

HILLSIDE MURDER

Critical analysis in Research

Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water. Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after. Accident or Murder? Did Jack simply fall or was he pushed? Is Jill a murderess?

The art of critical thinking and analysis is the art of asking questions and weighing up the evidence. It is the art of identifying arguments and evaluating what they are saying by examining the evidence and reasoning fairly as to their validity. In order to do this you need to understand how an argument is constructed and presented. You need to be able to see where there is any possible bias in the argument and whether there are any understated assumptions.

You do this every day of your life. For example, when you read a newspaper and form an opinion on the topic. An article presents an argument: you as the reader weigh up the arguments for and against and then form a view. Arguments are there to persuade people of the validity of a certain point of view – this may be explicit or implied and can be valid or flawed. As academics and thinkers, what we need to do is ask whether the argument exists at all, whether it stands up to scrutiny and whether its conclusions are sound.



KEY IDEAS

Critical analysis means you have to consider and evaluate the claims made by others (more often than not theorists on a particular subject) and ask yourself if the basis of these claims are valid and relevant to your own argument. Thinking critically involves analysing critically and then explaining your analysis. You do this by informing yourself on the subject, conceptualising the key ideas being discussed, listening and asking questions, reasoning, defining understanding and refining your thought processes.

Think about Jack and Jill. What is the first thing a police officer at the scene would do? This is the first stage of critical analysis – research into the facts, asking for clarity and definition and making sure the facts as presented are correct.

Then follows detailed examination and contextualisation. This is the second stage of critical analysis – a process of depth and breadth. Questions you could ask include the usual 5 Ws: Who, What, Where, When, and Why? You question whether there are there any hidden factors that need to be taken into account: did the author have an agenda? When was the article written – is it still relevant? It is important to have theoretical underpinning that supports your own view point – by using the theories of others you provide evidence to support your own ideas.



KEY READINGS

Bell, J. (2014). *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Cottrell, S. (2011). *Critical thinking skills: Developing effective analysis and argument*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hart, C. (1998). *Doing a Literature Review*. London: Sage.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Before you start, use a dictionary to find the meaning of the words in the glossary below, this will help you answer the questions.**
2. Read a newspaper article. Explain it to your partner. Try using a narrative device such as 'X argues that...' to explain its content. Try using synonyms for the verb in each sentence to make your sentences more complicated.
3. Can you use the synonyms you have chosen as signposts to imply what you think about the article?
4. Now change the synonyms to antonyms – can you persuade your partner that you have a different view of the article?

Glossary

Synonym

Signposts

Antonyms

Verb