

Writing fluently and critically

A key aspect of your AO3 mark is the ability to communicate 'fluently in an appropriate format' (AQA specification, assessment objectives for AO3).

An EPQ that is well-structured, easy to follow, logical, and coherent, will be a joy to read. On this spread we consider ways to improve the quality of your descriptive and critical writing.

'The moment we want to believe something, we suddenly see all the arguments for it, and become blind to the arguments against it.'

George Bernard Shaw (1928)

Think of the moderator

The moderator who reads and marks your EPQ deserves your consideration. Make their job easy for them. They will be reading and marking many EPQs. If you make your argument hard to follow, they will need to re-read a paragraph (or more) to try to make sense of what you have written. You are at risk of irritating them because it makes their job slower and harder. It is your task to present your arguments in a way that your moderator can follow. It is not their job to detect the points you are trying to make.

You are not expected to produce a unique, perfect or revolutionary piece of work. Instead the moderator will be happy to read a reasonably well-planned, well-argued and well-written essay. They will mark positively not negatively.

Clear line of argument

What you write should tell a story. One piece of information should logically follow from the previous piece of information so that the reader can make sense of the whole. In some cases it may be better to remove some items because, even though they are impressive, it confuses the 'story' you are telling.

Well-structured paragraphs

It is vital to separate the points you are making into separate paragraphs so that the reader understands where one line of thought finishes and another begins.

Paragraphs can also provide a clear separation between descriptive writing and critical analysis, by switching to a new paragraph when you move from description to critical writing, and vice versa.

Points are based on evidence

You need to support your opinion with evidence from academic sources. It should be an objective position presented as a logical argument. The quality of your evidence will determine the strength of your argument. The challenge is to convince the reader of the validity of your opinion through a well-documented piece of writing.

Both description and critical analysis

It is important that you focus mainly on critical analysis in order to access the high mark bands. It is likely that in the early parts of your report a certain amount of descriptive writing is needed. Beyond that, however, there is a danger that too much descriptive writing will use up valuable words from your word limit, and reduce the space you have for the all important critical analysis of your topic, critical writing that will enable you to access higher mark bands.

Critical writing includes:

- Explaining what the evidence means. A useful habit to get into is to make sure that, if you describe some evidence relevant to your arguments, you need then to explain to the reader why it is relevant.
- Explaining the relevance of the evidence. Do not assume that the moderator is following the same logic as you, or will just work out the relevance of the quote or data you have described. You must explain it.
- A recognition of the limitations (or strengths) of any evidence. You may challenge the conclusions reached by others by criticising their evidence.
- Drawing conclusions from your evidence.

Making your point – writing a **POWERFUL** paragraph

There is a knack to constructing effective descriptive or critical points. Let us have a look at an EPQ exemplar:

EPQ title: To what extent does England need new laws to be able to deal effectively with defamation, abuse and contempt of court in relation to social media and the Internet?

There is a significant argument that suggests that the Communications Act of 2003 goes too far in limiting free speech. This is an opinion shared by Kier Starmer, QC, Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) and head of the Crown Prosecution Service. Starmer suggested, in an interview for BBC News on 11/10/12, that we should divide communications that are grossly offensive from those which are a campaign for harassment. However, it is also true that teenagers need to be protected from malicious communications that cause serious harm, as demonstrated by the number of teenagers who have committed suicide as a result of cyber bullying campaigns. So we can see that there are certain issues relating to social media that need to be addressed.

Deconstructing the paragraph on the left

Such a structure may not work with every point or paragraph you write but it is a useful structure to aim for.

Identify the point	There is a significant argument that suggests that the Communications Act of 2003 goes too far in limiting free speech.
Justify the point	This is an opinion shared by Kier Starmer, QC, Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) and head of the Crown Prosecution Service.
Elaborate upon it	Starmer suggested, in an interview for BBC News on 11/10/12, that we should divide communications that are grossly offensive from those which are a campaign for harassment.
Further elaboration (e.g. a counterpoint)	However, it is also true that teenagers need to be protected from malicious communications that cause serious harm, as demonstrated by the number of teenagers who have committed suicide as a result of cyber bullying campaigns.
Conclusion	So we can see that there are certain issues relating to social media which need to be addressed.

ALISTAIR'S EPQ ON NEW LAWS

Avoid personal opinion

In academic writing it is not desirable to express your own opinions. Let the facts do the arguing for you.

For example, if you are writing a project on the arguments for and against animal experimentation in medical research you shouldn't write: 'In my opinion I consider animal experimentation to be cruel and unnecessary and instead we should use prisoners or people with incurable illness as they are of little use to society.'

Apart from being subjective this is a very unhelpful opinion. State the arguments and keep your opinions to yourself!

Use precise language

Avoid vague expressions that are not specific enough for the reader to derive their exact meaning. For example, using terms such as:

- 'They' or 'we' – who does this refer to?
- 'People' – which people?
- 'The organisation' – what organisation?

Avoid abbreviations and contractions

Avoid using i.e. and e.g. – spell it out as 'in other words' and 'for example'.

Avoid words such as isn't and can't – spell it out as 'is not' and 'cannot'.

Use of quotations

Both short and long quotations can be used as an effective way to explain your point. The way to introduce and use these is explained on page 71.

It is important, however, to remember that you also need to interpret the quotes for the reader, and to explain their relevance, discuss their validity, and show how they relate to other evidence as exemplified below.

According to Recinos (1405), a medieval woman [was] taught to look up to female saints as role models'. Recinos's view is supported by the academic concept of the Mary and Eve dichotomy that suggests that medieval women were placed into one of two stereotypes by leading church figures; either Mary, chaste and virtuous, or more commonly Eve, a woman drawn to sin and a leading figure in tempting men away from a virtuous life.

EXERCISE 4.2 Powerful paragraphs

Look at your work so far and try to write one point using the structure of a powerful paragraph

Identify the point	
Justify the point	
Elaborate upon it	
Further elaboration (e.g. a counterpoint)	
Conclusion	

Here are some useful phrases for creating a critical commentary:

This suggests that ...

So we can see that ...

This would imply ...

One consequence would be ...

One advantage of this is ...

An alternative explanation ...

Therefore ...

This is challenged by ...

In comparison ...

In contrast ...

However ...

The passage below uses some of these phrases to create a critical commentary (useful phrases are highlighted).

EPQ title: What are the costs of alcohol?

Alcohol has played a prominent role in British life for many years and can be traced back to the Roman Conquest. Alcohol is a psychoactive drug and it is a central nervous system depressant that brings advantages and disadvantages when taken in excess. **One consequence is** the cost to the NHS. Around 40% of admissions to Accident and Emergency Departments are diagnosed with alcohol-related injuries or illnesses. **Between midnight and 5am this figure rises to 70%. So we can see that alcohol has some major disadvantages. Therefore, this suggests that alcohol-related emergencies are of prominent concern to the NHS.**

However, despite the fact that alcohol consumption seems to be falling over the past 2–3 years (according to the annual survey from the Office for National Statistics), **in comparison** there are still 10 million people drinking over the government's recommended daily levels and 1.6 million dependent drinkers. **This would imply** that binge drinking is still an issue in Britain.

EXERCISE 4.3 Useful phrases

Use the phrases at the top of the page to make the following paragraph more critical.

In 2010 there were 160,181 prescription items for drugs for the treatment of alcohol dependency. This is an increase of 6% on the 2009 figure of 150,445 and a 56% increase on the 2003 figure of 102,741. Alcohol misuse, in the form of binge drinking, is common among young people and seems to be a characteristic of the British drinking culture. In the recent past the government has reformed licensing laws and implemented strategies aimed at reducing alcohol harm. Experts and critics of the current licensing laws have debated whether the government should have greater control over the younger generation. Binge bashes can take to the street and in most cases cause serious violence, antisocial behaviour, crime and injury. Restrictive controls may result in an increase in the production of illicit liquor, difficulties of law enforcement, loss of tax revenues and a reduction of personal and social enjoyment.

Suggested answers on page 124.