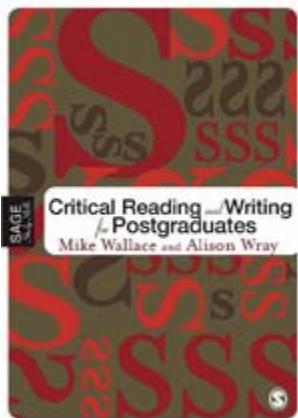


Book Review



Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates

Mike Wallace and Alison Wray
London: Sage Publications (2006)

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Review by Karl R. Wall

For any student undertaking postgraduate study there is a real sense of having to shift up several gears in their academic activity as they embark upon a course of higher study. Reading needs to be overtly critical and analytical with writing, informed by clear evidence-supported argument, carefully structured, evaluative and focused. Audience, purpose and context must be allowed for, the focus of postgraduate reading and writing moves beyond the demands of previous study experience and, possibly a period of professional experience for older students, onto more considered, detailed and conceptual purposes. Making this transition can be difficult and can dampen initial enthusiasm for the more exacting and exciting nature of higher level study. Where then to turn to for guidance?

Taught courses have much to cover in a comparatively short time and what is taught needs to be used, from the start, to access the material being studied. Two key aspects of this activity focus on critical reading and the production of critical writing. In '*Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates*', the authors Mike Wallace and Alison Wray, offer not only a carefully structured approach to the rationale, practise and development of critical reading and writing, but also a clear example-related argument about the importance of such reading and writing in an academic context.

That this approach sees critical and evaluative reading as the crucial starting point for examining the texts produced by others is apparent from the first chapter, 'What it means to be critical'. This is itself, carefully structured and targeted at the reader: It starts by reminding the reader of their existing critical competencies – the need for open minded scepticism, and then relates this to academic enquiry, in the process setting some benchmarks for the conduct of academic writing that are themselves fundamental and timely. These include the need for honesty in the arguments being presented; the possibility that while an argument may be logical it may also be flawed; that impartiality may be intended and attempted but may fail because of unexamined assumptions and that there is a need to make links between what is already known and is currently being reported in the text being read or constructed.

On one level, a critical reader needs to be clear that the arguments offered by what they are reading are evidence-backed, coherent and consistent-is what is being claimed justified or not? For the writer, the text they produce is necessarily an attempt to persuade the reader of validity of some argument-is it convincing; are the reasons offered relevant, adequate and explicitly supportive of the claims being made?

To be a self-critical writer demands critical attention to the writing of others through careful reading, that it may inform their own subsequent writing. This is not achieved by simply reading widely in the field relevant to the writer's interest; neither does reading outside that field necessarily enhance a critical approach to what is written. Rather, the use of a critical

approach to each act of reading is required. These are informed by discipline related traditions and styles but any piece of reading can be – and the authors would argue should be, carried out with a specific task or purpose in mind.

To be effective the reading purpose needs to be informed by a number of key questions, such as whether or not the text in question is relevant to the research topic or offers methodological insights or information. These act as a structure through which to approach and interrogate a text; such a structure also organises material for subsequent use in writing. Wallace and Wray make it clear that this should not be a simple, mechanistic, line-by-line interrogation. Equally the same text may be re-visited with different purposes in mind. Chapter 1 clearly links reading and writing together and having established and justified this connection, the text moves on, in the second chapter, to examine how the texts to be read are selected (in relation to the reading purpose) and how this selection may itself be structured and organised. Here the relationship between theory and practice is clearly identified, as is the need to check that texts apparently on the same issue or topic, share a conceptual, theoretical or methodological compatibility of perspective. As part of this discussion the use of the Web for research is commented upon: the numerous advantages of web-based research are enumerated. The serious issues of the quality, status and reliability of the source being accessed are also explored. This sense of needing to be choosy – and so selective (again related to reading purpose) is evident and is twinned later in the text, with being equally choosy about which source might best evidence and support the writing of an argument.

'Getting started on critical reading' the third chapter, takes the reader through the issues of evaluating what has been read by identifying its central arguments and purposes; how to spot unsupported assertions and where warrants are missing or not appropriate, looking for and identifying argument flaws. The chapter then takes the reader through the process of generating a critical synopsis of the text being read, using a scaffolding series of question prompts-these would be applicable to any form of text being accessed for critical purposes. The chapter concludes by explaining how one can move from a synopsis to a critical summary. This section implicitly develops paraphrasing skills and links seamlessly into Chapter 4, 'Getting started on Self-critical Writing'.

In chapter 4, to develop self-critical writing, Wallace and Gray take the reader through a series of prompts focusing on how to develop an argument and how to match this to a target audience. A 'worked example' is given which illustrates the processes of introducing a particular text, analysing and reporting its principle arguments and reaching a final considered conclusion. This summarises the evidence from one source: combining multiple sources to sustain and evidence an argument is explored in the next chapter where the focus shifts to creating a comparative and contrasting summary of multiple evidences (Chapter 5). This chapter concludes the first section of the text supporting the reader to become a critical and self-critical reader of other texts.

The second part of Wallace and Wray's text concentrates on how to carry out a detailed and in-depth analysis, across a body of literature. Chapter 6 uses the notion of mental maps to explore how to organise conceptual information taking in issues of perspective, theorisation and modelling. Ideology and underlying assumptions and how to recognise and work with these are also touched upon. The following chapter (7) explores the components of this mental mapping approach in more detail, by relating what is covered to the construction of arguments and the use of evidence to warrant assertions. Talking in terms of three broad types of knowledge: theoretical, research and practice derived, the authors lead the reader into an account of different literature types and how these might be identified and evaluated. Here critical approaches are classified in terms of their underlying intellectual project as represented by a particular type of writing task. Key points, clear summaries and prompt questions for the reader mark this out as a very effective approach to these issues.

Chapter 8 further develops the critical theme by offering strategies for critically analysing texts in greater detail, drawing on the tools developed in earlier chapters. An extended worked example then follows, as chapter 9, followed by a chapter (10) focusing on how an argument might be developed from a critical analysis into the basis of a critical review of a particular article. Here again an extended worked example is provided that dwells on structural and organisational issues as well as how evidence may be integrated into each stage of the argument process. This leads effectively into the third section of the book, which focuses on how to construct a critical review of a body of literature-a key aspect of writing for dissertation or thesis purposes.

Starting with the issue of review focus in chapter 11, Wallace and Wray employ a series of closely interlinked chapters to work through how to review a body of literature in a critical way; its organisation for the reader (including the implications of writing for an international audience); the use of different types of evidence linked to main and subsidiary lines of argument and how review writers might position themselves as being 'independent'. This process draws on the use of the tools previously discussed, in a systematic and logical way, encouraging a coherent approach to the process of writing a review. Sensible attention is applied to the issue of evaluating data of different types and how this can be both interrogated in the text and integrated in an evaluative way-always a difficult task if it is to be done in a balanced and consistent way.

Later chapters in this section focus on specific writing tasks, such as integrating reading and evaluated material into the structure of a dissertation (Chapter 13) and how critical reading and writing can continue to develop and underpin an academic writing career (Chapter 14). Appendices 1 and 2 provide the materials to support earlier textual activities: Appendix 3, offers a scaffold for a critical analysis of texts supported by a checklist for developing a logical argument in Appendix 4.

Overall, this book offers to the reader, a systematic, coherent approach to developing critical reading and writing skills that are applicable to a range of different levels of analysis and types of reading and writing tasks. The authors are to be commended for the clarity of their writing and the way scaffolded advice and tasks are integrated into the text. The book could form the core text for a course on critical reading and writing and a useful reference tool for the academic recently entered upon writing for publication.

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