

## Discussing the literature

We all make mistakes when we write, no matter who we are. We fail to apply elementary tests of logic to determine whether one idea does in fact lead to another. We rely on partial, untested evidence. We use language in a misleading, inconsistent way without reflecting on its hidden implications.

These three types of mistake cover virtually all of the points of criticism you need to identify as you discuss your sources, so develop the habit of checking for them routinely by using the following checklist.

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### Criticism and evaluation – checklist

<b>Evaluating arguments</b>	1	What are the key claims made by the author?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2	Does she develop them consistently?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	3	Do her conclusions follow from the reasons she gives?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	4	Does she leave some parts undeveloped which could lead to alternative conclusions?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	5	Have any assumptions been made without acknowledging them?	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Evaluating evidence</b>	1	Does she use enough reliable evidence to back up her arguments?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2	What kind of evidence is it, and does she describe it accurately? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From primary or secondary sources?</li> <li>• Statistical – how is it described? Is it accurate?</li> <li>• Anecdotal – how reliable/ representative is this?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	3	Does she draw reasonable inferences from it to develop her arguments? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does she draw conclusions that are too strong?</li> <li>• Is the evidence relevant to her arguments?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	4	Are her inferences relevant?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	5	What alternative inferences can be drawn from the evidence?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	6	What do other authors have to say about this?	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Evaluating language</b>	1	Is she consistent in the way she uses words or do they mean different things at different times?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2	Is the meaning of her arguments obscured by the use of jargon and abstractions?	<input type="checkbox"/>
	3	Do you need to analyse concepts to reveal the hidden implications of her arguments?	<input type="checkbox"/>

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## What sort of argument is it?

- 1 Are the assumptions purely factual?
- 2 Are there value judgements that the author hasn't revealed?
- 3 Are there concepts about which you should ask, 'But what does he mean by this?'
- 4 Has he made clear all of his assumptions or does he rely on some that are unstated?

## Critically evaluating an author's use of evidence

- 1 Does she have enough relevant and reliable evidence?
- 2 How does she describe it? Does she exaggerate or understate it?
- 3 Does she draw reliable inferences from it?
- 4 Does she draw relevant inferences from it?

## Is the author's use of statistics reliable?

- 1 Are her generalisations based on a sufficient number?
- 2 Are they a fair sample?
- 3 Is there a reasonable probability that they are true?
- 4 Has she used simple absolutes, like 'all', where other **qualifiers**, like 'some', would be more accurate?
- 5 Has she presented her evidence with enough precision?
- 6 Where she uses them, is it clear what she means by 'typical', 'normal' and 'average'?
- 7 Where she uses **averages**, has she chosen the right type to use: mean, median or mode?
- 8 Where she uses **statistics** are there ...
  - 8.1 *hidden qualifications*;
  - 8.2 *uniformity between the comparisons she makes*;
  - 8.3 *confusion between absolute and comparative figures*?

## Evaluating the causal inferences an author draws: are they invalid?

- 1 Has she committed the **post hoc fallacy**?
- 2 Has she confused a **cause** with a **correlation**?
- 3 Has she assumed that there is a **single cause**, when in fact there may be many? And, obversely, where she has assumed that there are many causes operating, is there just one single underlying cause?

## Has the author drawn irrelevant inferences?

Check whether she has...

- 1 sidestepped the weaknesses in her argument by **discrediting those who drew attention to them**;
- 2 appealed to **popular opinion** to bolster her argument;
- 3 diverted attention away from criticism by appealing to an **authority**;
- 4 attempted to promote her own argument by raising **fears** about accepting her opponent's;

- 5 or encouraged you to accept her argument on the basis that it is the most reasonable **compromise** between two undesirable extremes.

## Synthesis – laying the foundations for your own alternative approach to the problem

Work through the following stages in your synthesis:

- 1 First draw connections between your own research topic and the sources you have reviewed to show how your topic fits into this.
- 2 Briefly sum up your evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the main sources and the gaps they leave.
- 3 Now create your own structure of ideas out of the differences and similarities you found in your sources. In this stage use the ideas we created using the methods we learned in Chapter 12 where we synthesised the arguments, ideas and analyses of different sources to lay the basis of our alternative approach.
- 4 We then adapted these structures, using the four strategies we learned in Chapter 11 to find a new way of approaching the problem either by ...
  - changing the structure;
  - approaching it from a different direction;
  - starting from a different point of view;
  - or by creating a new structure.
- 5 Finally, show how your alternative approach, the new ideas, methods and procedures, represents a significant advance and will fill the gaps you have identified.

For more information, see *How to Write Your Literature Review*, Chapter 20.