

# Thinking on writing a critical essay

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To provide a strategy for writing a critical essay for the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists examination using a sample question.

**Conclusion:** To prepare for writing a critical essay, candidates are advised to read widely and critically, to practise writing essays with a clear structure under examination conditions and seek constructive critique from colleagues. This will help them to write succinctly and develop a reasoned argument that is relevant to the quotation.

**Keywords:** psychiatry, professional competence, thinking, writing, essay

This article recommends a strategy for trainees preparing to write the critical essay question in the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) examination. It provides suggestions on critical thinking and practical advice for structuring an essay. Writing a critical essay is one of a number of daunting tasks towards attaining fellowship<sup>1,2</sup> but a crucial skill which psychiatrists demonstrate every day of their working lives by documenting their professional opinions, clinical decisions and formulations.

## The task

A critical essay quotation is provided in the examination. The general task is to discuss critically the statement from different perspectives. The essay marking is linked to the CanMEDS roles of medical expertise, scholar, communicator, collaborator and manager.<sup>3</sup> The essay tests how clearly candidates communicate, critically evaluate the quotation, whether they can develop a number of lines of relevant argument, cite accurate information, apply arguments to clinical contexts (and vice versa) and draw conclusions. The essay is scored to a maximum of 40 marks.<sup>4</sup>

## The practice of reading critically

Good writers are avid readers.<sup>5</sup> Background reading enables candidates to gain a broad base of thinking on a range of topics.<sup>6–17</sup> Rather than just believing what you read, it is important to screen information and evidence. In doing so, you can question and evaluate the quality of the dialogue in your professional practice.<sup>18</sup> As you read, ask yourself why you agree or disagree with different perspectives and be aware of your personal reactions

to arguments and counterarguments.<sup>19</sup> It can be a helpful practice to write an annotated bibliography of readings, highlighting quotes, summarising key points and condensing your opinions.

## The skill of thinking critically

While written examinations test conceptual knowledge, candidates are encouraged to integrate evidence with their clinical experiences and demonstrate their awareness of locating psychiatry in a broader scientific, social, cultural or historical context. The practice of psychiatry is inherently complex, fraught with controversies, conflicts and ethical dilemmas. Good writing reflects this complexity, connecting the reader to issues that matter to the writer. Presenting a balanced view is ultimately important. This calls for candidates to think holistically, beyond the medical model, and explore different perspectives. Adept candidates will integrate their experiences with direct reference to relevant literature. The quality of the debate rests on the strength of reasoning and the ability to articulate contrasting points of view.

## The art of writing

The principles of writing a critical essay may be applied to writing a research paper.<sup>20</sup> Good articles contain a

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balance of clinical or scientific merit, in which themes are well articulated, clearly and concisely presented.<sup>21</sup> The process of editing facilitates learning.<sup>2</sup> Time is not on a candidate's side during an examination when pressure and stress make it difficult to 'throw away the draft and start again'.<sup>22</sup> However, purposefully practising essay writing will assist with developing a discipline to timing, structure and critical thinking that will help candidates manage anticipatory anxiety about the task.

Writing is a way for candidates to transmit what they know and understand about a topic. The curse of knowledge<sup>5</sup> may explain why crafting an essay is perceived to be a difficult task. Strive to write clearly, simply and with humanity.<sup>5,23,24</sup> Crisp, coherent writing offers pearls, pith and provocation.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, rambling discussion and erroneous conclusions will render arguments irrelevant or redundant.<sup>20</sup> Poor style, grammatical and spelling errors or incorrect punctuation often go together.<sup>26</sup> Try to avoid nominalisations,<sup>24</sup> slang, clichés, abbreviations and pejorative language.<sup>26–28</sup>

An essay that is effortless to read is one in which the author's train of thought can be followed. Practising writing legible essays will help develop your own voice and style. You are engaging the readers in a conversation, showing them something of psychiatry and of yourself.

### A strategy for writing a critical essay using a sample quotation

Propaganda is the enemy of reason and truth (40 marks)

Reference: Silove D. The asylum debacle in Australia: a challenge for psychiatry? *Aust NZ J Psychiatry* 2002; 36: 290–296.<sup>29</sup>

This is an example of a critical essay quotation, with the instructions: 'In essay form, critically discuss this statement from different points of view and provide your conclusion'.

Candidates have to jump-start themselves at the moment of performance<sup>23</sup> and get something on paper as quickly as possible.<sup>20</sup> Use the reading time to scan the quotation. Allow five minutes of writing time to sketch out a brief plan. Brainstorm the main points of your argument. Mnemonics can be helpful to generate ideas but should not be used as a formula to write. It is not necessary to have read the article containing the quotation. What is of most value is having a critical perspective and understanding the broader factors that impact on your clinical practice, your professional specialty and the care of your patients.<sup>30</sup> Select key concepts to open up possibilities for counterarguments and alternative views. Be disciplined about timing; it is necessary to stop writing the essay at the 40-minute mark in order to complete the remainder of the examination.

Ask what does this statement mean? Quotations are a trigger to critical thinking. Candidates need to ask who

wrote the quote and consider its context, whether it is evidence based or a professional opinion to provoke discussion. This is an invitation to link the quotation to your own arguments and show that you can incorporate a critical approach in your writing.

Brainstorm ideas around the key concepts (see Figure 1). Broadly define the terms and their alternative meanings.

Cluster ideas, for example:

Idea 1: In responding to the needs of asylum seekers, psychiatrists might use their skills to provide clinical services and conduct research. As a humanistic profession, psychiatrists also have an obligation to advocate for issues of social justice.

Idea 2: Psychiatrists have an obligation to act ethically, where political pressures and policies undermine the mental health of a vulnerable group of people perpetuating stress and trauma.

Idea 3: Reflective practice is essential to avoid becoming an unwitting agent of doing wrong.

Take a broad view and evaluate the statement, for example:

Psychiatrists need to evaluate critically claims to truth; discourse on propaganda in psychiatry relates to power and control in relationships; or the nature of truth may be difficult to discern, let alone prove.

Structure the essay in a logical format that contains an introduction, middle and conclusion.

#### The introduction

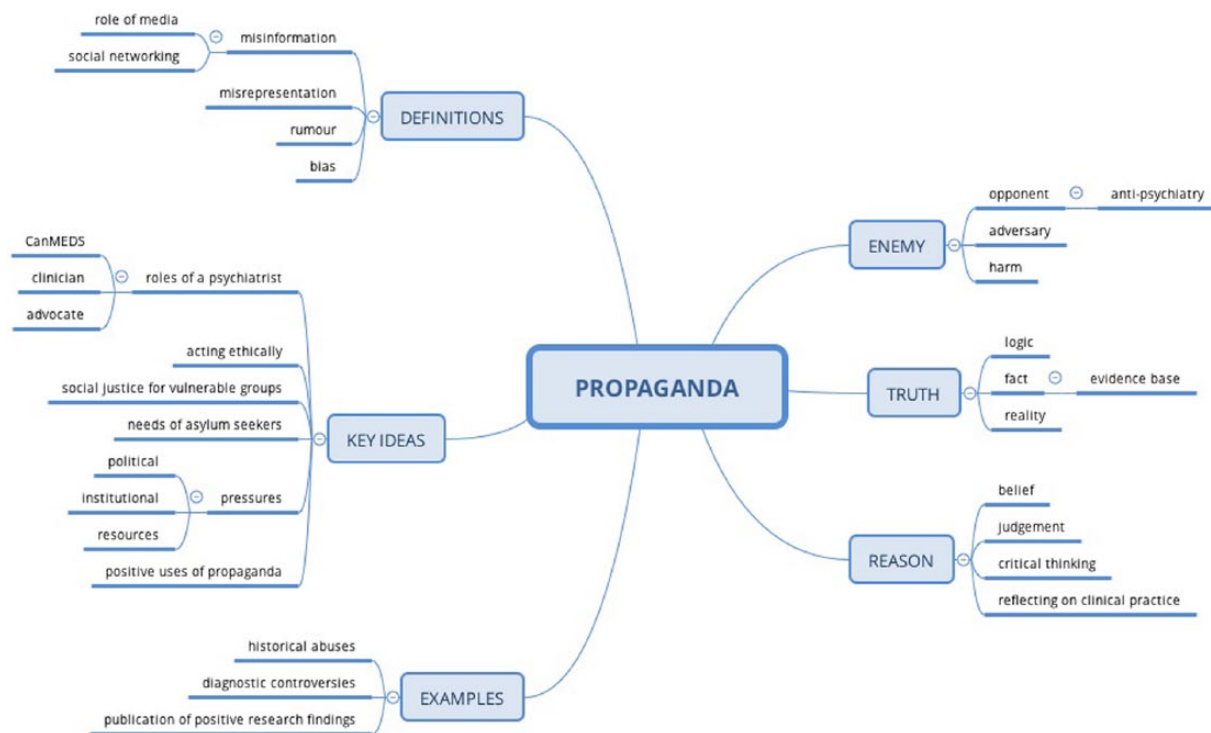
The most important idea should be conveyed from the outset. Make a purposeful statement about the quotation. You can state your position and the opposing one you will take, or set out that the issue is a dilemma that needs a solution.

For example:

Psychiatrists are rigorously trained with a broad base that encompasses thinking critically and ethically. They must use reason and truth and act with a high standard of professionalism to counter misinformation.

#### The middle

The body of the essay is an opportunity to generate counterarguments. You may provoke more questions than answers. You may not even agree with a controversial view but it is important to demonstrate your understanding of the issues in polemical debate and present this in a balanced way. Make one point per paragraph and support this from specific evidence or your own experience. Explain why the evidence you present is significant and supports your thesis. Signpost your main



**Figure 1. Mind map of key ideas.**

points as this allows the reader to reflect and understand the broad implications of your argument. Each paragraph builds and moves the argument beyond fact into significance and interpretation. You can enhance the flow by connecting paragraphs with a linking sentence.

For example:

Counterargument 1: The quotation refers to the asylum debacle in Australia. The media has drawn attention to the conditions of asylum seekers and the trauma they experience. The recourse to desperate acts by asylum seekers has been depicted as a threat to Australian society. Misrepresentation can occur, as when the media reported that asylum seekers on a boat allegedly threw their children overboard. Was this propaganda? This report was not subsequently verified but exploited for political means.

Counterargument 2: Propaganda, as opposed to being an enemy to truth and reason, can be positively used to advocate for issues of social justice. Psychiatrists can engage in collective action to change the situation of asylum seekers.

The conclusion: This draws together your argument and delivers your final point of view. Emphasise what you believe to be most important in your analysis of the quotation and make a concluding statement.

For example:

Psychiatrists are obliged to use their knowledge and skills in an ethical way to ensure patients are cared for in the best way possible. They can choose activism in wider society, advocating for aims and policies that are socially just for marginalised groups, such as asylum seekers with psychiatric disorders.

## Conclusion

Crafting a critical essay may be considered a daunting task but careful preparation will enable candidates to write confidently under examination conditions. Thinking and reading critically is essential, as is having a strategy to write. Practical points include structuring the essay with a clearly stated aim in the introduction and a logical conclusion, ensuring the debate is relevant to the quotation and keeping writing clear and succinct. It is helpful to practise writing essays and ask colleagues to provide constructive critique. This may empower candidates to develop critical thinking and a preferred style of writing.

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