

Essay Writing

Unit 4B – Developing an Argument: Being Critical

INDEPENDENT LEARNING RESOURCES

Learning Centre



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

This unit's place in the whole module:

- Unit 1A How to be analytical:
What is analysis?
- Unit 1B How to be analytical:
Setting up a taxonomy
- Unit 2A How to structure an essay:
Developing an essay structure
- Unit 2B How to structure an essay:
Writing introductions and conclusions
- Unit 3A How to use evidence:
Developing an argument out of the evidence
- Unit 3B How to use evidence:
Supporting your argument with the evidence
- Unit 3C How to use evidence:
Avoiding plagiarism
- Unit 4A How to develop an argument:
Being persuasive
- Unit 4B How to develop an argument:
Being critical**

UNIT 4B **How to develop an argument: Being critical**

OBJECTIVES OF THIS UNIT

After you have finished this unit, we hope you will be able to

- identify the difference between uncritical description, and analytical evaluative writing which demonstrates critical judgement
- recognize and use the language of evaluation in an appropriate way
- develop and present an argument of your own based on a critical presentation of the evidence

IDENTIFYING YOUR PROBLEMS WITH DEVELOPING AN ARGUMENT

If you have been having difficulty in developing the argument of your essay, your marker may have made a comment on your writing similar to these:

- *"Your bibliography is quite extensive and you appear to have read fairly widely. However, I can't see what line you are taking. What is the argument?"*
- *"You have made some good critical comments about the readings, but there does not seem to be an overall argument flowing through your discussion."*

INTRODUCTION TO THIS UNIT

This unit will examine how to be critical of the evidence you are using to answer the essay question. You need to evaluate the evidence because in this way you develop your argument. If you do not evaluate the evidence your essay will read like a collection of summaries on the topic.

1. STAGES IN THE PRESENTATION OF EVIDENCE

In order to structure the presentation of evidence in a critical way, you need to have two stages:

Stage 1 : Summarise evidence

Stage 2 : Evaluate evidence

In your essay, these stages would be repeated many times. Here is an example from a student essay on the tobacco topic:

It is important to recognise that most tobacco is grown by small farmers, often in developing countries (UNFAO, 1977) and the role of the finished product ensures the economic viability of thousands of small retail outlets and thus the jobs and security of many thousands of people (Small Retailers Association Report, 1982). Thus a substantial section of the labour force in both developed and developing counties is supported by the tobacco industry and is not a burden on the state.

SUMMARY

EVALUATION

Exercise 1

In the example just given, is the evaluation made by the writer a positive or a negative evaluation

of the evidence? What do you think this writer's thesis might be? Underline the words or phrases which indicate to you the writer's evaluation.

Exercise 2

Identify the summary and evaluation stages in the following examples of student writing taken from essays on the effects of television on children. Are these positive, negative, or mixed evaluations?

1. *Feshbach and Singer (1976) attempted to resolve these problems and in doing so produced evidence which was totally contrary to earlier results. They claimed that the children in their study who had viewed the violent programmes became less aggressive while those on a non-aggressive diet became more aggressive. It is important to note, however, that their sample was of high school boys who lived in youth centres because their families could not look after them. Moreover their sample was very small and the results were not compared with a control group.*
2. *Television has the potential to educate children. Programmes such as Sesame Street have been carefully planned to foster skills such as learning the alphabet and numbers and also to increase vocabulary. Ball and Bogatz (1984) have shown that the longer children watch Sesame Street, the more proficient they become. Their findings show that children who watched the programmes performed better on tests such as reciting the alphabet than those who did not. Thus, although television can never take the place of individual attention to students, it seems to be the case that television has a useful role to play in introducing basic concepts such as figures and letters and it can enhance formal education.*

However Stein and Friedrich (1976) and Evans (1975) question the goals, content and style of programmes like Sesame St. They ask whether they are appropriate for the way children learn and whether they aid formal education. A further criticism is the way programme material is presented at a great pace which fails to really involve children in an initiative taking role. Therefore, although educational television programs can generally be regarded as a positive influence on the child, the claims regarding their educational value need to be treated with caution.

2. LINKING YOUR EVALUATION OF THE EVIDENCE TO YOUR THESIS

Your evaluation of the evidence needs to be closely linked with your thesis. You need to remind the reader how the evidence relates to the thesis. Look at the following example, to see how the summary and evaluation stages are linked to the thesis being argued.

Stein and Friedrich (1976) introduced the notion of base levels or habitual levels of aggression to explain the individual differences in response to television violence. The idea of habitual levels of aggression assumes that people are placed at different intervals on the aggression continuum. That is, people who have a high level are likely to behave aggressively if provoked while people at lower levels are more passive. This relatively simple theory has far reaching implications for television violence. Several empirical studies have highlighted the fact that television violence is most likely to affect children who are already relatively high in aggressive behaviour. Therefore if a child who is high in aggression (and research seems to suggest that this is most likely to be a male child) is watching TV for long periods of time, he is prone to observe violence and these acts may

easily trigger his own aggressive behaviour. In the light of such convincing theoretical and empirical evidence the claim that modern children are spending so many hours in front of the television is indeed alarming, if not frightening, especially in terms of the aggressive child.

Exercise 3

Now we will look at a simplified version of a whole essay. This will help you to understand how to sequence your summaries and evaluations of evidence to develop your argument to support your thesis statement. The simplified essay is based on the essay written by Prue for the question about the effect of television on children. The paragraphs are in a jumbled order. Read all the paragraphs and try to work out what their purpose is, that is, which of the following stages they are in the essay's structure:

Stages:INTRODUCTION

CONCLUSION

PRESENT EVIDENCE TO CONFIRM THESIS

PRESENT EVIDENCE THAT CONTRADICTS THESIS

CRITICISE EVIDENCE

Paragraphs in jumbled order:

- a) *In these studies, no real harm comes to person or property and so they do not show whether imitation of an aggressor who does do damage or is reprimanded by someone in authority would occur. While the studies of Bandura and his colleagues (Huoton, Ross and Ross, 1976) show that in some circumstances children will imitate televised violence, they fail to show the conditions under which children will carry out aggressive behaviour already in their repertoire, nor the factors making it more or less likely, for example, parental explanations, the favourable or unfavourable outcome of the violence, whether it is seen as fantasy or reality. These shortcomings motivated scientists to study the effects of televised aggression in more natural settings.*
- b) *Although many controls and regulations have been introduced to enhance the quality of children's programs in Australia, violence and crime still seem to filter through. The common finding across most age groups is that this television violence and crime instigates aggressive behaviour. Therefore, the claim that "modern children spend more hours in front of television than they spend at school" is indeed cause for alarm. For the young pre-schooler, the child with a high base level of aggression, and the unsupervised "latch-key" child, the implications of television violence are quite serious.*
- c) *As television has been labelled an "influential teacher" by many professionals, the claim that "modern children spend more hours in front of television than they spend at school" is definitely worth further investigation. If it is found that the quality and content of the children's programs promote the development of social and cognitive skills then these citations have no relevance. Unfortunately however many studies show that children's television is lacking and is even, in some instances, harmful. The devastating effects of television violence on the development of the child's aggressive nature is one of the main concerns when evaluating the effects of television on children.*
- d) *Typically, two films similar in length, use of colour, identity of the acts and the character of the situation are shown. One film also shows distinctive and novel aggressive behaviours while the other does not, and in the post-film sessions, the different children*

who viewed the films are compared for their aggressive behaviours. Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961, 1963) showed that young children were intrigued by displays of violence, and that given the opportunity, they would readily mimic them. In a typical study, children were allowed to watch a live or filmed model or a cartoon in which the hero made aggressive verbal statements or played aggressively with a toy, for example, an inflatable rubber toy. Then the children were left alone in a room full of toys and their words and behaviour were observed and recorded. In all the studies, the children imitated the model's behaviour whether gentle or aggressive, with the imitation more pronounced if the model's actions brought a reward or if the model had been kind to the child.

- e) *Feshbach and Singer (1971) attempted to answer this question, and in doing so produced evidence totally contrary to earlier predictions. They secured control of the television diet of pre-adolescent and adolescent boys in four residential youth centres whose families could not care for them and in three private schools. For six weeks, the boys saw either all aggressive television (westerns, crime, wrestling) or all non-aggressive television (comedies, talk, variety and prize shows, benign cartoons) while concurrent daily measurements of aggression in the boys were made. Those on a non-aggressive diet showed more aggression than those on an aggressive diet, who showed reduced aggression. Trends were only significant for subjects in the lower-class boys' homes, but parallel trends were observed in elementary, junior-high and high school boys, and declines in aggression were greatest for boys initially aggressive. The boys who had seen aggression on television also became less verbally aggressive towards authority and peers, except on a fantasy measure when they were more aggressive than the control group.*

3. THE LANGUAGE OF EVALUATION

There are a number of different types of evaluations that can be made:

- a) **Identifying strengths or weaknesses in the evidence**
*"the findings are **impressive** but there are **problems**" (shortcomings, difficulties)*
- b) **Identifying what is missing or what is present**
*"subsequent reputable studies found **no** evidence"
"however the experiments **fail** to show"
"some factors which are **not taken into account**"
"the detailed study **was able to provide** convincing evidence"*
- c) **Attaching positive or negative qualities**
*"the findings are **impressive**"
"the **detailed** study was able to provide **convincing** evidence"
"it is **important** to note, however, that "
"it is **important** to recognise that "
"the experimental data, while not being **wholly consistent or conclusive**"
"subsequent **reputable** studies"*
- d) **Showing different degrees of certainty**
*"the experimental setting **may** still be too artificial"
"the children **may** not understand"
"it is **unlikely** that the children"
"the children **probably** did not understand"
"it is **probable** that..."*

- e) **Quantifying**
"a vast amount of experimental data"
"their sample was very small"

- f) **Attaching comments which add meaning to the whole idea**
"significantly, this only applied to"
"unfortunately,...."
"it is important to note that..."

Exercise 4

Look at the sample essay on the economic effects of use at the end of Unit 3A. In this sample essay identify the language of evaluation. The writer's thesis is that the tobacco industry is an economic burden. Re-write this essay so that your thesis is the opposite. Now you will have to re-arrange the same pieces of evidence to support a different thesis and develop a different argument. Your evaluations of the evidence will be critical in developing this different argument.

ANSWER KEY ESSAY MODULE

Unit 4B

How to develop your argument: Being critical

Exercise 1

This text is making a positive evaluation of the evidence, towards the argument that the economic effects of tobacco use are positive. The words which contribute to making this evaluation are underlined:

It is important to recognise that most tobacco is grown by small farmers, often in developing countries (UNFAO, 1977) and the role of the finished product ensures the economic viability of thousands of small retail outlets and thus the jobs and security of many thousands of people (Small Retailers Association Report, 1982). Thus a substantial section of the labour force in both developed and developing countries is supported by the tobacco industry and is not a burden on the state.

Exercise 2

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|--|--|
| 1. Feshbach and Singer (1976) attempted to resolve these problems and in doing so produced evidence which was totally contrary to earlier results. They claimed that the children in their study who had viewed the violent programmes became less aggressive while those on a non-aggressive diet became more aggressive. It is important to note, however, that their sample was of high school boys who lived in youth centres because their families could not look after them. Moreover their sample was very small and the results were not compared with a control group. | SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

SUMMARY

EVALUATION (negative) |
| 2. Television has the potential to educate children. Programmes such as Sesame Street have been carefully planned to foster skills such as learning the alphabet and numbers and also to increase vocabulary. Ball and Bogatz (reference not given) have shown that the longer children watch Sesame Street, the more proficient they become. Their findings show that children who watched the programmes performed better on | Thesis statement
SUMMARY

EVALUATION (positive) |

tests such as reciting the alphabet than those who did not. Thus, although television can never take the place of individual attention to students, it seems to be the case that television has a useful role to play in introducing basic concepts such as figures and letters and it can enhance formal education.

(positive)

However Stein and Friedrich (1976) and Evans (1975) question the goals, content and style of programmes like Sesame St. They ask whether they are appropriate for the way children learn and whether they aid formal education. A further criticism is the way programme material is presented at a great pace which fails to really involve children in an initiative taking role. Therefore, although educational television programs can generally be regarded as a positive influence on the child, the claims regarding their educational value need to be treated with caution.

EVALUATION (Taken from another source)

(negative)

EVALUATION
(Summarising final position)
(mixed evaluation)

Exercise 3

SIMPLIFIED ESSAY IN THE RIGHT ORDER

Note: this has not been written originally in just these five paragraphs. This means that this simplified essay does not flow very well, because there are large sections missing. However, the essential structure shows the way that the argument is developed through summary and evaluation of the evidence.

Introduction

As television has been labelled an "influential teacher" by many professionals, the claim that "modern children spend more hours in front of television than they spend at school" is definitely worth further investigation. If it is found that the quality and content of the children's programs promote the development of social and cognitive skills then these citations have no relevance. Unfortunately however many studies show that children's television is lacking and is even, in some instances, harmful. The devastating effects of television violence on the development of the child's aggressive nature is one of the main concerns when evaluating the effects of television on children.

Present evidence to confirm thesis

Typically, two films similar in length, use of colour, identity of the acts and the character of the situation are shown. One film also shows distinctive and novel aggressive behaviours while the other does not, and in the post-film sessions, the different children who viewed the films are compared for their aggressive behaviours. Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961, 1963) showed that young children were intrigued by displays of violence, and that given the opportunity, they would readily mimic them. In a typical study, children were allowed to watch a live or filmed model or a cartoon in which the hero made aggressive verbal statements or played aggressively with a toy, for example, an inflatable rubber toy. Then the children were left alone in a room full of toys and their words and behaviour were observed and recorded. In all the studies, the children imitated the model's behaviour whether gentle or aggressive, with the imitation more pronounced if the model's actions brought a reward or if the model had been kind to the child.

Criticise evidence

In these studies, no real harm comes to person or property and so they do not show whether imitation of an aggressor who does do damage or is reprimanded by someone in authority would occur. While the studies of Bandura and his colleagues (Huoton, Ross and Ross, 1976) show that in some circumstances children will imitate televised violence, they fail to show the conditions under which children will carry out aggressive behaviour already in their repertoire, nor the factors making it more or less likely, for example, parental explanations, the favourable or unfavourable outcome of the violence, whether it is seen as fantasy or reality. These shortcomings motivated scientists to study the effects of televised aggression in more natural settings.

Present evidence to contradict thesis

Feshbach and Singer (1971) attempted to answer this question, and in doing so produced evidence totally contrary to earlier predictions. They secured control of the television diet of pre-adolescent and adolescent boys in four residential youth centres whose families could not care for them and in three private schools. For six weeks, the boys saw either all aggressive television (westerns, crime, wrestling) or all non-aggressive television (comedies, talk, variety and prize shows, benign cartoons) while concurrent daily measurements of aggression in the boys were made. Those on a non-aggressive diet showed more aggression than those on an aggressive diet, who showed reduced aggression. Trends were only significant for subjects in the lower-class boys' homes, but parallel trends were observed in elementary, junior-high and high school boys, and declines in aggression were greatest for boys initially aggressive. The boys who had seen aggression on television also became less verbally aggressive towards authority and peers, except on a fantasy measure when they were more aggressive than the control group.

Conclusion

Although many controls and regulations have been introduced to enhance the quality of children's programs in Australia, violence and crime still seem to filter through. The common finding across most age groups is that this television violence and crime instigates aggressive behaviour. Therefore, the claim that "modern children spend more hours in front of television than they spend at school" is indeed cause for alarm. For the young pre-schooler, the child with a high base level of aggression, and the unsupervised "latch-key" child, the implications of television violence are quite serious.