

Literature Review: Style

Activity 4: Critiquing the Literature

1. What form of critique does the extract below employ: general literature, group of studies or individual study critique?
2. Which of the following questions does it answer?
3. Underline parts of the text that mark the candidate's critical assessment of the literature.

The general body of literature and groups of studies:

- Is the literature contradictory?
- Are there controversial ideas in the literature?
- Which researchers agree with each other?
Which don't?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each group?

Individual studies:

- Are the claims supported by the evidence?
- Is there internal consistency in the research?
(Are the research questions/problems, methodology, results, discussion and conclusions logically consistent with each other?)
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each study?

Critiquing the literature and maintaining your own voice

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With PhDs offered in virtually all universities around the world and substantial movement of academics between university teaching posts (with the prerequisite of a research degree), a likely assumption is that there is some sort of universal value and currency. Two studies aimed at benchmarking doctorates, however, reveal differing perspectives. Brown (1999) claims doctorates have no universal value, citing the difficulty in being accepted to study for the PhD in some universities (for example, the 'ivy league' universities in the USA) relative to others. Conversely, Evans (1998), attempting to benchmark the doctorate in order to prevent erosion, argues that doctorates should consist substantially of research training and practice and be founded on three years of full-time equivalent study after an appropriate Honours or Masters degree. However, this is clearly too broad to be of use in identifying or upholding any idea of value for the doctorate. Brown (1999), in fact, points to the reason for the relative lack difficulty in defining and applying assessment frameworks for higher degrees compared to undergraduate level. In discussing the impossibility of comparing, for example, a doctorate in electrochemistry with one in education, she alludes to the intransigent belief of some that 'hard' science is more difficult (and therefore inherently of more value) than 'soft' disciplines (or vice versa)...

Activity answers

1. The text compares two studies with very different conclusions.
2. One (Evans) is considered weaker than the other (Brown); and the candidate aligns the PhD argument with Brown's position: it is impossible to accord universal value or currency to PhD theses or dissertations, in large because of prevailing beliefs in the greater value of 'hard' science.

Critiquing the literature and maintaining your own voice

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