SAGE Study Skills

READING CRITICALLY *at* University

Mike Metcalfe

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Dedication

To Katie and Rachael on their graduation, and to Joan for a lifetime's support.

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SAGE Publications Inc.
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Intent

Our quest is to find new ways of seeing the world.

Introduction

The need

What is the core competency of graduates? How do they distinguish themselves from non-graduates? What is their distinct competitive advantage compared with an experienced practitioner? Workplace experience can only be gained in the workplace, by those struggling amidst its day-to-day demands. This sort of knowledge is not born and nurtured in universities. So, what is?

This book is designed around the assumption that 'thinking' is the core competency of the graduate, more specifically, 'applied critique'. This means an ability to critique contemporary problems systematically and constructively, using multiple stances methodically. This is a core competency, which can later be thoughtfully evolved through experience in the workplace. Applied critique is knowledge that stands the test of time by providing the generic skill to evaluate any particular problem, technique, fad or common-sense solution that comes over the horizon, whether at home, at work or in your community. Graduation means developing this competency to critique tomorrow's problems constructively. This book aims to help with this task.

The alternatives to critique as a core competency of graduates have been overemphasised. Imparting enthusiasm intended to motivate lifelong absorption of new information is a popular teaching theory at present. This is commendable at one level but some skill in how to process this information is still required, especially given the ever-increasing volume of low-grade information being generated on the Internet, through the popular media and in some textbooks. A more sustainable competency is required to assist the graduate to deal with the ever-changing world.

This book, then, is for those who face the problem of wanting to develop their multiple-stance 'critiquing' skills. What is critiqued is not so important when developing the skill. It may be any written or spoken 'passage of words', an article, book, story, play, speech or a lecture. It could be a photograph, a film, a painting, scenery or a drawing. Often it is intended to influence you, like political speeches, employer's plans, community gossip and entertainment. Critique, however, is not just thinking to yourself, but also involves convincing and influencing others, hopefully as part of a process of improving the world. There is an intricate recursion between reading, writing and

thinking, especially when interacting with other people. Therefore, this book takes critique beyond the stage of just thinking, to that of constructing critique statements which can be developed into a well-argued and coherent written critique. Thoughts can be improved by communication; the act of communication alters what is thought.

Human activity can be studied from a range of views, viewpoints, worldviews, perspectives, lenses, frames, conceptual frames, interpretations, methods, models, paradigms, theories, angles, approaches and stances. What is 'seen' involves some 'stance' taken by our brain to process the confusing multitude of messages that come to it through our senses: our eyes, ears, skin and noses. So a scientific stance would 'see' some human activity in terms of physical and measurable objects in motion due to some cause and effect. A feminist stance would see the same human activity through women's experiences, and a historic stance would see the events that led up to the activity. I have chosen the word 'stance' to represent this concept because it carries with it a hint of someone looking at the world, and a hint of ideology in the way they look. Also, many of the other words carry with them a bit too much baggage, including in some cases doubt that they can be easily altered. Can we jump meaningfully from one paradigm or one worldview to another? It will be assumed we can alter our stance at will. Each critique stance provides a different set of sensory inputs.

A further example may help. If people's motivation was being critiqued using the multiple-stance approach, then a 'social critical theory' (emancipation) stance would promote questions such as, 'Do they want to be motivated?' and 'Is employee motivation too divisive and not in their best interest?' A 'metaphoric' stance would encourage questions about the roots of the words. 'Employee' can be contrasted with 'colleague', 'mate' and 'expert'. The word 'motivation' would appear to have engineering roots, as in 'motion' and 'locomotion'. Perhaps a more social concept like encourage (from courage) would be more humane. A 'Marxian' stance might encourage questions like what the underlying tensions are that have created this condition of a lack of motivation. A 'systems' stance, on the other hand, would try and make explicit the purpose of the group, the purpose of studying the group and focus on the members' relationships with themselves and relevant technical artefacts.

Those students enthused by stances such as the empowerment of minorities, and the emancipation of the disadvantaged, are applauded, but may find this book insufficiently heroic. Feminism, history, culture, linguistics and critical social theory have developed their own unique critical stance on world events. These are not revisited here. Rather this book will be more suited to those with a desire to design complex socio-technical systems like their community, institutions or businesses; to improve the world through redesign. It is for those who appreciate the world as made up of designs which can and will be evaluated from numerous stances – some justifiable, some not. Therefore, its revolutionary zeal is in opposing a one-stance world. It wants instead to develop stance

flexibility pragmatically. Put more directly, this book is intended for students of innovative and creative organisation, governance as designing human groups, rather than for students of literature, mathematics, injustice or revolution.

There has been some agonising over the title of the book. As will be elaborated later, the terms critique and critical are used informally as well as formally with potential readers, and the author is in no position to demand a standardised terminology. Here the 'literature' meaning of critical is the most relevant, as in the title 'film critic'. The word 'critical' is avoided in this book because it is rather discipline specific. In medicine it means 'nearly dead', in nuclear physics it means 'about to explode', in social theory it means to 'critique' society. In everyday speech is has negative connotations. Perhaps more relevant is why the author was tempted to present the book as creative problem solving, decision making, innovation, or creative design. This is because the practice of trying to critique some situation, by looking at it through artificially generated stances, is likely to result in novel insight. An example is provided by an old engineering problem of designing some way of allowing cross-country vehicles to traverse a deep ditch. By looking at it from a 'nature' stance the problem was solved as seeing it as analogous to rows of foraging ants needing to cross some gap. The ants lock together front and back in a line so as to lever the front ants across the gap, which then pull the rear ants over. A device was welded onto the front and back of the cross-country vehicles to enable them to do the same. This is creative design, creative problem solving using the same methods called here 'critique'.

This raises the ever-important question 'why'; why critique? Good educational institutions insist on it endlessly, even if they do not call it critique. Avoid an educational process that only provides you with information; rather your brain needs training in how to use information, how to think creatively from that information, how to critique. Critique provides more than creative solutions; it provides emancipation and a sense of freedom. Those who work in the stock market make good money from understanding the dialectic between information and insightful critique. For example, reading in the newspaper that the paper mill sales in some country are down may be critiqued as being a specific indicator of a forthcoming slowdown of the overall economy in that country. Not using paper means companies are not busy. Advantage comes from being able to read between the lines. These insights then need to be applied to some advantage. With financiers this usually means a simple investment decision. For us, this means using the insight to help people better design their world.

The book assumes that like sport and artistic skills, there are some basics that can be taught and practised which will improve everyone's capacity to think creatively, to critique. This skill involves first encouraging people to actively seek new stances on whatever is being thought about. Some people will have great natural talent for this and others will soar with the minimum of explanation. Some will not be impressed, instead

seeking to explain everything in terms of one universal stance, while others will always have a rather deliberate style. This book with its 'how to' style and thirteen demarcated stances is in danger of itself being overly deliberate or instrumental. The author has tried to walk the narrow path between prescription and demonstration, but it is the reader's use of the book that will decide in the end. Please treat the book as merely a collection of examples, a few starting point suggestions, as possible pathways, not as a set of rules. The author therefore sees the whole book as an introduction, a sample, a taster to a skill that needs to be applied constantly throughout life and takes a lifetime to master. It is catch-up for those who have not yet developed an adequate, methodical, critical stance on what they see going on around them and what they say. Apart from appreciating the thirteen stances outlined in this book, a critical stance can be further practised through debate, reasoned argument and listening to the stances of minorities. In its grander intentions, this book tries to offer a life style; how you might want to study life. It is a hybrid between a 'how to', a reference and a life-style book.

The book was written because the author is trying to keep alive an extension of scientific thinking that science often says it rejects but in fact uses in its everyday work. This might be called pluralism, multiple perspectives, soft or critical systems thinking, irony or interpretivism. It is not relativism or non-justified post-modernism. But the author is reluctant to discuss these labels, preferring instead to offer practical advice on how to see the same passage of words from many different stances in a manner that a scientist would accept as rational. Doing this is a very important part of someone's education, not only to make them more creative and innovative but to make them more ethical, compassionate and understanding. To be able to see that other people sense things differently, that things can be sensed differently, is what being self-conscious is all about, what being human is all about. Rather than provide a lecture or speech on the need for multiple stances on the world's affairs, the book takes an inductive approach. It presents numerous situations described in short passages, and provides alternative stances in a deliberate, explained and controlled way. This demonstration is intended to lead by example, to show how the reader might put into practice the ideology that human activity should not be seen through one large theory of everything but rather through a nearly endless array of stances.

While the author has a particular interest in the creative powers of constructive dialectic argument, the other critique stances suggested in this book were selected from many hours of research critique seminars. These were small groups of mainly mature students who were required to critique research articles, four per week, as part of a first-year PhD literature appreciation programme. The early critiques were typically: 'I thought it was boring', 'I thought it was great' or 'I thought it was crap'. After discussion of the argument stance, they became better at seeking the argument in the article and whatever evidence was provided to support that argument. This, in a more

elaborate way, is explained and presented as the first critique stance later in this book. As more literature was read by the seminar group, for example the soft systems literature, this was then developed into a stance to critique the later literature, and so on. It was thought there were two possible finishing lines. Miller's (1956) magic number seven suggests that seven or so stances would have been enough. However, this did not provide enough emphasis on how infinite the number of stances could be. Therefore, it was decided to call a stop at thirteen stances only because this is such a symbolic number. The downside of having so many critique stances is that the methodical reader will get overloaded, and the space to discuss each stance thins out.

Explicitly exploring a critique stance, rather than treating it as some kind of black box that generates questions, is considered to be very important. For example, if critiquing welfare or taxation using the stance of profiteering, power, poverty or liberty then these stances need to defined, bounded and contrasted. An analogy is if you are going to understand the inner working of a human body using ultrasound or X-rays then some understanding of the properties of ultrasound or X-rays is expected to improve understanding of the resulting images. While wanting to avoid an infinite regress, the critique stances need to be critiqued. As the main argument of this book is that thinking involves applying multiple, explicit, critical stances, too much regress has been avoided. Each chapter discusses a different stance, then suggests what questions such a stance generates, and finally provides possible responses to those questions, a critique.

What is critique?

Critique is defined in the *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary* (2003) as:

cri•tique

Noun: a piece of written criticism of a set of ideas, a work of art, etc.
Verb: to write or give your opinion of, or reaction to, a set of ideas, a work of art, etc.

My reservations about this definition are that it does not require a critique to be insightful and does not counter the common usage of 'criticism' as negative. While many writers have given up and now refer to constructive or negative criticism, a different form of defeatism is used in this book, that of referring to critique to mean insightful criticism derived from an explicit stance. Of course, knowing how it is defined does not explain how to undertake a critique.

To get a better idea of what critique is, and how to do it, read the boxed passage below and immediately record your response. What does the passage make you think about?

Whether you like it or not, try to record a series of statements on your thoughts about the passage; '*write or give your opinion of, or reaction to*' the passage.

> Why do dogs have a sense of humour but not cats? To understand you have to go back into the mists of time. Imagine a large pack of dogs huddled in a cave, the snow falling outside. They are tired, cold and hungry because the hunting over the last several days has been a compete failure. They need a sense of humour so one of the dogs can wake up cheerfully and say, 'Who's up for a bit of hunting today?' and survive the temper of the other dogs. On the other hand, cats wake up, feel hungry, go outside, kill something, eat it, and then go back to sleep. No fuss, no need for a sense of humour.
>
> Source: Gorman, 1988

It is useful for you to make explicit your reaction so as to contrast it with my own. Do not let the humorous stance of the passage distract from a serious critique. The passage raises some serious research issues. My list of statements relating to this 'cats and dogs' passage includes that:

- **It raises issues about the evolution of humour.**
- **It raises the complex cognitive issue of the role of emotions in decision making.**
- **It takes no account of the influence of the extensive artificial breeding involved with cats and dogs.**
- **It ignores that humour requires a high level of self-consciousness not present in either cats or dogs. Humans do not become self-conscious (able to see themselves as others do) until they are about 8 years old.**

These will be very different to your statements. That is not important except as a reminder of the beauty of using multiple stances when undertaking a critique. Rather, notice how each critique statement, yours or mine, comes from a different stance. For example, the first of mine sees an evolution issue in the passage, the second sees a decision-making issue with the rules of evidence, the third see issues around interfering in breeding and the last used the critical stance of self-consciousness. This generation of numerous critique statements from what might be called 'intuitive' or non-explicit stances (ideas that suggest themselves only when reading the passage) is commendable in its own right but it is not the approach taken in this book. This book uses multiple explicit stances, not intuitive ones. The two differences may need further distinction. Simply as a result of reading the passage, ideas come into your head. So, for some reason that is hard to explain exactly you may feel there is an unfair assumption in this

passage that the dogs are living in an environment of snow and ice with few food sources, while the cats are living in a land of plenty. This then would be your intuitive critique of the passage, which may be labelled a 'fairness' stance. While you might not be able to explain in detail where this stance came from and intuitive leaps can be very creative, there is a danger that every critique you undertake will use the same stance. This is why this implicit stance approach is not what is being suggested here. Rather, this book explores the approach of setting up numerous explicit, upfront stances that have been thought through and then used to critique some passage.

For example, a 'critical–social' stance advises that the critique recognises any acts of oppression in the passage. Through this you may recognise that the passage can be seen to stigmatise cats as humourless. This, the critique may continue, runs the risk of justifying cruel exploitation and persecution of cats. The approach was to set up an explicit stance and derive a particular critique. Intuitive leaps are still necessary, but ironically, when using multiple explicit stances, they are often more creative. This is perhaps because using both forces the critiquer out of his or her comfort zone. An imposed explicit stance hopefully forces the critiquer to move away from his or her default or intuitive stance. This book will try and demonstrate that explicit stances can generate novel insights, by presenting numerous examples. The book is based on the belief that an essential purpose of critique is to think explicitly, consciously and inquisitively about the stance so as to generate novel and insightful critiques.

Learning from stances

The psychology literature which talks of frames, and the philosophy literature which talks of 'intentions', both suggest that experience and nature provide us with default or intuitive stances, or perhaps combinations of both. When people look at, hear, smell or feel the world around them then their past experiences, coupled with their instincts, act as a stance. Staying with the dog theme, if you had a lot of experience of uncontrolled dogs attacking passers-by, then you could be expected to interpret immediately the sight of a dog tied to a post differently to someone who has extensive experience of dogs being mistreated. This default or experience stance is clearly a useful thing at it enables us quickly to assess familiar problem situations. My doctor has an experience stance that the most likely cause of a cough is a chest infection. This saves him time in correctly diagnosing most coughs. However, when faced with a novel problem, or when a novel solution is required of a situation, then this experience stance can blind us. Insight and innovation seem to arrive when these default stances are challenged.

When I read the dogs and cats passage above I find myself intuitively wanting to critique it from the first stance of 'evolution' theory: does humour evolve, what is its

role in species evolution, is it merely a by-product of individual survival reflexes? This tells me about myself, my real interest, my love of evolution theory and perhaps my concerns with the meaning of life. I appear to have a primary stance on the living world, sourced from my long interest in evolution theory. Can you label your intuitive take on the dogs and cats passage? To exercise our brain and to improve our critique skills we need to take time out to think about our dominant default stance. In my case it was 'evolution'. What are the rules of evolution? One rule includes that, 'more are born than reproduce'; this creates the selection process so necessary for evolution to occur. Can I use this rule to further my critique of the dogs and cats passage? The passage carries the assumption that dogs without a sense of humour will not reproduce and so humourless puppies will not get born. Being an effective critiquer of situations, be it tied-up dogs, coughs or much more complex social situations, is thought to mean at least trying to be aware of what, and perhaps why, you are adopting a stance. To undertake and get the most out of a critique you need to be aware of the stance you are using and to think about the limits of that stance.

Using an imposed explicit stance, especially one that you are a little uncomfortable with, is not expected to destroy your own intuitive creative skills. Just the opposite: the challenge may force you to take completely new intuitive leaps. For example, if I asked you to critique the dogs and cats passage from the stance of 'revealing inherent contradictions' then hopefully it would force you to do two things. One is to think about what is meant by 'inherent contradictions'. What are they, are there examples and types, what are not inherent contradictions? The other thing you might do in response to this imposed stance is force your brain to go where it has rarely gone before and try and synthesise this stance of inherent contractions with the hungry cats and dogs passage. Don't let the simplicity of the passage fool you. Having a challenging stance and a novel passage to critique can still act to exercise your thinking skills. This is a generic skill that is useful to deal with whatever problems come unexpectedly over your horizon at any time during the rest of your life.

Moving on, above you were asked to record 'statements' that came to you as a result of reading the dogs and cats passage. From an evolution stance at least two statements were generated. One was that the passage takes no account of the influence of artificial breeding, and the other that the passage carries the assumption that dogs without a sense of humour will not get to reproduce and so humourless puppies will not get born. It has been found useful to record thoughts resulting from a critique stance in this form. You may want to call them conjectures, propositions, tentative statements or critique statements. Perhaps the only advice on what form they take is to suggest they are 'truth statements', meaning they say something that is either true or not. Alternatively,

make them into conditional statements. Even when critiquing from an explicit stance, statements may start as a rather random, non-mutually exclusive set with a mixed hierarchy. This is fine, but later they will need to be pulled together into a written coherent argument if others are to benefit from your insights. This often acts to cluster the statements usefully so as to suggest some more. This is discussed more towards the end of the book.

Having explained a little what is meant by critique and critiquing from a stance, it may be useful to end this introduction by discussing what critique is not.

- **Many people don't, but a critique can be distinguished from a 'summary' or an 'analysis' and to a lesser extent from a review. To 'summarise' a passage is to prepare a shortened version, identifying what you interpret are the important points.**

- **An abstract is a summary, as is an executive overview.**

- **To analyse is to 'pick apart', to decompose a passage into what you interpret is a useful classification system. An analysis of a mark on the carpet could be its chemical composition. Analysis is seen as the opposite of critique. Systems thinking underlines this distinction by referring to the need both to analyse and to 'synthesise'. Critique as presented here involves a synthesis between the stance and the passage.**

- **To review something, to see it again, is very similar to how critique is being presented here if that second view comes from a new stance. I can review a department by viewing it from an economic stance rather than an efficiency stance. The only distinction from critiquing is that the intent with a critique is to provide some novel insight.**

How to use the book

Given the number of critique stances suggested in the book, and that each is intended merely to be illustrative of other stances you may wish to develop for yourself, it is suggested that you:

1 **Read a few chapters until you get a feel for the overall structure. Each chapter provides a different stance to think about a passage.**

2 **Put the book aside and carefully read the passage you intend to critique.**

3 **Come back to book and scan the Contents page. From this select two likely looking stances, turn to the relevant chapters and read them. If you cannot decide which stances to take then throw a numbered hendecagon (eleven sides).**

4 **Use the questions at the end of the chapter to make statements about your passage. From these statements structure a response argument with supporting evidence. For more on how to write these see the later chapter on writing critiques.**

Many of the passages (presented in boxes) to be critiqued in this book are presented from what has been called a 'grey humour' stance. This has been done deliberately so as to keep the book easy to read and to appeal to a wider range of people. The idea was to stop it becoming discipline specific. By using 'grey cynicism' it is meant to make light of what might otherwise be seen as a sad situation. This should not distract from developing critiquing skills for what readers see as more serious or important situations.

1 Using Argument to Critique

Critique the following passage by highlighting the message, the point the passage makes. This might also be called the moral, the conclusion or the argument of the passage.

Few people will know where Invercargill is, the New Zealand one that is. It is a little town on the very southern tip of the real 'God's Own Country'. It must be a contender for the town closest to the Antarctic. For people growing up there in the 1950s and 1960s it must have felt fairly isolated despite the lovely countryside.

This story involves a young lad, about 11 years old, trying to make a little pocket money from a paper-round. You need to imagine a paper-round in Invercargill in those days. It involved going from one fairly remote house to another, often before dawn in the cold and rain. He did this lonely chore on his heavy old bicycle. One morning the lad arrived at the newsagent to pick up his papers and there was this dog he had never seen before sitting outside the newsagency. He noticed how very friendly it was, so he gave it a few strokes. On the way out the dog was still there, still being friendly, so the boy encouraged it to go with him on his lonely round. The dog looked extremely pleased and full of life. When the boy threw the first newspaper onto the porch of a house, the dog ran and fetched it back. It turned out to be a very long morning.

Is the claim, the argument, the passage makes:

- **that planning goes wrong, even in simple situations,**
- **that we need to reveal our own assumptions about situations,**
- **that if you persuade people or dogs into routines then a change in circumstances can turn a strength into a weakness, or**
- **that only people are self-conscious, animals and objects are not,**
- **that (and this one works for me) trying to influence others to your intent is problematic?**

There is no right answer; a critique is what you want to mention after reading the passage. The skill is being aware of where your thoughts are coming from. This chapter deals with the argument stance of critique which encourages your thoughts to come from first identifying what you thought was the argument made by the passage.

In the dog passage, the argument the passage is making is a bit vague. To note this can be part of your critique. In some passages the author can be very explicit about the argument he or she wants to make.

Those who believe that deterrence justifies the execution of certain offenders bear the burden of proving that the death penalty is a deterrent. The overwhelming conclusion from years of deterrence studies is that the death penalty is, at best, no more of a deterrent than a sentence of life in prison. The Ehrlich studies have been widely discredited. In fact, some criminologists, such as William Bowers of Northeastern University, maintain that the death penalty has the opposite effect: that is, society is brutalized by the use of the death penalty, and this increases the likelihood of more murder. Even most supporters of the death penalty now place little or no weight on deterrence as a serious justification for its continued use.

States in the United States that do not employ the death penalty generally have lower murder rates than states that do. The same is true when the U.S. is compared to countries similar to it. The U.S., with the death penalty, has a higher murder rate than the countries of Europe or Canada, which do not use the death penalty.

The death penalty is not a deterrent because most people who commit murders either do not expect to be caught or do not carefully weigh the differences between a possible execution and life in prison before they act. Frequently, murders are committed in moments of passion or anger, or by criminals who are substance abusers and acted impulsively. As someone who presided over many of Texas's executions, former Texas Attorney General Jim Mattox has remarked, 'It is my own experience that those executed in Texas were not deterred by the existence of the death penalty law. I think in most cases you'll find that the murder was committed under severe drug and alcohol abuse.'

There is no conclusive proof that the death penalty acts as a better deterrent than the threat of life imprisonment. A survey of the former and present presidents of the country's top academic criminological societies found that 84% of these experts rejected the notion that research had demonstrated any deterrent effect from the death penalty.

Once in prison, those serving life sentences often settle into a routine and are less of a threat to commit violence than other prisoners. Moreover, most states now have a sentence of life without parole. Prisoners who are given this sentence will never be released. Thus, the safety of society can be assured without using the death penalty.

Source: www.teacher.deathpenaltyinfo.msu.edu/c/about/arguments/argument1b.htm