if they want a paragraph on each, which paragraphs should be grouped together. It would be worth ensuring they understand what is meant be a theme.

To ensure this doesn’t feel like too onerous an approach to reading, it could be emphasised that this only needs a couple of bullet points and that students who use it find they work more efficiently and save time because they’re not needing to go back through all their notes again to find those themes and connections. This therefore helps them to plan as well as analyse as they go.

I’ve often completed one of these live too, based on their discussion of the readings, by having a blank one on the screen and adding in a couple of bullet points as you go, especially by showing how their synthesis emerges as they discuss each reading. This does make it more time consuming but can be effective, if you think it could work for you and you have plenty of time.

1. 5-10 minutes for this.Some exemplification of how the three articles they’ve been reading and discussing can be written about based on many of the key points you’ll have been able to get them to identify in the discussion. It helps them to see how they can build up a piece of critical writing if they have read effectively. The three colours reflect the three elements from slide 3 (synthesis, meaning and evaluation). I’d give them a few minutes to read it and think about how they would identify the three colours – what is the student doing here? Then you talk through it, highlighting how it is showing critical analysis and emphasising that that what is here has grown from their reading, and that if they have read as well as they hopefully have done, this is not beyond them.
2. Just a bridging slide to lead them into a few final points about critical language and structure.
3. Only needs 10 minutes maximum for this and the next slide. Maybe ask them for some examples of their own and I would get the sample paragraph back up and ask them to identify where some of this language is used. This will also show them that they don’t need to overload their writing with transitioning and stock critical writing phrases, but a few helps to show their thinking more clearly to the reader. On slide 12, it’s worth making the point that these words do often get used incorrectly (‘however’ has a specific meaning and isn’t just used for whenever they want to use some transitioning!). The Manchester Phrasebank is excellent but it can also be a bit overwhelming - they can also be encouraged to pick out phrases that the authors they’re reading use when discussing other research as good models.
4. **See slide 14**
5. 5 minutes to talk through and explain this.WEED is a very useful way for them to start thinking about how they can use their structure to show critical analysis. I often describe it as a more sophisticated university-level of PEE (point, evidence, explanation) that they may be familiar with from school. If they even write WEED on their plan for each paragraph, they can check that each will have each element in it. Of course, they don’t have to have it always in this order (except the W) but it’s a good starting point as they can use it to begin to build up their confidence and skills in critical writing, as well as well-structured paragraphing. The E and E will also often be blended. It also helps them to avoid the very short paragraphs that can make their writing feel disjointed because they won’t be able to get all four elements into just a sentence or two. Students who start to use this tell us they find their writing develops a great deal and the D element forces them to think critically and say something to show that analysis. You could use the sample paragraph again and ask them to identify the four different elements there as some exemplification.
6. This activity is optional. If you have time to fit it in, it will enable you to assess their learning a bit further, and for the students to self-assess, including some reflection on how they can now identify key features of critical writing compared to their responses in the first activity. The point about feeling more able to write critically if they know what that looks like is important as it can make critical writing feel more achievable. It would take about 10 minutes but rather than them discussing in groups first, you could get the next slide up and do it as a quicker whole group Q and A. The theme of the paragraph being British Values is intended to trigger some consideration of what this means, and the problems related to it in terms of inclusivity and diversity – it bookends the opening paragraph further highlighting the concept of them/us. This can be commented on but just being exposed to the pieces of writing can influence consciousness about such issues.
7. I’ve not colour-coded/broken down the paragraph this time so that you could just respond to what they’re saying and highlight other aspects yourself, but you could also add in the colours and notes.
8. 10 minutes. More application as they’re moving into the final phase of the lesson – what they’ve been building up to. They need to write a couple of sentences that sum up some of their analysis of the article, using language to make that analysis clear. Could be done individually too. Of course, they can do this on paper and read them out but using an online platform allows you to see all their work at once for when you’re giving some feedback. They also see each other’s too, which can make it feel more collaborative.
9. 5 minutes. This plenary activity is intended to assess their learning because they have to pinpoint one key element from the session. It also gives them a chance to identify the main thing they think they will take away from it.

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