ASHOKA UNIVERSITY

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Writing Handbook

A Very Short Introduction to Critical Thinking, Argumentation, Structure and More!

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Thinking (and Learning to Read) Critically

by Shubham Gupta

The story goes like this: once upon a time in a far-away land, there lived four blind men. Life was monotonous, until one day, they heard that a strange creature was being paraded outside the city walls. The city-dwellers called it an 'elephant'. Wonderstruck, the blind men decided to find out for themselves what this animal was like. So they ventured out and soon enough, they found it. Curious, they walked up to it. The first man, feeling the trunk of the elephant, exclaimed, "Gods be praised! This elephant is a unique animal, built like a smooth, heavy, elongated pipe." The second man, having touched the tail, was quick to respond. "Your wits have left you," he exclaimed. "The elephant is shaped not like a pipe, but like a rope." The third, standing near the ears, shouted, "It's a fan! It's a fan!", and the fourth, patting the tusk, said, "Of course not, it's a spear!". The argument began. Each man, convinced of his own intellectual superiority, refused to believe the other. There was shouting, there was screaming, and soon, the four blind men came to blows. When that too produced no result, they walked back home, resolving to never speak to each other again.

The parable of the blind men and the elephant has been told for centuries, with different versions existing in Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Sufi folklore. There are various interpretations of the story. Some have interpreted it as a moral tale about learning to work together. Others see it as a push for syncretism, or as a metaphor for various scientific phenomena. There is a key take-away that underlines all of these interpretations. The American poet John Godfrey Saxe, writing in 1872, put it like this:

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,

And all were in the wrong!

The paradox in the last two lines illustrates what the parable wants to teach us. Our worldview is often limited by *what* we experience and *how* we experience it. It is only when we acknowledge this subjectivity that we begin to understand what the truth most approximates. None of the men in the story were *wrong*. They all accurately reported their findings. An elephant's trunk, tail, ear, and tusk do resemble a pipe, rope, fan, and spear, respectively. But the men faltered as soon as they decided that only their *individual* opinion mattered. Once they chose not to listen to and learn from each other, failure was certain.

Today, not only has the story not changed, but its implications have become more complicated. The rise of the digital age has concurrently led to the rise of new ways of confined thinking. Consider the example of fake news. Access to information from a variety of sources has become easy. But what has become increasingly difficult is the ability to distinguish right from wrong, truth from falsehood, real news from fake news. No matter what happens, narratives are formed and disseminated across the Internet, in minutes if not seconds. Our social media feeds often give us the version that is aligned to our prior beliefs or notions. We tend to see more of what we like or believe in. If it goes unchecked, fake news can polarise people, swing elections, or cause great harm, leaving us no better than the men from the parable above. This is why the ability to think clearly, rationally, and analytically has become so important in both our professional and personal lives. In other words, the modern world is in desperate need of critical thinking.

There are several ways of defining it, but fundamentally, critical thinking means knowing how to:

- Think clearly about the matter at hand
- Identify, construct, and evaluate ideas, claims and arguments, and the sources from which these have come to us
- Be open to new information that challenges assumptions and beliefs
- Communicate effectively

This definition helps us acknowledge that thinking is not an isolated process. In most contexts, including the college classroom, it exists in conjunction with reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These interrelated and interdependent skills work together to produce meaning. To illustrate this, let us consider an example.

Suppose you are a first-year university student enrolled in an introductory literature course. On the first day, you enter the classroom and find the following poem projected onto the board:

Mr. India
wearing his gold watch

Harry
under the cloak

A pickpocket's hand
at work

A virus
without a microscope

A B-grade ghost
in the mirror

The account book
of PM Cares Fund

The professor informs you that the poet is Akhil Katyal, an Indian writer, and then asks the class, "Well, what do you think?"

What should you do? The professor has not said anything else. They want to hear from the class. So you begin with the only thing that you have: the poem. You read it once. You are a bit confused. You have no idea who or what "Mr. India" is. By then, someone's hand has gone up. "I think it's a clever poem," they say. "There is a running theme of 'invisibility' that builds and builds until it reaches its climax in the final stanza."

Realisation dawns upon you. You now remember that *Mr. India* was a 1980s Hindi film about a guy who finds an invisibility cloak, just like Harry Potter. Similarly, a pickpocket makes things disappear, and viruses and ghosts can't be seen. Finally, the PM Cares Fund, created during the Covid-19 pandemic in India, has received backlash for a lack of transparency.

The poem interests you now, so you read it a couple more times. Slowly, you begin noticing the words, the structure, and the flow. There is a certain quirk about the structure that you are able to discern. But you are not sure if your observation is 'right'. Still, you build up your confidence, raise your hand, and then say, "Even though there is no rhyme scheme or metrical pattern, there is a uniformity in the structure. Each stanza is made up of two lines, the first mentioning the subject, the second giving additional information." The professor smiles. "Good point," they say. You sigh in relief. They then dismiss the class, telling everyone to submit a one-page analysis of the poem the next day.

In summary, here is what happened:

- You first **read** the poem, but were unsure of what it meant.
- You **listened** to your classmate. It helped.
- You began **thinking** about the structure of the poem. You noticed something.
- You **spoke** your thoughts out loud. Your professor appreciated it.
- You were then told to **write** an analysis.

Far from being independent, critical skills work in tandem. Reading, listening, thinking, speaking, writing–they rely on each other. But it is critical thinking that seems to be the common link to all. Ideally, we think before, during, and after we read, write, listen, and speak. We should also think about thinking: what we think, how we think, and so on.

Critical thinking is, of course, not limited to understanding poetry. We see the importance of critical thinking in scientific hypothesis testing, mathematical proofs, urban planning, music composition, business administration, national governance,

clinical psychology, playwriting, development economics, algorithm design, and so on. More importantly, it is not limited to our vocations. We need critical thinking in dealing with interpersonal relationships, cooking dinner, buying a car, voting in elections, drafting emails, posting on social media, reading the news, picking an outfit, taking care of plants, investing in the stock market, and more generally, choosing how to lead our lives. Our analytical abilities have widespread ramifications. Therefore, we must understand, question, and be willing to change our own analyses. That's CRITICAL THINKING!

The Research Process

by Shubham Gupta

One of the most intimidating tasks you have to undertake before writing just about anything is to carry out relevant research. In this essay, we break down the research process into 3 simple steps to help you go from the initial spark to compiling a comprehensive assortment of resources from which you can launch your arguments.

Step 1: Seek

Research begins with questions. Why is something the way it is? What is its history? How does it impact others? Which direction will it take in the future? Who has a say in it? To kick off the research process, we must begin with finding that "something" we are interested in or curious about.

Not all questions are research questions. Matters of fact or definition, for one, are often stepping stones to larger concerns. Consider the voting patterns of the 2020 US presidential election. Let us begin by asking a factual question: How many men and women voted for Joe Biden and Donald Trump respectively? According to the Pew Research Center, 48% of men voted for Biden, and 50% for Trump. In contrast, 55% of women voted for Biden, while 44% for Trump.[1] To the curious, the follow-up question should be obvious: Why did more men vote for Trump, and why did more women pick Biden? There are a few things that we should note at this point:

- The first question, the one that asks 'how many', leads to a specific answer. That makes it a question of fact. (Pew's data relies on a sample size of 11,145 voters.[2] Notice that there is still room for disagreement in *how* we arrive at these facts)

[1] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/06/30/behind-bidens-2020-victory/
[2] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/06/30/validated-voters-methodology/

- The second question, the 'why', builds on the answer to the first. Most importantly, it prompts us to evaluate information and construct arguments. Such an inquiry can lead to great research, healthy debates, and even more questions.
- New information leads to new questions. Apart from gender, Pew's data is also organised by race. Their survey shows that 43% of White voters picked Biden, with 55% choosing Trump. In sharp contrast, 92% Black people voted for Biden, and only 8% for Trump. We may ask: Why is there voter polarisation across race? Further, if we combine race with gender (which Pew has data for), the questions become even more complex.[3]

What, then, makes a good research question? From our discussion above, we can see that it should involve evaluation and argumentation, inadvertently opening up more questions. Let us add two more ingredients.
First, focus. We should know what our scope and objectives are. Is our investigation too broad? Too narrow? What kind of answers can we expect? How we frame our questions will determine the direction of our research.
Second, research. Once we solidify our interest in a topic with some preliminary reading, we are in a position to ask better questions.

The first step of the research process: asking good questions.

Step 2: Scour

Once we have our questions, we must know how to look for answers. Step 1 showed us that the right questions nudge us in the right direction. But the path forward can be rocky, filled with roadblocks, misdirections, and unfamiliar destinations. How do we make our way through all this?

[3] There are many other voter-related factors that we could possibly consider: age, education-level, religion, geographical location, and more.

We can start by reading and listening. Researching any topic requires us to first read what others have already said about it. American literary theorist Kenneth Burke likened it to joining an ongoing conversation, one that started before we joined and will continue after we leave. We must first listen, figure out what is being talked about, and only then share our thoughts.

Researchers are constantly 'talking' with each other. If we open any research paper and scroll to the very end, we will find a section titled 'References' or 'Works Cited'. This is a list of the various sources that the author has referred to in their paper. Most of them would probably be works by other academics (this is the 'talking' mentioned above), but they don't always need to be. Anything that helps us with our research is a potential source.

Of course, all sources are not the same. The kind of sources we use depends on the purpose and the audience–why we are writing, and who we are writing for. For example, an academic may write about the same topic differently for an academic journal and a digital magazine. The former is more likely to be read by fellow academics, while the latter by a general audience. Thus, we may find a large number of scholarly sources in the journal article, and only a handful in the magazine.

This distinction also arises from the differences in the publication process of the two. Articles in academic journals are peer-reviewed. This means that each article is reviewed by a panel of experts in that particular field before it is accepted (or rejected) for publication. The reviewers evaluate the article on the basis of several criteria, including argumentation, academic soundness, integrity, and scholarly value. Due to this process, articles published in peer-reviewed journals are likely to be of high quality. On the other hand, articles written for magazines and other popular sources are edited, not peer-reviewed. Moreover, they are usually written by staff writers who might not be specialists on that matter.

There is another way to categorise sources: primary and secondary. Primary sources are first-hand evidence, research that you have conducted yourself. This can include observations, interviews, photographs, surveys, experiments, or personal experiences. Conversely, secondary sources are authored by others. This includes existing research on a particular topic that can be accessed through books, websites, journals, reviews, or other sources.

This is the second step of the research process: finding the right sources.

Step 3: Synthesise

So far, we have done two things: asked questions and collected sources. We should now have a fair idea about our research topic and what we intend to say about it. But it is natural to be buzzing with several tangential ideas at this stage. It is also natural to feel lost. The questions may no longer make sense, the research may look endless, and everything may appear to fall apart. Therefore, it is important to pause and take stock of all that we have done so far. This final step of the research process is crucial. To make it easier to understand, let us break it down into four sub-steps:

Step 3.1: Read the sources

There is no dearth of information on the Internet. Suppose I am interested in writing about space travel. Searching for "space travel" on Google gives me 3,150,000,000 results.[4] If I switch to Google Scholar, a specialised search engine for academic articles, I am left with 42,10,000. There is an abundance in quantity and an uncertainty in quality.

[4] The average life expectancy of humans, according to the United Nations in 2019, is 72.6 years. This equals 2,289,513,600 seconds. Even if we read one article per second all our life, we will never be able to finish reading the Google results for "space travel".

We can fix the former by refining our search queries[5] and using specialised websites like Google Scholar and JSTOR. Fixing the quality requires some work.[6]

As we spend time reading and evaluating our sources, we need to keep track of what they are about and how they are contributing to our research. Some scholars keep an annotated bibliography.[7] Others write a literature review.[8] We could also consider collating everything in a table like this:

What is the title of the source?	
Who is the author? What do we know about them?	
Where has this source been published?	
What is this source about?	
How are you planning to use this source for your research paper? Summarise the key claims/evidence that you will be using from this source.	
What are the strengths and limitations of this source?	

[5] See this quick guide by Google: https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/www.google.com/en//educators/downloads/Tips_Tricks_17x22.pdf

[6] Some scholars swear by the CRAAP test, where each source is evaluated on the basis of currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose. Here is a handy guide: https://libguides.cmich.edu/web_research/craap

[7] https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/common_writing_assignments/annotated_bibliographies/index.html

[8] https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/literature-reviews/

Step 3.2: Refine questions/scope/objectives

Over time, the questions that we began our research quest with may change. As we read more, we often realise that our scope was too broad, or the objectives too vague, or the questions no longer to our interest. We could have started out by wanting to conduct research about 20th century women painters but after reading a few sources, decided to focus only on the flower paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe.[9] Developing focussed knowledge is key to writing a good research paper. Therefore, we should be willing to refine our questions, scope, and objectives.

Step 3.3: Construct the thesis statement

At this stage, once we have formed questions, read our sources, defined the scope and objective, and refined everything, we should be ready to add *our* contribution to the research topic. In certain academic disciplines, like biology and psychology, this means first conducting experiments. In others, like sociology and anthropology, this might require fieldwork. No matter the discipline, the end-goal is the same: gradually, we need to begin forming what is called a "thesis statement".

Put simply, a thesis statement is a one- or two-line summary of the research paper. It is the main argument of the paper.[10] A strong thesis statement is clear, specific, assertive, and debateable. Notice the differences in the following example:

Weak thesis statement: Something should be done about air pollution in Delhi.
Strong thesis statement: Since vehicular emissions are the major cause of air pollution in Delhi, the government should incentivise residents to switch to electric vehicles.

Step 3.4: Put everything together

[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flower_paintings_of_Georgia_O%27Keeffe
[10] For further reading, please see our entry on argumentation.

The final step of the research process is to put everything together and write it down. It sounds simple enough, but it can confound even the best of researchers. To research something and to write it in a way that makes sense are two completely different skills.

We should start by taking comfort in the fact that following all the above steps makes this last part much easier. In a way, we have been writing all along–by making connections between seemingly unrelated ideas, by summarising the key points in each source, by coming up with a thesis statement, and so on. We call this “prewriting”. To make it complete, let us add one more element: an outline. It is crucial to outline the paper before writing it. In its simplest form, a research paper has an introduction, a few body paragraphs, and a conclusion. We should keep this in mind while creating the outline.[11]

It is important to write multiple drafts of the paper. “The first draft is the child's draft,” says writer Anne Lamott, “where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later.” Each subsequent draft will get better if we get some feedback, ideally from a teacher or a mentor.

This is the final step of the research process: putting everything together.

[11] To learn more about this, please refer to the entry on structuring a critical essay.

Argumentation

by Shubham Gupta

Arguments form the foundation of academic writing and critical thinking. While the former provides a vehicle to convey research-based arguments, often within a disciplinary framework, the latter, critical thinking, refers to the analysis and synthesis of facts and arguments in order to arrive at a judgment about something.

This handout will lay out what an argument is and how it can be constructed. To explain the different parts of an argument, this entry will refer to "Judging a person on their spelling and grammar reveals more about you than it does about them" by Joanna Whitehead, an article published by *The Independent*.

What is an argument?

An argument is a claim supplemented with evidence and reasoning. Essentially, it is an act of persuasion. We present arguments for the serious consideration of a specific audience, who may or may not choose to accept our point of view.

At its simplest, an argument has three parts – claim, evidence, and reasoning.

Claim: A claim is an assertion that the author attempts to put forth. It is the conclusion of the argument. This is what the reader's main takeaway should be. Put simply, it is the *point* of the argument.

In argumentative essays, this is also called a thesis statement. A good thesis statement is narrow and debatable.

For example, Whitehead writes:

> *"It seems obvious to me, a relatively educated person, that* ***judging a person's "intelligence"*** *(itself a profoundly subjective and loaded term)* ***on their ability to spell a word correctly or construct a sentence with the correct verbs, nouns and clauses is deeply flawed****."*

There are several things worth mentioning here:

1) Notice how closely the claim resembles the title of the article. This should drive home the idea that the main claim is the key takeaway or the *point* of any argument.
2) The claim is narrow. It specifically targets the notion of (flawed) elitism attached to grammar. The scope is ideal considering the relatively short length of the article.
3) The claim is debatable. It expresses the author's opinion rather than being a universally-acceptable fact. There is room for discussion, for disagreement, for counterarguments (as we will see soon).

Evidence: Evidence is all the data that supports your claim. Depending on the context of the claim, it may include facts, numbers, interviews, historical details, calculations, measurements, and other observations.

Evidence can come from primary or secondary sources.

Primary sources are first-hand evidence, research that you have conducted yourself. This can include observations, interviews, photographs, surveys, experiments, or personal experiences.

Secondary sources are authored by others. This includes existing research on a particular topic that can be accessed through books, websites, journals, reviews, or other sources.

In her article, Whitehead employs both primary and secondary sources. Let us try and classify them.

Primary sources
"***I know a woman*** *who's an incredible artist, working across a range of mediums. In her job as a secondary school teacher, her role is to engage students with art, encourage critical thinking and develop their imaginations and creative expression.* *Working in a depressed part of outer London, she believes in her students and cares profoundly about them and their future. She has a strong sense of community and always makes time for a smile and chat with people, regardless of their status or pay grade.* *She's a wonderful person – but her spelling is atrocious.*"
"***I know a man*** *who's a painter and decorator by trade. He's been involved with Labour activism for over 30 years and wakes up every morning at 5am to wade through hefty political and historical tomes that I wouldn't even attempt to understand. He can explain the plight of the Palestinian people or the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland with clarity and nuance.* *He's one of the most intelligent people I know – but his spelling is atrocious."*
"*Despite this,* ***I regularly see*** *people attacked and their entire argument renounced for a misplaced apostrophe or misspelt word.*"

Secondary sources
"***Recent findings by researchers at Tilberg University in the Netherlands*** *support this. They found that online daters were turned off by "poor spelling, typos and information diction". Typographical mistakes, such as writing "teh" instead of "the" were construed as a sign of inattentiveness, resulting in lower scores on perceived attractiveness.*"

Sometimes, it is not that straightforward to arrive at these classifications. For example, consider this paragraph from the article:

> *"Learning difficulties such as dyslexia are just one of many reasons why some people struggle with words more than others. People whose second or even third language is English, or those whose early learning experiences were*

> *negative – or who didn't finish school – may also be less than proficient when it comes to matters typographical."*

While Whitehead does not mention a specific source here, it can be said that she is implicitly referring to existing research. However, since she does not make that clear, we cannot be certain that her evidence is credible. As readers, we will often encounter this kind of uncertainty. This does not mean that we should discredit the entire text. Authors sometimes make editorial decisions based on the length of the text or the assumed expertise of the audience regarding the subject matter. Our job, always, is to continue to ask questions. Therefore, it is best to either give the author the benefit of doubt, or to check the existing literature around the subject matter ourselves to make an informed decision.

There is another such example in her article.

> *"But pointing out typographical errors is increasingly used as a 'gotcha' to undermine an ordinary person's entire argument or opinion. This is particularly common on social media where even apparently intelligent folks do this for sport."*

How do we say that something is "particularly common on social media"? This can come either from personal observations or detailed research. Since Whitehead does not specify her source, there is room for doubt, even though those familiar with social media might attest to its credibility.

Reasoning: - Reasoning is a description of how or why the evidence ties to the claim.

In formal logic, there are two main types of reasoning: deductive and inductive.

Deductive reasoning is used to draw specific conclusions from general theories. It is a top-down approach to reasoning.

Consider this example.

1. All languages have elements of grammar.
2. English is a language.
3. Therefore, English has elements of grammar.

Notice how English is a specific language in the large, general set of languages. This helps us move from the first statement, which is general (grammar in all languages), to the conclusion, which is specific (English grammar).

Inductive reasoning is used to draw generalisations from specific premises. It is a bottom-up approach to reasoning.

Consider this example.

1. According to a survey of a random sample of students of Ashoka University, 50% identify as women.
2. Therefore, we can expect that 50% of students of Ashoka University are women.

Notice the shift from a specific sample of students to a generalisation of all students.

A key difference between deductive and inductive reasoning is the level of certainty of the conclusion. The former leads to *certain* conclusions ("English *has* elements of grammar"). The latter leads to *probable* conclusions ("We can *expect* that …").

What is Whitehead's reasoning?

Her claim: Linking grammar to intelligence is flawed.
Her evidence: Acquaintance with 'intelligent' people with poor grammar, observations on social media that grammar is used to undermine arguments, the existence of learning difficulties and barriers to English acquisition.

The reasoning she offers is multifold. For the three kinds of evidence mentioned above, her reasons that justify the claim are, respectively:

1. *"By reducing intelligence to someone's ability to spell "definitely" correctly – one of the top words in the English language that people consistently struggle with – we're doing ourselves a huge disservice."*
2. *"Look beyond the letters and symbols on the screen and judge them on the content of their message, not their use (or misuse) of punctuation."*
3. *"Rejecting contributions from those who may not have the same literacy privileges that you enjoy is misguided and elitist."*

The claim-evidence-reasoning model can be summarised as below:

Claim: What do you know? **Evidence**: How do you know that? **Reasoning**: Why does the evidence support the claim?

Counterarguments

One of the foundational principles of critical thinking is the idea of engaging with multiple points of view before reaching a conclusion about a particular inquiry. This becomes important even while presenting an argument as it shows the reader that you have arrived at your thesis after careful consideration of multiple perspectives. Therefore, most critical essays contain one or more counterarguments.

Any good thesis can be challenged. Including and rebutting counterarguments strengthens your own argument. Therefore, once you are done writing your arguments, you should:

1) Read your essay as a sceptic. Identify limitations in your own writing. Look for drawbacks in your thesis statement or sub-arguments, including evidence and reasoning.
2) Understand what the counterargument says. Do not discount it simply because it opposes your point of view. Do your research and search for evidence around the subject of inquiry.
3) If the counterargument is faulty, refute it. If it has some merit, acknowledge the shortcomings of your argument.

Whitehead addresses one counterargument in her article.

> ***"In no sense am I disregarding the value of clear communication****. Anyone who has seen the many excellent examples emphasising the importance of a well-placed apostrophe ("Grammar: the difference between knowing your sh*t and knowing you're sh*t", is one such belter) knows that a small symbol can cause tectonic shifts in the meaning of a sentence.*
>
> *Clear and concise spelling and grammar are something we should aspire to in our efforts to improve understanding in the world.*"

However, she is able to refute it by first stating that:

> *"[P]ointing out typographical errors is increasingly used as a 'gotcha' to undermine an ordinary person's entire argument or opinion."*

Whitehead then goes on to argue that while clear communication is ideal, grammar is not a determinant of intelligence. By doing this, she is able to acknowledge the 'other side' and add nuance to her argument.

Structuring a Critical Essay

by Akshita Todi

Structure is one of the most important aspects of any critical piece. An essay – even one with novel ideas and strong assertions – would fall apart without a coherent layout and structure. As you might know by now, critical pieces usually make a series of claims that fall under one argument. Structure ensures that these claims logically follow after one another – that they are stitched together seamlessly, rendering the piece more comprehensive and impactful, and the reader's experience more enjoyable. More importantly, mapping the structure of an essay before you get down to the writing aids *you*, the writer, in organising your thoughts and gaining clarity about your thesis statement.

At the broadest level, paying attention to structure refers to writing a clear introduction, body and conclusion. Within these sections, one must strive to structure each paragraph as well. As I explain these levels of structuring below, I draw upon examples from two essays, "'My Problem and How I Solved It": Domestic Violence in Women's Magazines" (1999) and "Degendering the Problem and Gendering the Blame: Political Discourse on Women and Violence" (2001) by American sociologist, Nancy Berns to elucidate my points.[12]

Introduction:

Introductions are one of the trickiest sections in an essay. They present your voice as an author to the reader and set the tone for the rest of your work. Furthermore, they invite the reader to engage with your topic or question – a function which demands that this

[12] Essay 1: Berns, Nancy. "'My Problem and How I Solved It': Domestic Violence in Women's Magazines." *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1999, pp. 85–108. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4120892. Accessed 12 Aug. 2020.
Essay 2: Berns, Nancy. "Degendering the Problem and Gendering the Blame: Political Discourse on Women and Violence." *Gender and Society*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2001, pp. 262–281. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3081847. Accessed 12 Aug. 2020.

paragraph contain crucial information about your area of research and your thesis statement.

Typically, an introduction should have three major components. You may see these colour-coded components in the examples given in this section:

1. Context
2. Thesis Statement
3. Methodology, Material and a Roadmap (What will you study and how? How will your essay proceed?)

Because they contain so many components, introductions need not be confined to a single paragraph. However, they must ideally not occupy more than 10-20 percent of the space within your essay. For instance, in a 2000-2500-word paper, an ideal introduction should not exceed 400-500 words.

Stylistically, introductions can be fairly flexible spaces. It is in the introduction that you must hook the reader into your piece with an interesting piece of information that immediately engages them with your point. To this end, introductions can:

a) Proceed towards a broader question after starting with something specific such as:
    - Anecdotes (personal, cultural, news-related, etc.)
    - A close-read example

Example (Essay 2, pg 2):

> It is time to pay attention to those who say they get Playboy and Penthouse "for the articles." Although best known for their nude pictures, both of these popular men's magazines contain political commentary that reaches millions of readers-more than those of obviously political magazines like the conservative National Review and its liberal counterpart The New Republic. Despite differences in packaging, all of these magazines are remarkably similar when it comes to the problem of domestic violence. They reframe domestic violence in a way that obscures men's violence while placing the burden of responsibility on women. This perspective, which I call

patriarchal resistance, can also be found in books, talk shows, the Internet, political debate, classrooms, courtrooms, and everyday conversation. On the basis of a case study of one medium-political and men's magazines - I describe the two main discursive strategies of this perspective-degendering the problem of domestic violence and gendering the blame-and discuss their implications for the fight against domestic violence

b) Start with a larger field of research and move on to specifics. This larger field can be:

- Fact-based
- Driven by a larger context

Example (Essay 1, pg 2):

Since the 1970s there has been a dramatic change in the "representational resources" (Holstein and Miller 1993) available to the people who-in their roles as police officers, judges, attorneys, jurors, doctors, social workers, shelter workers, politicians, clergy, employers, friends, and family-make decisions regarding domestic violence. Today not only is there a domestic violence vocabulary and a host of social science theories (Lamb 1991; Kurz 1989; Loseke and Cahill 1984), but domestic violence is represented in talk shows, movies, and popular magazines. Social scientists have generated a vast literature on domestic violence, some of which has entered the popular media and the consciousness of its consumers. As yet there has been little scholarly investigation of this popular body of knowledge on domestic violence. Using a qualitative analysis of popular women's magazine articles and magazine writers' guidebooks, I investigate the content, creation, and impact of this popular discourse.

This article presents a qualitative analysis of one segment of the popular discourse, popular women's magazines, which demonstrates the dominance of an individual perspective for establishing responsibility for domestic

violence. Not only is it portrayed as a private problem but most often it is the *victim's* problem.

As you can see in these examples, the thesis statement is not always confined to one sentence and the introduction is not always limited to the first paragraph. There is only one fixed rule for an introduction that you must remember – in critical pieces, it is *always* best to get right to your point. Do not waste your introductory sentences on things that are not absolutely relevant to/reflective of your central argument.

Body:

The Body is the *point* of any essay – it is in this section that you bring out the various layers of your argument and substantiate your points with references. Most body paragraphs will engage with at least one or more of the following: summary, description, analysis, claims and evidence. Thinking about these components at one go can be confusing (and a tad too technical). It is best to conceptualise the Body as a series of paragraphs, each of which makes one complete point.

Paragraphs are the basic units of every academic essay. Treat the paragraph as a self-enclosed entity – it should make one complete point such that it makes sense to the reader independently. Much like the bigger essay, the paragraph will have an introduction, a body and a conclusion. It usually begins with a claim, assertion or topic sentence – these are essentially the point that you're making in the paragraph. It then proceeds to back that claim (or assertion or topic sentence) with evidence. This evidence could be a quote from a text, a paraphrase, a description, etc. It is important that you unpack the relevance of the evidence in connection to your specific claim before you tie the paragraph neatly, often restating the point you have just demonstrated. You can see these colour-coded components in the example below.

Example (Essay 2, pgs 3-4):

Analysing popular representations of social problems is important because individuals draw on these sources when constructing their understandings of issues such as violence against women. The media are perhaps the most dominant and most frequently used resources for understanding social

> issues (Gamson 1992; Kellner 1995). The media culture "helps shape everyday life, influencing how people think and behave, how they see themselves and other people, and how they construct their identities" (Kellner 1995, 2). Newspaper columns, magazine articles, films, made-for-TV movies, television special reports, and talk shows are all public arenas where images of domestic violence are constructed, debated, and reproduced. From these resources, individuals construct their own conceptions of what is normal and acceptable. These conceptions, what Cicourel (1968) calls "background expectancies," govern all social interaction. The background expectancies enable individuals "to search for 'valid' explanations of 'what happened' and justify decisions" (Cicourel 1968, 53). Numerous studies illustrate how media representations and popular culture distort images of social issues such as crime and violence (e.g., Beckett and Sasson 2000; Best 1999; Brownstein 2000; Ferrell and Websdale 1999; Fishman and Cavender 1998; Jenkins 1994; Potter and Kappeler 1996).

That said, a Body may have paragraphs that serve different purposes. Sometimes, you may want to write a paragraph that simply summarises your primary text. On other occasions, you might feel the need to use a paragraph to merely give history or context. Remember, that no rule around writing (apart from your citational rules) is absolute. As long as you are devoting the paragraph to a single point that adds to your larger argument, you are on the correct Writing-and-Structuring track.

For Body paragraphs, the following additional pointers may help:

- A typical paragraph ranges from 200-400 words. It should never become too long or unwieldy.
- Try and keep the size of your paragraphs more or less uniform across the paper.
- Each sentence in your paragraph should logically follow the previous one. Check repeatedly to ensure that you are not making logical leaps between sentences by glossing over a point, referring to an idea from several paragraphs earlier, or alluding to research you have not yet introduced .

Finally, not only is it important to arrange information in a coherent manner within the paragraphs individually, it is equally vital that your paragraphs flow one after the other in a sequential fashion. This will require attention to transitions between paragraphs. For instance, Berns made a transition from the example given above with the following sentence at the start of the consecutive paragraph:

> Because individuals use the media to make sense of social problems, it is important to understand how these media construct images of an issue…

As is clear here, your transition phrases must establish a sense of continuity and connection with what you have written right before. Some easy (and trusty) transition words and phrases include "In contrast to what has been demonstrated above", "Similarly", "On one hand…on the other", "To continue with this line of argument", "In comparison", etc.

Conclusion:

Conclusions are spaces where the author can exercise significant freedom. Of all the components of an essay, these are the least formulaic. They could have combinations of a variety of elements:

- A restatement of the thesis statement
- A restatement of how you have built your argument in the paper (the progression of your smaller claims or questions)
- A brief study of the counter-arguments/limitations/gaps with respect to your argument.
- A map of the implications of your research and further scope.
- The broader significance of your argument within the relevant disciplinary field; especially if you have looked at something very narrow and specific.
- And in some cases: a reference to the hook or anecdote that you began your essay with, creating a full circle effect.

Clearly, you could choose to end your essay in a number of ways. It is however useful to keep in mind one simple rule: endings in academic research should ideally indicate a sense of continuation – that the conversation initiated in the essay by you ties up with a larger ongoing academic conversation which must be continued in research – while tying up the specific piece. You can see this sense of completion and continuation in the following conclusions. You may also try and check how many of the aforementioned elements are present here:

Example 1 (Essay 2, pg 19) :

> Holding victims responsible as illustrated in popular magazines is a common theme in other discourses. Similar strategies as described in the patriarchal-resistance perspective are found in classrooms, Web pages, newspapers, TV shows, and popular books. Counterattacks, competing victimisation, and de-emphasising gender are strategies that are used to divert attention from the everyday violence against women. A more informed debate, whether in the media, classrooms, or academic journals, is needed to uncover the political strategies used to veil issues of gender and power, and to counter the distorted images of men's and women's violence that currently dominate popular discourse.

Example 2 (Essay 1, pg 22):

> There does appear to be hope. Articles calling for social change have appeared in various magazines. Foucault contends that we can learn from these ruptures of dominant discourse. Perhaps, then, we can learn from these rare occurrences in an attempt to alter this discourse. However, as long as these magazines continue to locate the victims' experiences within a discourse that silences the role of the abuser and of society, individuals will continue to not ask, "Why does he hit her?" or "Why does he get away with hitting her?" Even though victims of domestic violence continue to encounter institutional, structural, and cultural barriers that keep them

from leaving, we should not be surprised that people continue to ask "Why doesn't she leave?"

Outline:

As is clear, there are multiple factors and rules regarding structuring that one must keep in mind while writing. However, we all know that writing in itself can be a very frustrating and demanding process. It can be difficult to constantly return to structure when you are struggling to put your ideas on paper and move from one sentence to another. Therefore, a productive and easy way of incorporating structure within your writing processes is to focus on it *before and after* you write.

Before you begin with the actual writing, you can set out the structure or Outline of your essay. This Outline will allow you to stay on track while you are in the midst of the aforementioned frustrating writing process. Outlines can be as rudimentary or detailed and information-heavy as you would like them to be. Some outlines contain simply the thesis statement and the smaller claims being made, arranged in a sequential fashion. Other outlines may contain the exact information that goes into each component of the paper (the Introduction, Body and Conclusion) along with a delineation of the point being made and the quotes (from primary or secondary materials) being used in each paragraph. There are no set rules for creating an Outline because it is meant more as an aid for *you* and your writing process, as opposed to a metric for judging and grading your essay.

Example (gleaned from parts of Essay 1):

OUTLINE

Essay title (tentative): Domestic Violence in Women's Magazines

Word limit: 5000 words

Thesis Statement: How Domestic Violence is portrayed as a 'private' problem, the onus of which falls on the victim, in most popular women's magazines.

Primary Material: *Essence, Glamour, Good Housekeeping, Ladies' Home Journal, Mademoiselle, McCall's, Redbook, Seventeen, 'Teen*, and *Vogue*

Introduction:

1. Context of how domestic violence has been represented as a problem in women's magazines
2. A review of scholarly literature on these representations
3. Thesis Statement and Primary material
4. Methods used in the essay - close-reading the photographs and news-coverage/discourse around this topic in the selected magazines
5. Definitions of domestic violence that are relevant to this essay
6. Limitation: only focusing on heterosexual relationships, American context

Body (to make this section more detailed, you may add entries on the point made in each paragraph under each section. Note point 1 for this example):

1. How it has been portrayed as a Victim's Problem
   - The majority of articles using the individual frame place responsibility solely on the victim.
   - Attributing responsibility solely to the victim is typified by the Good Housekeeping series "My Problem and How I Solved It," in which an anonymous woman relates a case history of an abusive marriage and what she did to solve the problem.
   - Articles that focus primarily on the victims tend to be about women who eventually left the abusive relationship.
   - In these articles, the women say they are telling their stories to encourage other victims of domestic violence to get help.
   - In the 1990s, some articles began appearing that described "what they're doing now." These articles describe the lives of women several years after they got out of abusive relationships.

- The majority of articles that use an individual frame of responsibility focus primarily on the victim. A prevalent question in these articles is "Why do battered women remain in the abusive relationship?"

2. How narratives of battered women who killed their abusers are used to create a counter-discourse of 'accountable' and violent women
3. How it is framed as a private, "couples' problem"
4. The value of bringing in institutional/cultura/structural responsibility as opposed to the victim's

Conclusion:

1. Reiterating the problem and how the victims continue to be held accountable for the social problem of domestic abuse.
2. Establishing hope for a future of a different kind of coverage and understanding of the issue in popular magazines and other media
3. Ending with highlighting the need for more research in this direction to aid this transformation in understanding/coverage.

Once you are finished with writing your essay, you can return to this Outline and pay attention to your flow and structure during the editing process. Remember, the Outline, once made, is not a frozen blueprint of your essay; it will keep growing as you build your arguments and incorporate or exclude sources. The Outline will simply allow you to keep track of your line of thought at each point in the writing process. This will ensure that the resultant essay is coherent and that its components are sequentially arranged.

On Using Citations

by Sidharth Singh

The citation is undoubtedly the most despised tradition within academia—but this might just be because it is also one of the most misunderstood. Note that the word 'plague' is half-suggested every time we say 'plagiarism': that feared epidemic within academia. Indeed, we make our way through university, treating the citation as a painful but necessary vaccine against this disease. We learn that plagiarism is widespread, and citations are for "giving credit where it is due", so our fellow scholars might know that we have not plagiarised and committed academia's cardinal sin.

While this use of a citation is not inaccurate, it is certainly incomplete, a misunderstanding by consequence, and is perhaps as widespread as the problem of plagiarism itself. With this understanding, we find ourselves unable to justify the pedantic rules for composing a citation: why must we italicise some titles but put others in quotes, confuse readers with names in reverse, be strict about an em dash or an en dash, if the point is only to give credit? The result is frustrated compliance with a system we do not understand and a confusion that completely turns people away from research.

The issue here is not merely one of appearance. Indeed, many people assume that our writing will stop looking academic if we fail to use citations. But the problem is that an inability to make full use of citations means that we opt out of a necessary process fundamental to research as writers and readers. From here, we can begin to unravel the knots in our understanding of citations and bibliographies and learn that a citation is a single thread in a weave of texts from a scholarship. When followed, it further leads us to new, varied, and valuable texts which might inform our work. In simpler terms: citations enable us to search re-search.

To be an active participant in a scholarship—the texts written about an idea from a given discipline—one must be a reader and a writer. You read the texts you find, understand them, and use them to inform what you are writing. A scholar, then, should be part of a diverse community of thinkers who actively engage with a particular scholarship by reading and writing about it. But to only think of the citation as proof or credit to other

scholars is to limit its potential use in this context. The citation is also an indication from the writer to a reader (from one scholar to the rest of the community), to investigate what might be a useful reading.

In this sense, to read a citation is only to begin using it, and to write one is to do an academic service. Good researchers do not follow citations to merely verify how original a writer has been. Instead, they attempt to build a whole reservoir of citations and bibliographies to be traced and followed, such that new readings and perspectives may be discovered to inform, and be accounted for, in their own writing. The citations they compose themselves are in turn read by other scholars, and so on.

When thought about in this fashion, the citations in a bibliography cease being the credit roll at the end of a film, and become extensions into new papers to be read. It is vital to understand this because academic writing is defined by a depth in reading about a particular idea; fathoms which bibliographies actively enable us to explore. The more you read, the more your paper will be able to engage with the scholarship at large.

If we understand these fundamental principles on the use of a citation, we might begin to make better sense of its rules which otherwise confound us. Consider the following bibliographic citation, composed in the Chicago style, of Henry David Thoreau's essay 'Walking', from an anthology called *The Making of the American Essay* (2016):

> Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking." In *The Making of the American Essay*, edited by John D'Agata, 167–95. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016.

Imagine you encounter such a citation as you do research for a paper criticising America's imagination of the wilderness in the 19th century. *The Chicago Manual of Style* dictates that the italicised title is the name of a book, the title in quotes the name of an entry (an essay, a poem, a chapter or any such equivalent) within that book, "edited by John D'Agata" with "Thoreau, Henry David" suggests that one has edited a collection and one has composed an entry, 167–95 are the page numbers to locate this entry, and then the city of publication, name of publisher, and year of publication follow.

All this information makes the book distinct from other books and is useful to anyone who might want to search for it. This information is also vital for compiling a database. The last name is written first because it enables smoother alphabetical classification since first names tend to be more common. Similarly, all the rules about full stops, dashes, commas, and quotes enable a system of uniform classification and indexing. This way, anyone searching for a particular book does not walk into chaos every time they walk into a library or archive—physical or digital. The citation helps a researcher know exactly what they are looking for and simultaneously enables a system that allows a text to be easily searchable.

So imagine now if scholars followed no such system for citations. Today one might italicise the name of a chapter and put in quotes the name of a book, do the opposite tomorrow. The day after, nobody, the writer included, might remember what and who wrote when. Scholars would be hindered from searching for the books mentioned in a bibliography. The idea of an index becomes a pipe dream. It is in this scenario, that a citation achieves what we are popularly told it is for: giving credit.

When it comes to citations, one should focus on not so much the rote learning of formats in MLA, Chicago, APA, or any such style system. Those formats are readily available for composition by reference to their respective style guides. We perhaps set the bar too low. It is far more useful to focus on locating in bibliography citations that interest you, following them to new sources that provide new citations, and becoming familiar with this perpetual cycle.

In this way, one goes beyond merely becoming acquainted with the format of citations and begins to develop that fundamental feature which is the hallmark of a good researcher: instinct. Which citations are likely to lead to good material? How do we estimate the value of texts before we spend precious time reading them? Can we learn something about the text if we scan the bibliography before reading the text itself—perhaps something about the author too? These questions become inseparable from the use of a citation. And the answers are valuable because they are helpful in academic work as a whole, far more than a salute to any individual author.