

# Evaluative Writing

Evaluation other writers' arguments is an important part of almost all academic writing, since every time you use a text in an essay, you need to decide how reliable the information is, and whether the argument is valid. In addition, much academic writing consists solely of evaluation; i.e., the main purpose of the essay is to evaluate the argument(s) in one or more texts.

## 1 Analysing the text

### 1.1 Context

Writing does not occur in a vacuum. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Who wrote the text? Do you know anything about him/her? Does the author seem to have a particular perspective (religious, political etc.)?
2. Where was it published (academic journal, newspaper, textbook)?
3. Is the author discussing a particular country/society?
4. When was the text written? Is it influenced by historical circumstances? Have things changed since it was written?
5. What is the overall tone/style of the writing (debate, explanation, propaganda)?

You probably will not choose to mention most of these points in your writing, but it is worth keeping them in mind.

### 1.2 Structure of the argument

1. What is the author's main argument? Do you agree, partially agree or disagree?  
HINT: look in the introduction for a thesis statement, then look at the conclusion.
2. What supporting arguments are there? Do they really support the main argument? Are they necessary for the main argument (i.e., could the main argument be true even if some of the supporting arguments are false)?  
HINT: Look at the beginning of each section of the body.
3. How does the author define key terms? Do you agree with these definitions or are there problems with them?
4. What assumptions does the author make? Are they true? If not, does this make all or part of the argument invalid?

It is a good idea to try and make a diagram of the argument, with premises/assumptions at the top and the main conclusion at the bottom.

### 1.3 Argumentative technique

1. What examples does the author give? Are they accurate and appropriate?
2. Does the author make generalisations? How valid are they?
3. Does the author use analogy to make his/her points? Are these analogies appropriate?
4. Does the author use unfair methods of arguing (e.g. *ad hominem* or straw man arguments)?
5. Does the author use emotive language? Does this damage the argument?
6. If the author is explaining a phenomenon, is the explanation unnecessarily complicated or implausible (remember Occam's razor)?

## 2 Organisation

The simplest way to evaluate a text is first to summarise the author's argument and then to give your own evaluation of it. However, except for very simple arguments, this often does not work well, since you will end up repeating points you made in the summary. A better way to organise your essay is point by point.

1. Introduction
  - (a) Any background information you feel is necessary. *Keep this brief!*
  - (b) The author's main argument, and whether you are arguing for or against it.
  - (c) The principal supporting arguments and/or assumptions.
2. First point
  - (a) What the author says
  - (b) Why this is valid or invalid
3. Second point
  - (a) What the author says
  - (b) Why this is valid or invalid

4. *n*th point
  - (a) What the author says
  - (b) Why this is valid or invalid
5. Conclusion — restatement of the author's main argument, to what extent it is valid and why.

### 3 Language

#### 3.1 Referring to the author's ideas

The way you refer to what the author says can often indicate how valid you think his/her ideas are. In particular, your choice of reporting verbs is important.

##### Neutral reporting verbs

Jones *says/argues* that ...

These verbs do not indicate agreement or disagreement.

##### Reporting verbs implying agreement

Jones *explains/shows/demonstrates/observes/points out* that ...

In all these cases, you are implying that what the author says is a fact.

##### Reporting verbs implying scepticism

Jones *claims/assumes* that ...

Jones *makes the claim/assumption* that ...

Here you are not explicitly disagreeing with the author (yet), but are implying that his/her ideas are not proven.

You can also add words to a reporting statement to give a clearer idea of your position.

Jones argues *correctly* that ...

Jones argues, *without much evidence* that ...

Jones makes the *questionable/dubious* assumption that ...

Jones makes the *valid* point that ...

### 3.2 Giving your own opinions

Evaluative writing is essentially giving your opinions about another person's opinions. However, this is *not* what is called for:

Madsen argues that Confucianism will be the “hegemonic ethic” of this century. I disagree.

If you agree or disagree with a point the author makes, you need to say *why*. If you do this effectively, you will rarely, if ever, need phrases like “I (dis)agree” or “In my opinion this is (in)valid.” Here is an alternative version of the previous paragraph:

Madsen argues that Confucianism will be the “hegemonic ethic” of this century. This view *may be challenged on* three points: firstly, he *assumes* that there is a unified ideology which unites East Asian countries (Confucianism, *as he sees it*); secondly, he *ignores* the similarities and exaggerates the differences between Western and Asian values, and finally he *gives too little importance to* the possibility that values which are effective in Asia may not be transferrable to other countries.

The phrases in italics all indicate disagreement without the need to say explicitly “I disagree.”

Some useful language:

This *view*  
*theory* *assumes* that ...  
*claim* *rests on the assumption*  
*argument*

This *view*  
*theory* is *supported* by the fact that ...  
*claim* *disproved*  
*argument*

This *view*  
*theory* may be *criticised* on the grounds that ...  
*claim* *challenged*  
*argument*

The *view*  
*theory* that ... is *questionable* , since ...  
*claim* *invalid*  
*argument*

A *strong* *view*  
*weak* point of this *theory* is that ...  
*claim*  
*argument*

Note that in each case, “this” may be replaced by the author’s name, e.g. “Smith’s view”, “Madsen’s argument”.

## 4 A few general points

1. Don't forget to include citations for all the author's points that you mentioned, whether they are direct quotes or paraphrases.
2. You only need to use the full name of the author once; after that use only his/her surname. To avoid repetition, you can refer to the idea rather than the author, as in the examples given in the previous section ("this view", "this theory" etc.).
3. Remember that texts you read will often include the author's evaluation of *other* authors' ideas. Be careful not to get your authors mixed up!
4. Try to keep your evaluation fair and balanced. It is unusual for an argument to be 100% true or 100% false, so avoid language which implies this, e.g. "perfect", "nonsensical", "totally wrong", "absolutely true".