CRITICAL WRITING STRATEGIES

This writing guide details three key rhetorical strategies used in academic writing. A rhetorical function explains the relation between two units of text. The smallest unit is a sentence or a clause; units can be as big as paragraphs or sections. The rhetorical function is useful to describe what is happening in a text. In academic writing, you will need to describe, analyse and evaluate at different times. Good academic will go beyond description to include analysis and evaluation.

# Describe

There are a number of techniques for describing in academic writing. One common technique is to elaboratei.e. to give more detail about your topic. Here is a list of ways in which you can give more detail:

General > Specific: common in Introductions, Backgrounds or any opening paragraphs. The topic (first) sentence in a paragraph would be a general statement and then you elaborate on this by adding more detailed information to support the general statement. This structure is often used to introduce a thesis statement.

Part > Whole (also called Specific > General):common in the Discussion section, where you argue or draw conclusions from your results and observations. Also used to discuss patterns and trends but these are based on your research (if they are generally known then this is a **General > Specific** pattern.

Process > Step:used to describe procedures and instructions as well as processes. The steps described are usually presented in sequence. The types of steps may include events, actions and measures taken.

Set > Member:used to classify, categorise or describe any groups with shared characteristics (e.g. people, organisms, ideas). Often used to talk about ‘types’ (genres) of something.

Object > Feature:used to describe the ‘parts’ that a particular object/ phenomenon/ idea is composed of. These features are sometimes called attributes, properties, elements, components or characteristics. If you want to talk about, for example, a system or software or landscape or data, you would start by describing its features.

There are also more complex ways of describing. You will need to use these before you start to analyse*.* The most common of these are:

* Giving **examples**
* Providing **definitions**
* Describing **methods**

After you have described your topic or your concept in detail using these techniques, you will be ready for analysis.

# Analyse

You can’t start analysing until you have described everything otherwise the reader won’t know what you are talking about! However, analysis is the main part of any research or assignments you will have to write because this is where you show your understanding. Here is a list of different techniques for analysing in your subject.

## Explaining techniques

Give Evidence**:** used to support your position (stance) in an argument. Different types of evidence include references, quotations, paraphrases and statistics.

Give Reasons:used to explain *why* *.* This could be why you believe what you believe (your claim), or the reasons why something happened or is happening,

Give Factual Explanations:these are different from reasons because they are based on events that have actually happened or phenomena that are known to exist. There must be proof for a factual explanation (although you do not need to present the proof in your writing).

## Comparing and contrasting

Make a Comparison: this is an important basic analysis technique that looks at similarities and differences. It can help you decide which of two or more phenomena/objects are more appropriate or useful. It can also help you understand how much your analysis items actually have in common, which can be useful for your evaluation. Remember to compare for a purpose (i.e. to test a hypothesis or answer a question).

Make a Contrast: this a specific kind of comparison, where you analyse the differences between the object of your current research and another object that you are not researching. For example, my research may compare London to Birmingham but I may contrast both of them with my home city (e.g. Abu Dhabi).

Draw an Analogy**:** this is a comparison between a) something unknown and usually quite complicated and b) something that is easier to understand or imagine. For example, conducting business can be analysed using the analogy of a video game or comparing human memory to computer RAM.

Make a Concession**:** this is an important part of writing because when you make an argument for or against something, it is important to give the other side of the argument and the limitations of your own argument. A concession is an admission that the opposing side has a good point. Concessions are especially effective when a writer can agree partially with the opposing position, but also point out a flaw.

## Showing connections – Cause and Effect

Finding Causes:causes are events or changes that influence something and produce an effect. For example, some people argue that global warming is the cause of climate change. So causes explain how something happens (cf. reasons which explain ‘why’ something happens).

Finding Results:these explain the impact of an event or the **effect** of a change.

## Evaluate

After describing and analysing the main objects and concepts, your next key question is “So what?” This is where you judge the success, discuss the implications and assess the value of your analysis. *Whenever you analyse, you need to evaluate.* This also means drawing conclusions, making recommendations, making comments and individual points. Good analysis helps you to pass your assignments; good evaluation helps you get better marks.

### Ways of evaluating

Make an Evaluation:there are different types of evaluation such as:

* appraisal (how important is it?),
* estimation (what is the value?),
* rating (how good is it?),
* interpretation (what does it mean?),
* assessment (what can I make of it?).

All of them involve giving your *verdict* on a statement/ analysis/research findings.

Draw a Conclusion:this can be at the end of a section or a paragraph, not only the end of an essay. It will *sum up the main ideas* the previous sentences/paragraphs/chapters and make the reader feel that this is the end of the topic/discussion/argument.

Suggest a Solution:a common structure used in paragraphs (and frequently in whole sections and essays) is to present problems and then suggest solutions. You should also **Evaluate the Solution** (using the Evaluation techniques mentioned above).