

Descriptive versus Analytic Assignment Writing

It is common for feedback on student writing to focus on the need to engage more critically with the evidence on the topic under investigation. Typical comments in feedback are: 'too descriptive', or 'not enough analyses'.

When you engage in critical writing through sound analysis you are developing your own academic voice and understanding in the subject. With descriptive writing you are not developing argument but merely setting the background within which an argument can be developed. Descriptive writing represents the situation as it stands, without presenting any analysis. In providing only description, you are presenting but not transforming information; you are reporting ideas but not taking them forward in any way.

An analysis assesses options by looking at their strengths and weaknesses and developing arguments that allow valid judgements to be made.

With critical analysis you are participating in the academic debate. This is more challenging. You need to weigh up the evidence and arguments of others. You will need to:

- consider the quality of the evidence and argument you have read;
- identify key positive and negative aspects you can comment on;
- assess their relevance and usefulness to the debate that you are engaging in for your assignment; and
- identify how best they can be woven into the argument that you are developing.

A much higher level of skill is clearly needed for analytical writing than for descriptive writing, and this is reflected in the higher marks it is given.

It can be tempting to string together paraphrased sentences from the evidence to support an argument, feeling that the more paraphrased evidence you include, the stronger your argument. It is important, however, to remember that you also need to *interpret* the paraphrased sentences to the reader, and to explain their relevance, discuss their validity, and show how they relate to other evidence.

A paraphrased sentence or two might describe and reference the evidence, but this is not enough in itself. The next few sentences need to explain what this evidence contributes to the argument you are making. You must ensure that the relevance of the evidence is explained to the reader; you should not simply assume that the reader will be following the same logic as you, or will just work out the relevance of the paraphrased sentence or data you have described.

A certain amount of descriptive writing is essential, particularly in the earlier parts of the assignment. Beyond that, however, there is a danger that too much descriptive writing will use up valuable words from your word limit, and reduce the space you have for analysis that will get you higher marks.

To gain a better understanding of analysis simply review the discussion section of any high impact academic journal articles for how topics of interest are analysed and how sound arguments are developed.