

# Developing students' understandings of critical writing

The following exercise was developed in partnership with the **School of Law**. It formed part of a broader programme of activities for a distance learning study school. Crucially, the exercise formed a prelude to a subsequent session in which students assessed sample pieces of writing from previous cohorts. This opportunity to discuss critical writing in relation to **concrete and subject-specific examples** is very important as it enables students to understand the relationships between definitions of criticality and the varied ways in which it can be achieved (or not achieved) in practice. Although originally conceived of as being a 15-20 minute exercise, the students' reflections and questions meant that it ran for almost an hour! The discussions were very much enriched by the presence of tutors from the School who were able to talk about their own understandings of criticality and the ways in which they recognise it in action in the assignments they read and assess.

## Exercise and tutor notes

1. What does the term 'critical writing' mean to you?

**Tutor notes:** students are invited to do this as an individual exercise, jotting down thoughts and reflections to aid discussion later on.

*Pair up with a colleague and share and compare your responses to these questions*

Still working in pairs, discuss questions **2** and **3**

2. Why, in your opinion, does the School of Law place such value and importance on criticality in students' writing?

**Tutor notes:** this question is designed to help students appreciate and unpack the values that underpin the emphasis on criticality. At this stage the workshop leader can start to drop-in on discussions, sharing observations and probing students to explain their views further.

3. Of the reasons you have identified, which are the most important and why?

**Tutor notes:** this question is designed to simulate the questions of prioritisation students



are often asked to address in their own writing (the workshop leader can point this out to students). Part of its aim is to illustrate that agreement between students is neither likely nor desired. The key is to be able to provide reasons and evidence for the positions taken.

Finally, in larger groups of 3 or 4, consider the following question:

4. What features might you expect to see in a *critical* piece of writing? How would you recognise a piece of writing as being *critical* in the first place?

**Tutor notes:** this is where the exercise turns its attention to the *practice* of critical writing. As mentioned, this sets up the subsequent exercise where students review examples of students' writing. In this final section, they are invited to create some criteria for recognition which they can later test in relation to concrete examples. This question also gives tutors a chance to share their reflections and observations as readers and assessors.