ACADEMIC RESEARCH, PUBLISHING AND WRITING

This essential book for researchers, students, and policymakers contains seven chapters from Professor John Dumay on developing critical research, writing, and publishing strategy. It is writing in a storytelling style using the author's experience as to how he developed the skills to be an excellent publisher of scholarly work in journal articles, book chapters, books, and the media. This book testifies that writing scholarly work is an art form to be experienced and learned.

—James Guthrie, Macquarie University, Australia

We can all learn from this book. Follow even a fraction of John Dumay's advice and you'll increase your chances of publishing more academic articles that are more engaging and easier to digest by your intended audience. Your papers will be cited more, and you'll have fun while writing them. This book should be required reading for all postgraduate research students and early career scholars, and the rest of us should re-read it every so often to ensure we stick to the success formula John advocates.

—Charl de Villiers, University of Auckland, New Zealand

ACADEMIC RESEARCH, PUBLISHING AND WRITING

Critical Thinking and Strategies for Business Scholars

BY

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To my darling wife, Jenny, thanks for your patience.

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CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures

Tables

PREFACE

Helen Sword

I vividly remember the first time I met John Dumay. I had been invited to facilitate an academic writing workshop for early career lecturers at the University of Sydney. The topic was 'Stylish Academic Writing' (echoing the title of the book I was working on at the time) (Sword, 2012), and I was scanning the room to check how things were going.

I had just asked the workshop participants to tell me what the phrase *stylish academic writing* means to them, and they had responded with the same list of attributes that I've heard hundreds of times from researchers across many different disciplines, countries, and contexts. Stylish academic writers, they told me, express themselves with energy, elegance, and flair. They convey complex information using carefully crafted, accessible language. They write like human beings communicating with other human beings, not like robots on Mars.

Whenever I'm teaching or presenting, I try to find at least one person in the room who nods and smiles at everything I say. I call that person 'The Cheerleader'; they make me feel supported and heard, even when the going gets tough. If I'm unsure whether my message is getting through, I look to the Cheerleader for affirmation. And when I feel the energy in the room starting to drop, a quick glance at my bright-eyed Cheerleader inspires me to redouble my efforts to connect.

As I wrote the words 'engaging' and 'lively' and 'jargon-free' on the whiteboard, I was pleased to see most of the workshop participants nodding in vigorous agreement – a whole room full of Cheerleaders. But then I spotted John across the room, frowning. Or maybe he was actually *scowling*? Either way, it didn't look good. Even

while I rely on the Cheerleader's smiles for encouragement, I always keep an eye out for anyone who looks bored, confused, or, worst of all, sceptical. I call that person The Doubter – someone whose negative energy I must defuse before it infects the rest of the room.

At the next opportunity, I wandered over to John's table for a chat. Over the years, I've developed a pretty effective technique for dealing with the Doubters. First, I disarm them by listening to their grumbles and enthusiastically agreeing with them: 'That's a great point, John!' Then I air their concerns to the rest of the room: for example, 'John here has pointed out that scholars who write in a personal voice often end up getting shut down by conservative editors and peer reviewers. John, that's so true!' Finally, I execute a deft twist to transform the Doubter into an ally: 'John, what strategies do *you* use for pushing through that kind of resistance? I'll bet that everyone here would love to hear about them!'

But John, as it turned out, wasn't frowning because he disagreed with me. On the contrary – when I asked him how things were going, he told me that he had just experienced a kind of stylistic epiphany, and he was annoyed that it had taken him so long to see the light. Since leaving behind his business career to pursue a PhD in Accounting and Finance, he had been trained to produce the same kind of wordy, wooden, impersonal academic prose that filled most of the journals in his discipline. But now, he realised that the researchers he most admired were 'stylish academic writers' who wrote in the kind of lively, engaging mode I was encouraging. 'They use first person pronouns, they play with metaphor, they tell stories', John told me. 'That's how I want to write too – but I've never been taught how. If anything, I've been actively discouraged from writing that way!'

Thus began a long and fruitful academic friendship, as John set about learning out how to write like a human being, while I conducted research, published books, and developed online tools designed to empower writers like him. From time to time, John would get in touch to ask me a question, invite me to speak at a conference, or let me know about a new article. Eventually, I invited him to be interviewed for my book *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* (Sword, 2017). The resulting profile is worth printing in full:

When accounting lecturer John Dumay enrolled in a course on higher-education pedagogy, he and his colleagues were encouraged to become more self-reflective teachers: 'We had to look at what we were doing as teachers, question why we were doing it, and ask ourselves, "How can I change and improve it?"' He decided to apply a similar mindset to his research writing:

> *I had heard from reviewers that my writing tended to be very abstract, so I tried to change the style and write this really dynamic, personal, me-from-the-first-person kind of narrative.*

His first journal article in the new style received an enthusiastic response – 'the reviewers thought it was fantastic' – but then he hit a stumbling block:

> *It was all ready to get published, and the editor came back to me and said, 'Oh, you're writing in the first person. We only publish in the third person. You have to change this'. I thought, 'Are you kidding me?' It took me half a day to go back through it, making sure it was in the present tense and writing everything in the third person. Instead of 'we', I would write 'the researchers'. But I didn't like that. I thought it constrained what I did.*

The next time he submitted a paper to the same journal, he used personal pronouns again: 'Again the paper got accepted, and this time, the editor didn't say boo. So maybe I pushed his buttons a little bit'.

Dumay compares academic writing to cooking – 'It's a craft that you hone and you develop' – and likens a scholar learning the craft to 'a chef mastering a recipe':

> *You can get the structure right, you can get the ingredients right, but it's actually how you combine those ingredients and the quality of those ingredients – the quality of the analysis, the quality of the data – that take it to the next level. We can all bake a*

> *chocolate cake if we have the right recipe, but there are only a few of us who can bake an absolutely superb chocolate cake.*
>
> As a writer, Dumay now feels that he has now passed his apprenticeship – 'I can cook some wonderful meals' – but still has a lot to learn:
>
> *Can I cook that pièce de résistance that's going to be a hit in the finest restaurant? I don't think I'm there yet, but I'm certainly working on it.*

'I don't think I'm there yet, but I'm certainly working on it'. Reading through this book, I'm struck once again by John's relentless commitment to learning. A decade and a half after that writing workshop in Sydney, he is now a full professor with an impressive publication record, including several articles *about* writing and publication. But he didn't become a successful academic writer merely through instinct or osmosis. He got there by emulating the best writers he could find, by challenging his own assumptions, and by asking the same question over and over again: 'How can I change and improve it?'

Who better, then, to write a book about the scholarly strategies that he has used to achieve such success? John practices what he preaches: you'll find here relevant anecdotes, playful metaphors, meticulously crafted sentences, and vivid storytelling. Best of all, as you shift outside your comfort zone into the world of stylish academic writing – a place still beset by grumpy Doubters – you can be assured that you'll have a supportive Cheerleader in your corner.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about developing a critical research, writing, and publishing strategy. Using my experience, I outline the specific skills that I believe are essential for academic researchers in the social sciences, and particularly business studies, to develop and execute a personal strategy to achieve their goals and advance their careers.

This book stems from lectures I have been giving for over a decade. These lectures originated during my time as a visiting scholar in Italy in 2011, where many business academics were eager to learn about publishing in prestigious English language academic journals. The pressure to publish frequently and make a significant impact is a global phenomenon known as the 'publish or perish' pandemic. This pressure is particularly prevalent in the social sciences, especially within business. The ability to publish regularly and with influence is crucial for achieving academic success and building an academic career.

Throughout my academic journey, I have honed my writing abilities by seeking guidance from mentors, studying examples of successful writing (de Villiers & Dumay, 2013, 2014), cultivating critical thinking and analysis skills, and striving to comprehend the impact of research. However, I have noticed that many of my colleagues overlook or lack these essential skills when conducting and documenting their academic research. I, too, was once in this same position back at the beginning of my career.

Nevertheless, I always approach my research with a well-defined strategy in mind. This strategy includes determining the research topic, evaluating its potential impact, identifying suitable publishing platforms, tailoring the writing style to the target audience, and devising methods to promote the research and get citations after publication. By formulating a strategy before commencing

their research, academics can enhance their chances of publishing in reputable outlets and thus thrive in the demanding 'publish or perish' environment.

The 'publish or perish' pandemic continues to evolve in academia. In response, academics are under increasing pressure to publish now rather than later. Issues such as open-access publishing, predatory journals and research impact are becoming increasingly tricky pathways and even minefields to navigate. An inexperienced researcher could easily take the wrong step and damage their career forever. As a result, they need a clear and concise guide on navigating the minefields and developing survival skills. Thus, I use my experience from navigating the ladder of success to outline academic research, publishing and writing strategies that deal with the current 'publish or perish' world. The book has seven chapters that I summarise below.

Chapter 1: Critical Thinking and the IDEALS Framework

This chapter introduces critical thinking and the IDEALS framework as two core foundations of my approach to academic writing. Critical thinking is essential to research and writing because it causes us to question existing knowledge in a way that allows us to create new knowledge. For this reason, critical thinking is a fundamental part of the IDEALS framework. I teach these skills and this writing framework to my students because, with these tools, they are more likely to produce quality research outcomes and, in turn, get better grades. Moreover, academic authors who apply critical thinking and the IDEALS framework can produce high-quality research suitable for publication in the best academic journals.

Chapter 2: Becoming a Critical Scholar

The first step in becoming a critical scholar is understanding how one's beliefs, education, environment, and experiences shape oneself as an academic and a researcher. It is a myth that research in the social sciences can be unbiased; what is true is that we all bring our biases to research. As such, this chapter provides a journey of self-analysis from personal recognition to pragmatism to understanding how we can leverage our beliefs to develop research that impacts business, the environment and society. This chapter also

explores the different stages of critical research. Using The Chocolate Scorecard as an example project, it introduces the link between critical research and solving wicked problems.

Chapter 3: Developing a Publishing Strategy

In this chapter, I outline that having specific strategies about what, how, and where to publish is critical to success. In this chapter, I explore strategy and engineering before dispelling some academic myths, dealing with several issues stemming from the 'publish or perish' problem, and negotiating the minefield of academic journals and open-access publishing. I then explore how to plan for impact by examining how you can critically participate in academic debates, co-authorship, and testing the waters with your ideas. Armed with this knowledge, you will better understand how to strategically approach academic research, design your research to make an impact and formulate firmer ideas of where to publish your papers.

Chapter 4: Undertaking a Critical Literature Review

The core to developing any research is the literature review. Hence, this chapter explores different types of literature reviews, their purposes and epistemology, and how each is critical in different ways. I build on the IDEALS framework and critical scholarship to develop guidelines for undertaking a critical literature review. I also demonstrate how researchers should link academic literature to practice and current issues. I then link the literature review process to developing a single informed research question or problem important to academia and society.

Chapter 5: Designing Research for Reliability, Validity, and Generalisations

The previous chapter focuses on identifying a research question or problem, whereas this chapter discusses designing your research for reliability, validity, and generalisation. I review the case study as a methodology and primary model for building reliability and validity in social science research. Through these tools, researchers can avoid criticism while presenting research that tells a story based on multiple data sources. I then address the generalisation

controversy in qualitative research and the fallacy that qualitative researchers must apologise for not generalising their research. I demonstrate why such an apology is not needed.

Chapter 6: Writing Structure Using Reasoning and IDEALS

This chapter presents a basic recipe for structuring an academic article in the social sciences. I developed this recipe by researching the attributes of articles published in highly-ranked accounting journals. With this recipe in hand, I then demonstrate how different sections rely on different forms of reasoning, followed by a demonstration of how to write argumentative paragraphs, which are the core means of expressing critical research.

Chapter 7: Polishing the Diamond

This chapter outlines how to write concisely and clearly. I explore several tools to increase your writing productivity, diagnose your writing, help reduce word counts, improve your grammar and punctuation, and increase your writing confidence. I also discuss how artificial intelligence can assist the academic research process and some of its dangers. Last, I discuss why you should have someone proofread all your writing before submitting the paper to a journal for review. Overall, you will learn how to take your ideas, a rough diamond, and apply tools to polish the diamond, which will hopefully shine as a published star.

Conclusion

I hope you enjoy reading the book as much as I enjoyed writing it. I purposely kept the chapters as short as possible because I believe writing clearly and concisely is a hallmark of good academic writing and my success. Learning the art and craft of academic writing is taking me on a journey to places that I never imagined and will continue to take me, and hopefully you, further than we ever imagined.

1

CRITICAL THINKING AND THE IDEALS FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces critical thinking and the IDEALS framework as two core foundations of my approach to academic writing. Critical thinking is essential to research and writing because it causes us to question existing knowledge in a way that allows us to create new knowledge. For this reason, critical thinking is a fundamental part of the IDEALS framework. I teach these skills and this writing framework to my students because, with these tools, they are more likely to produce quality research outcomes and, in turn, get better grades. Moreover, academic authors who apply critical thinking and the IDEALS framework can produce high-quality research suitable for publication in the best academic journals.

CRITICAL THINKING

I was born in Australia but not in a big city or the mainland. I came from Tasmania. Tasmania is famous for many things. But, most of all, we know it as home to the Tasmanian Devil. From a research perspective, I like to say that's me! Why? Because, as researchers, I believe we should always play the devil's advocate, questioning existing knowledge and beliefs. We can only create

new knowledge by questioning existing knowledge and continuing to undertake research. Creating new knowledge is our primary role as researchers.

Critical thinking is a learned process that academics use to question knowledge. I believe it is *the* skill that allows us to stand on the shoulders of giants. When I teach critical thinking to my students, it helps them develop lifelong skills for decision-making that are useful in the workplace, such as deciding upon one option over another. Critical thinking helps them to gather and assess qualitative and quantitative information. It helps them formulate arguments to critique contemporary theories, technologies, and systems. It teaches them to assess for and against arguments to help solve problems. Most importantly, it ensures they can make and justify their decisions based on evidence rather than opinion.

Ensuring that we make decisions using evidence rather than opinion is the difference between criticism and critique (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Criticism is based on an opinion of what is wrong or bad. For example, if I say, 'I don't like your shirt!' it is not based on evidence. However, in critique, we assess and discuss the good and the bad, the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and threats (Dumay, 2009). A critique of your shirt might therefore be: 'I like your shirt because the colour matches your blue eyes, but it is light cotton and is not warm enough for the cold weather. Maybe you could put on something warmer?' Criticism is one-sided and negative and offers no positive solutions. Critique, however, is two-sided and offers a way forward.

Yet, critique, or critical thinking, does not come naturally to people. It is a skill we need to learn, which is why I teach critical thinking. However, what does come naturally is thinking and reflecting on previous experiences and using those reflections to form judgements that inform future actions. This ability to reflect is a human trait that other animals do not have. Hence, if we can learn to harness our ability to reflect, we can make more informed choices about how we act in the future. Part of being an academic researcher is drawing conclusions and making realistic recommendations for future practice, policy, and research. It is far better to do this from a place of critique and reflection instead of simply pontificating from our ivory towers.

Even if my students don't pursue an academic career, critical thinking is important to employers. According to the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2002), some of the critical thinking attributes that are important to employers are:

- Testing assumptions – taking the context of data and circumstances into account;
- Predicting – weighing up risk, evaluating alternatives, and applying evaluation criteria;
- Collecting, analysing, and organising information;
- Evaluating and monitoring your performance;
- Coaching, mentoring, and giving feedback; and
- Identifying opportunities not obvious to others.

I tell my students that when they have finished my class, they can add critical thinking to their resume alongside other common skills, such as proficiency in Excel or other computer applications. It is not common to see critical thinking listed, and it could become a talking point in a job interview. The feedback I get from former students who followed this advice is that it works, and interviewers are impressed that they can think, reflect, and act rather than wait to be told what to do.

Purposeful Reflective Judgement

Purposeful reflective judgement is 'precisely the kind of judgement which is the focus of critical thinking' (Facione, 2020, p. 17). It is a cognitive process that involves actively and systematically analysing information, experiences, or situations and using this reflective analysis to make informed decisions or form well-reasoned conclusions. It is an intentional and critical thinking process beyond surface-level observation or intuition. It is a conscious effort to question, evaluate, and integrate information, leading to thoughtful and reasoned judgements or decisions. Learning to harness

purposeful reflective judgement is a lifelong learning skill and an essential skill for academic researchers.

Facione (2020) outlines six related skills to harness purposeful reflective judgement. Each is defined next, along with an example.

Interpretation is the ability 'to comprehend and express the meaning or significance of a wide variety of experiences, situations, data, events, judgements, conventions, beliefs, rules, procedures, or criteria' (Facione, 2020, p. 5). For example, interpreting the meaning of Australian Aboriginal artwork requires understanding the cultural, symbolic, and spiritual elements embedded in the art. As with any social phenomenon, it is important to interpret Aboriginal art through its specific cultural context and traditions.

Analysis means 'to identify the intended and actual inferential relationships among statements, questions, concepts, descriptions, or other forms of representation intended to express belief, judgement, experiences, reasons, information, or opinions' (Facione, 2020, p. 5). When teaching critical thinking, I flash a join-the-dots picture with several hundred dots on the screen and ask my students to guess the picture. A few of them can see the shape of a face, but because the dots have not been joined, they can't see exactly who it is. After some guesswork, I show them the picture with all the dots joined, revealing that the face is the Mona Lisa. Joining the dots is a form of analysis. Still, you have to know how to do it because, to an untrained eye, the Mona Lisa remains hidden until you know how to connect the dots.

Evaluation is the ability 'to assess the credibility of statements or other representations which are accounts or descriptions of a person's perception, experience, situation, judgement, belief, or opinion' (Facione, 2020, p. 6). Arguably, evaluation is the most important skill one can learn today because we are bombarded with so much information on the internet and other sources.

Unfortunately, we live in an era of fake news, corporate greenwashing, and political and religious propaganda. Who are we to believe? According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, an annual report on the key institutions of society, 'A shared media environment has given way to echo chambers, making it harder to collaboratively solve problems. Media is not trusted, with especially low trust in social media' (Edelman, 2023, p. 5). Hence, we cannot

believe everything we read. Rather, we must evaluate the credibility of all the information we use in our academic research.

Inference refers 'to identifying and securing the elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions; to form conjectures and hypotheses; to consider relevant information; and to reduce the consequences flowing from data, statements, principles, evidence, judgements, beliefs, opinions, concepts, descriptions, questions, or other forms of representation' (Facione, 2020). Inference is what the great detective Sherlock Holmes uses to solve his cases. When undertaking academic research, we must present evidence to support our conclusions. If we don't, the reviewers and readers will not believe us, and we must live with the accusation that 'the bastards are making it up' (Van Maanen, 1988). Moreover, a core skill every researcher need is to write a convincing narrative that leaves unquestionable conclusions in the readers' minds. However, this is a task that is easier said than done.

Explanation means 'to state and to justify that reasoning in terms of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, and contextual considerations upon which one's results were based; and to present one's reasoning in the form of cogent arguments' (Facione, 2020, p. 6). Explanation complements inference because it is the skill needed to present the details in an easy to understand manner. It answers the questions of Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How. It is the ability to develop tables, charts, and equations summarising complex data.

Self-regulation is the process of 'self-consciously monitoring one's cognitive activities, the elements used in those activities, and the results educed, particularly by applying skills in analysis, and evaluation to one's own inferential judgements with a view towards questioning, confirming, validating, or correcting either one's reasoning or one's results' (Facione, 2020, p. 7). I agree with Facione (2020) that self-regulation is the most important critical thinking skill because it causes you to reflect on your performance and research outcomes. For example, many people struggle with dieting, going from one diet fad to another. However, people who weigh themselves daily or weekly are likelier to lose weight and keep it off in the long run (WebMD Editorial Contributors, 2023). Research and writing are no different.

As my good colleague and mentor, Prof Lee Parker, advocates, if you want to write well, you must train like a champion swimmer and jump in the pool daily. You also need a coach or mentor who gives you feedback on your performance, and you must critically evaluate your performance and compare it against others in the same pool. Doing so keeps you focused on your goals and allows you to make tactical adjustments to your performance that help to improve it in the long run.

Learning these six critical thinking skills is essential to good academic writing. But even when you think you have mastered critical thinking, another curve ball comes your way, which is what Facione (2020, p. 21) calls a 'dominance structure'. A dominance structure is something to avoid, as explained next.

Avoiding the Dominance Structure

According to Facione (2020, p. 21), we often choose an option that is 'good enough', after which we tend to argue only for this choice, making it our 'dominant option'. The disadvantage of this behaviour is that our decisions are often based on our initial reactions and not due to an open and critical evaluation of the situation. However, this also helps explain why convincing others to change their minds is usually difficult, even when you present them with overwhelming evidence to support an alternative view. In other words, people get stuck in their own beliefs.

A dominance structure is dangerous from a research perspective because it means we have blinkers on. It means we cannot see crucial evidence or that we ignore any evidence that does not support our beliefs. It can also mean we get so fixated on a particular theory that it blinds us to evaluating a phenomenon from any other perspective. For example, I once had a conversation with a prospective PhD student in which I asked what she would do for her thesis. She replied, 'actor-network theory'. 'Great!' I said. 'A thesis critiquing the use and development of actor-network theory will be a good project'. 'No', she replied. 'I want to use actor-network theory to analyse my data'. 'But how can you know what theory to use when you haven't even collected the data or know what you are studying!' was my retort.

She was so convinced that the theory was correct that it became her dominant option before starting her thesis. However, the danger is that by wedding herself to the theory, other insights and critiques that could be gleaned using alternative theories to understand the data would be missed. In the end, she did complete her thesis, and actor-network theory was not used.

The dominance structure occurs because humans naturally tend to make decisions on the spot. This is known as System 1 Thinking (Facione, 2020, p. 17):

> *System 1 relies heavily on a number of heuristics (cognitive manoeuvres), key situational characteristics, readily associated ideas, and vivid memories to arrive quickly and confidently at a judgement. System 1 thinking is particularly helpful in familiar situations when time is short and immediate action is required.*

The example I use with my students is driving a car and approaching a traffic light that has just turned orange. 'What do you do?' I ask them. Depending on how many lead-foot students I have, there is generally mix of 'hitting the brakes' and 'stepping on the accelerator and going through the light'. However, in the end, the point is that the initial decision is made instantaneously. This is System 1 Thinking in action.

I next introduce more variables into the decision-making process to take their thinking further. What would be your decision if it was raining? If there was a large puddle of water in the intersection? If you looked in your rear-view mirror and saw a truck barrelling towards you? Some students stick to their answers even after asking these questions, but others change their minds.

They change their minds because they have more information and time to reflect on the consequences. This is known as System 2 Thinking (Facione, 2020, p. 17):

> *This is our more reflective thinking system. It is useful for making judgements when you find yourself in unfamiliar situations and have more time to figure things out. It allows us to process abstract concepts, to deliberate, to plan ahead, to consider options carefully, to review and revise our work in the light of relevant guidelines or standards or rules of procedure.*

System 2 Thinking is essential to critical thinking and academic research. However, many researchers unwittingly fall into the trap of System 1 Thinking. They are set in their opinions that there is a correct way of undertaking academic research. For example, there is a continuing debate between qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in the social sciences (de Villiers et al., 2019). Each side has its fervent supporters and opponents who base their arguments on ideological opinions rather than a critical assessment of the research methodologies. A true critical assessment would be to use the most appropriate methodology to answer a particular research question (Dumay, 2009).

An Ethical Dimension

While I advocate the positive aspects of critical thinking, we must also recognise that it can be used unethically. As Facione (2020, p. 13) outlines, 'a person can be adept at developing arguments and then, unethically, use this skill to mislead and exploit a gullible person, perpetrate a fraud, or deliberately confuse and confound, and frustrate a project'. To illustrate this to my students, I get them to watch a Netflix video called *The Smartest Guys in the Room* based on the book by Mclean and Elkind (2003). The video is about the biggest corporate collapse in US history and how the innovative business practices employed by the company ended up in a financial disaster. Arguably, a lot of critical thinking went into these innovations. But in the end, these novel practices only lined the pockets of a few at the expense of numerous ordinary investors, many of whom lost their life savings. Thus, critical thinking is only as good as the people who use it ethically.

THE IDEALS FRAMEWORK

Putting critical thinking into action in academic research is challenging because it is a learned experience. When I started teaching at university, I realised that my students were not trained in critical thinking or academic writing. A quick hand poll of students at the beginning of the semester showed that most students had no