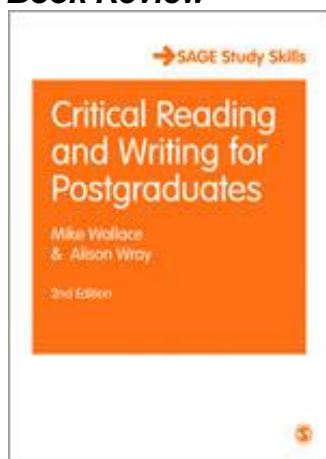


Book Review



Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates

By Mike Wallace and Alison Wray
London: Sage Publications (2010).

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Reviewed by **Anna Mazenod**

This book by Wallace and Wray helpfully unpacks the notion of criticality in reading and writing. Postgraduate students often struggle with finding the right balance of criticality. This book in the Sage Study Skills series explains what is critical reading and writing, and provides the tools for developing these important skills. Wallace and Wray argue that critical reading and writing are parallel skills so that in learning to analyse the arguments being presented in written text, one is taking steps towards being able to self-critically construct one's own arguments in writing. This book is divided into three parts to enable gradual development of critical reading and writing skills. This is achieved through a sequential introduction to the relevant concepts that starts with a discussion of the purposes of criticality in academic study. By the end of the book the reader will be familiar with different dimensions of critical reading and writing, and confident about applying these skills in practice.

The chapters in the first part of the book 'Becoming a critical reader and self-critical writer' are useful for students starting postgraduate studies. The first part outlines the role of criticality in academic enquiry, explains how to read research literature through identifying specific questions for review and how to structure a written summary of the literature. The second part of the book 'Developing an in-depth analysis' introduces the concept of mental maps for exploring the literature and provides a worked example of a critical analysis of a text. The chapters in the second part the book are also useful for doctoral level students as they discuss the different types of claims to knowledge that are being made in research literature. Particularly helpful is the table on pages 86-87 that outlines different types of research projects. Wallace and Wray suggest that there are five broad types of research projects in terms of their rationale, the typical mode of working and the typical style of research questions that are being asked. The structure that this table provides to analysing and summarising literature is potentially also useful for researchers beyond their postgraduate studies.

If like me, you normally skip any practical exercises provided in study skills books, you would be missing a trick here. Wallace and Wray provide a very helpful worked example, applying their framework to a critical analysis of an abridged journal article included in the appendix. Comparing my own critical analysis of the sample journal article with the authors' worked example, I realised how the tools they have outlined can strengthen my critical reading and writing skills by introducing a more systematic and thorough framework for analysing texts.

The third part of the book 'Constructing a critical review of the literature' focuses on how to apply the overall framework for critical reading and writing to stand-alone literature reviews and to reviews that form part of dissertations. Wallace and Wray consistently present systematic approaches to research, and place writing at the centre of the research process.

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This approach leads to a rather linear representation of the research process that is not always reflected in the reality of undertaking research. However, the clarity and focus provided by Wallace and Wray's account is undoubtedly useful for those postgraduate students looking for a guiding light through the impassable swamp that dissertation and thesis research can easily turn into.

Wallace and Wray succeed in their aim to provide practical tools for students to develop their critical reading and writing skills. A particular strength of the book lies in its systematic approach to deconstructing what can be a daunting and confusing concept to postgraduate students. The sequential approach in the presentation of the book means that at first glance, the book seems to be aimed at Masters level students. Students at later stages in their postgraduate studies interested in strengthening their critical reading and writing skills will, however find the second and third parts of the book very useful. The discussion on the different types of research projects, and the different reasons for studying aspects of the social world, can also be more broadly helpful in stimulating reflexivity in research. This illustrates the centrality of critical reading and writing skills in the making of good researchers.