

Using Criticism

Writing Resources



You should cite, reference, and engage with criticism (also referred to as ‘secondary sources’) in your essays. Here is some advice on how to choose and use criticism effectively.

Think quality, rather than quantity

When your markers look at your work, they will look at which critics you use in your writing, and the way in which you use them to build your argument, rather than how many. If you are unsure about the quality of the critics you are using, see the section below, or ask your tutor for advice/help.

Scholarly vs. popular sources

Always use scholarly sources in your essays. A scholarly source consists of original research, which is normally published in academic journals, monographs (books), or edited collections.

A scholarly source is written by an expert in their field (i.e. your tutors at York!) and is generally peer-reviewed.

The peer-reviewing process ensures that the article’s original research has been evaluated and, often, improved by other experts in the field. This practice is really at the core of what your tutors do when they are not in the classroom.

Scholarly sources will also always include citations.

They will have been published by academic publishers (like University presses, but not exclusively) and will be available via academic databases such as JSTOR or ProjectMUSE, which you can access via the library website).

On rare, but increasingly more frequent, occasions, scholarly sources are available online in open access. At York, we have plenty of resources and discipline-specific databases available via the Library website, as well as a dedicated library webpage for English and Related Literature and our own academic liaison librarian.

Popular sources, on the other hand, are more easily retrievable in open access. They may well refer to research findings but they very rarely contain original research; they are often written by non-experts for a general audience.

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Popular sources are normally not peer-reviewed, and so they do not undergo the same quality checks as scholarly, peer-reviewed sources.

If you feel you have found a popular source that is crucial for your essay, and you are unsure about its quality, do discuss the matter with your tutor. There are some exceptions for writing on very contemporary literature, culture, or film.

For recently published literature in particular, it is important to look at the critical reception of a text, particularly when there may be very little literary criticism published on such texts.

You will need to draw on theory and criticism on a topic rather than on the author or text, to build your own body of research. Try not to be daunted though—you have the opportunity to original here.

Also ensure you take the time to read interviews with and/or essays by contemporary writers too, as you may find ideas or a turn of phrase or two that is useful in helping you develop your own argument.

A community of scholars

While reading for your degree, you will become an integral part of a scholarly community not just your tutors or your peers, but also the academics behind scholarly sources. Think of your essay as entering a conversation on a topic that you find interesting: you want to listen and respond to the other people in a respectful but engaged way.

Use critics to provide support

Reading criticism on the topic you are researching on will enable you to make more informed judgements, and will offer support to your statements. Reading criticism will also help you develop your own critical and argumentative skills, and get a better picture of the critical debate you are entering. Never rely on one single critical source, and show you have read widely.

Argue against critics

You should not simply select criticism that supports your argument, but you should also consider points of views that may differ from your own, and engage actively (but always respectfully) with them. Ponder their values and their shortcomings.

Borrow terms from critics

Another way of using criticism is to borrow (and reference) terminology other critics have used, in order to advance your own argument. For example, your own investigations may be prompted by a critic's words, or you may find their terminology particularly compelling for a facet of your own argument.

Read critics for style

Do not only read criticism to borrow terminology or inform your understanding of a field, text, or topic, but also to get inspiration for your own writing style. Which critics do you find most inspiring? Which ones are less convincing from a stylistic point of view?

Always, always reference

Always acknowledge your sources in your essay (footnotes, or in-text citations) and in your bibliography or list of works cited. Failing to do so may cause you to be accused of plagiarism, which is a very serious offence. At the University of York you can find out more about plagiarism in the Guide to Assessment and in the University's Integrity website.