

DRAFT

## **Marking up texts to show Critical Thinking**

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This is a preliminary attempt at an activity designed to give us, as staff, a measuring tool for students' critical thinking in their academic writing. If it works, it has obvious potential for use in the classroom. I have tried to categorise the sorts of functions and knowledge that I commonly come across in essays (the last two at the highest levels only). The next stage is to road test and see if we as staff can code in reasonably similar ways and if we can arrive at a common agreement about what the categories cover. Are there the right number? Since I did this, for example, I have wondered if a category is needed for material that isn't relevant.

After the description of the categories, I attach a couple of brief samples that I have marked up. I think the difference is pretty obvious, though that depends on whether you agree with how I have coded the samples.

### Description and organisation

No highlight	Straightforward description
Turquoise	Textual organisation

### Knowledge processing

Red	Plagiarism
Grey	General 'common sense'
Pink	Knowledge gained from sources (referenced)
Green	Critical thinking or reflection
Yellow	Meta-reflective/metacognitive thinking
Dark Yellow	New knowledge generated by the writer.

## **Fuller description and examples**

### No highlight

Descriptive, factual account of what happened or is to happen; background information; summaries of plots in literary texts, films etc., e.g.:

The school is situated in a residential area and has 300 pupils.  
40 questionnaires were sent out and 23 responses were received.  
At the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and Darcy marry.

### Textual organisation

Headings or any other signposts to the structure of the piece, such as restatements of the question (where set by other people); use of words like 'firstly', 'secondly', 'in conclusion'; introductions which set out briefly the structure of the written piece which

follows; linking or introductory sentences which signal changes of topic. These are not exactly critical thinking but they are really important to good academic writing and all too often absent.

### Plagiarism

Direct quotation of another text, or detailed discussion of points made in another text, without acknowledgement or reference. Incorporation of lecture notes?

### General/common knowledge

Presentation of 'general' information e.g. generalised accounts of historical events or processes,—unreferenced, unsubstantiated and at the 'common sense' level. There shouldn't be much of this in a really good essay, because really these statements need some sort of evidence, although admittedly supporting references can be hard to pin down. E.g.:

Literacy levels in the general population were low before the 19<sup>th</sup> C Education Acts provided schooling for all.

Girls generally learn to talk at an earlier age than boys.

### Referenced knowledge gained from sources

Knowledge that the writer makes use of but clearly identifies as originating from others. The obvious example is referenced quotations, but the category also includes detailed, referenced exposition of ideas from sources in the writer's own words. In reflective pieces, this is likely to take the form of reporting other people's words or opinions.

### Critical thinking

Evidence of the writer's internal thought processes which can only be brought to light by the writer's exposition of them. This covers things such as:

- comments on the ideas of others;
- summarising of the main points of the writer's or others' ideas;
- expressions of opinion or evaluation in relation to others' ideas;
- emotional reactions;
- clear linking of opinion or action to evidence ('I think x is right because...');
- analysis of data.

This is the colour of critical thinking, actual or potential, and the sign of the writer's own personal involvement in what they are writing. Words like 'on the other hand' 'in comparison' 'in contrast to' often signal some degree of critical thinking, in addition to their role in organising a text. This category also includes aims or objectives or the

question to be answered – but only if the writer has originated these, not if they have been set by someone else. However, if the writer provides a statement of how they intend to answer a question set by someone else, that is critical thinking.

### **Metareflective/metacognitive thinking**

Thinking about the quality of one's thinking; reflecting on procedures for reflection; reflecting on how knowledge has been created either by others (critiquing methods in research, for example) or by the student (evaluative discussion of methodology and choice of methods).

### **New knowledge**

In a piece of research, this is the colour for the new knowledge which the writer has generated as a result of the research: in other words, the presentation of the data and probably parts of the conclusion. Discussion and analysis of the data would probably be a mixture of new knowledge and critical thinking.

### Examples

1. This is the opening paragraph of a sample undergraduate essay which is included in the DISSC website as a good model.

### **Discuss the 'Fallen Woman' as a Familiar Feature of Victorian Writing**

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* may be characterised as a 'social problem' novel. Basch (1974: 263) states, 'Mrs Gaskell's impure women came from ... the work and exploitation which she knew, relatively speaking, better than other novelists.' Gaskell was the wife of a Unitarian clergyman in Manchester. She devoted her time to setting up homes for fallen women, and after *Mary Barton* women became her central characters, her novels primarily seen through women's eyes. Thomas Hardy, since his career began, has been notably associated with his portrayal of female characters. Erving Howe even writes about 'Hardy's gift for creeping intuitively into the emotional life of women.' (Boumelha 1982: 3) From this point of view, I intend this essay to establish a comparison between Gaskell's 'fallen woman' in *Mary Barton* and the way in which Thomas Hardy frames his central female character in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

2. This is a weaker student's attempt at the same question, from the same source.

### **Discuss the Fallen Woman as a Familiar Feature of Victorian Fiction.**

Thomas Hardy was born in Higher Bockhampton in Dorset on the 2nd June 1840. His father was a builder. He trained as an architect in Dorchester, the local town, but gave up this career to write novels. His first novel was published in 1871, and he went on writing them until 1895. "Tess of the Durbeyvilles", published in 1891, is his most famous novel.

When we first meet Tess, she is at a sort of dance in the village. She is described in a lot of detail.

Tess Durbeyfield at this time of her life was a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience. The dialect was on her tongue to some extent, despite the village school: the characteristic intonation of that dialect for this district being the voicing approximately rendered by the syllable UR, probably as rich an utterance as any to be found in human speech. The pouted-up deep red mouth to which this syllable was native had hardly as yet settled into its definite shape, and her lower lip had a way of thrusting the middle of her top one upward, when they closed together after a word. Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still. As she walked along today, for all her bouncing handsome womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks, or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over the curves of her mouth now and then.