

Improving your commentary 1: making criticisms

You are learning how to...	In the context of...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write effective commentary, criticism and evaluation of psychological theories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forensic, atypical and developmental psychology

The 'so what?' effect

Generally, an effective critical 'point' does several things. Students miss out on exam marks because they neglect one or more of them, resulting in 'nearly' or 'incomplete' points. The commonest error is to indicate there is an issue with a theory or explanation, but not to elaborate any further. This leaves the examiner saying, 'so what?' When you make a critical or evaluative point in an essay, try to do the following:

- State the issue and explain why it is a problem.
- Indicate what implications it might have for whatever you are discussing.
- If relevant, introduce a counter-argument.
- Draw a conclusion.

Here are some typical 'incomplete' points from an essay about cognitive development:

One problem with Piaget's method for assessing object permanence is it conflates performance with competence.

Piaget's method for assessing object permanence requires the child to be able to exercise fine motor control.

The first point correctly identifies a problem, but doesn't explain how that problem arises in the thing being evaluated (in this case, Piaget's method). The second point correctly indicates a relevant feature of the thing being evaluated, but doesn't explain why it is a problem. Here is the same criticism fully articulated.

One problem with Piaget's method for assessing object permanence is that it requires the child to have fine motor control in order to search for the hidden object. Younger children may not have this control so even if they know the object is still there they are unable to search for it. In this way, P's task may conflate competence with performance. Because the task disadvantages younger children, Piaget may have underestimated what infants are capable of.

Try improving these:

- One problem with Eysenck's theory is he relied heavily on self-report measures in his research.
- It is difficult to compare prison and non-custodial sentences because of the different offenders who get them.
- Biological explanations of schizophrenia suffer from not being able to distinguish cause and effect.
- The psychodynamic theory of depression is unscientific because you can't test it.
- Bowlby's research is flawed because he didn't distinguish between deprivation and privation.
- Most research into children's friendships is descriptive.
- Vygotsky says that adults help children's development but sometimes adults confuse children.
- The information processing approach treats children like computers.