

# Critical vs Descriptive Writing

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## The #1 reason students lose marks:

Too much description, not enough critical analysis. University essays aren't just about showing what you know — they're about evaluating, analysing, and making arguments. Here's how to level up.

## Descriptive Writing

- States what happened
- Summarises the research
- Lists facts or events
- 'Smith found that...'
- Repeats what sources say
- No evaluation of evidence
- Passive voice, detached
- 'There are many factors...'

## Critical Writing

- Analyses why it happened
- Evaluates the research
- Makes judgements about facts/events
- 'Smith's methodology is limited because...'
- Compares and contrasts sources
- Weighs strength/weakness of evidence
- Active voice, takes a position
- 'The most significant factor is X because...'

## Signal Words for Critical Writing

**Evaluating:** significantly, primarily, crucially, notably, surprisingly, arguably, particularly

**Comparing:** whereas, conversely, by contrast, similarly, alternatively, in comparison

**Cause/Effect:** consequently, therefore, thus, as a result, because of, due to, leads to

**Critiquing:** however, nevertheless, despite, although, questionable, limited, overlooks

**Strengthening:** furthermore, moreover, in addition, builds on, extends, demonstrates

## Before & After: Example Transformations

- **Descriptive:** 'Smith (2020) found that students who sleep more get better grades.'
- **Critical:** 'Smith's (2020) correlation between sleep and grades is significant, but the cross-sectional design prevents causal claims. Longitudinal studies (Jones, 2019) provide stronger evidence for sleep's causal role.'
- **Descriptive:** 'There are many theories about climate change.'
- **Critical:** 'Whilst multiple theories exist, the greenhouse gas hypothesis is most strongly supported by empirical evidence, particularly ice core data (Hansen et al., 2013) and atmospheric measurements.'
- **Descriptive:** 'Shakespeare uses imagery in Macbeth.'
- **Critical:** 'Shakespeare's blood imagery in Macbeth functions symbolically to track Macbeth's moral degradation, intensifying from act to act until 'all great Neptune's ocean' cannot wash the guilt away (Act 2, Scene 2).'

## ✓ Quick Self-Check: Is Your Writing Critical Enough?

- Have I made judgements about the evidence, not just reported it?
- Have I compared different perspectives or studies?
- Have I explained WHY sources are significant/limited/relevant?
- Could a robot summarise my essay, or does it contain original analysis?