Teaching Critical Analysis Skills with Analysis Briefs: What They Are and How They Work

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Critical analysis, which is defined as the reasoned and logical process of skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information (Scriven and Paul 2001), is at the heart of the research process that propels our profession's knowledge-base forward. In this essay, I describe an effective method that I developed to help inculcate and hone students' critical analysis skills. Indeed, critical analysis skills are crucial foundational skills necessary for all students, especially those who intend to thrive successfully as researchers in our profession.

The method that I have devised is based on the century-old practice of briefing cases, whereby law students, professors, and lawyers dissect the components of individual cases as a mechanism for understanding their underlying rationale and place within a larger realm of legal theory (Sloan 2003). In many respects, political science graduate or advanced undergraduate students need to learn a similar set of skills (Cohen 1993; Alex-Assensoh 2000). For example, most political science seminars are organized around the need to examine the merits of assigned readings and to engage students in the process of ongoing debate through the examination of readings that are focused on a particular research question or research literature. Seminars are also geared toward allowing students to practice the process of knowledge production by engaging a specific literature and building on it. The analysis brief method includes three levels of analysis that graduate students must employ each time they read an essay or book: (i) accurate identification and summary of issues, concepts, themes and methods; (ii) interpretation and analysis; and (iii) synthesis.

The method is illustrated on Tables 1 through 3. Table 1 illustrates the structure of the assignment: column 1 of Table 1 lists the questions that students must address in each of the three aforementioned levels of analysis, while column 2 of Table 1 provides space for student responses.

In the first stage of the analysis, a brief assignment focuses on accurate identification and summary. Although this aspect of the assignment may appear, at first glance, to be too elementary for graduate students, the simple fact is that many graduate students do not, per se, know how to read scholarly essays accurately (Middendorf and Pace 2004). Many of them also do not understand how to separate the proverbial wheat from the chaff in order to focus on the real substance of the author's argument. The process of identifying the crucial aspects of scholarly essays hones critical analysis skills because it highlights the components of the assigned reading that warrant explicit attention. Additionally, students gain three collateral benefits. First, when the students identify the key aspects of research design in each of the assigned readings, they are simultaneously exposed to the myriad ways that political scientists frame research questions, engage the prior research, propose explanations, explain findings, and link them to the broader research literature. This exposure, in turn, provides them with a second benefit, made up of good models on which to base the research designs that they subsequently complete. Third, when students move beyond identification to summarize—in their own words—various aspects of the research design process,

Table 1
Article/Book Brief Assignment

Research Components	Student Responses
The major research questions explored in this article/book are:	
What is the state of prior research on this topic? Identify research gaps that the author intends to ameliorate.	
What are the major theoretical propositions?	
How does the author operationalize the concepts that undergird the theoretical propositions?	
What qualitative and quantitative data are used to examine the research question and test the theoretical propositions?	
What are the major findings and overall implications of the study?	
Based on a thorough examination of the research components, offer an accurate, clear, and concise critique of this article.	
Explain how this article or book relates to the other assigned readings and how it fits into the larger research puzzle under examination. If necessary, you may use additional pages to complete your response.	

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Table 2
Sample Questions to Facilitate Systematic Analysis

Research Components	Pertinent Questions
Research Question	In light of what is already known about this research topic, what additional contribution does the research question (i.e., as distinguished from research findings) make to this body of research? How does the author justify the merits of the research question and larger study? What is at stake theoretically and empirically in this research? To what extent is the author's method of framing the research question insightful and useful as a model for your own work? What methods are utilized in this study?
Prior Research/Existing Research Gaps	How accurate is the author's analysis of the prior body of research? Does it include relevant research that illuminates possible contradiction as well as replication? If so, to what extent does the author deftly distinguish his work from prior research? To what extent does the author claim linkages between his research and prior research that are strained or nonexistent? How does the author use prior research to further the study's propositions?
Theoretical propositions	What is the author's argument? How is it framed and presented? How robust are the animating theoretical propositions? Is the theoretical model properly specified to include all of the variables, cases, relevant documents, examples, or time periods that are likely to explain or affect various relationships? Is the theory adequately developed? Are the assumptions on which it is based valid?
Operationalization and Measurement	Are the conceptual linkages clearly articulated and satisfactorily operationalized to reflect the questions under investigation?
Data	Are the data appropriate to address the research question? Is the sample on which the data are based large and diverse enough to address the research question, or is it biased in some way? Are the data based on a representative sample of the interested population? Are the data cross sectional or longitudinal? Do the data have discrete or relatively continuous scales of measurement? If the data are qualitative in nature, how credible are the interviews, case studies, and interpretations on which the data are based?
Methods	Are the selected methods appropriate to the specified research objectives? Are there more effective methods to address the question? If so, what are they? Why are they more appropriate than the author's chosen methods?
Findings/Implications	Is the presentation of the findings accurate and responsible? What is the relationship between the theoretical propositions and the findings? In other words, do the author's findings jive with the stated propositions? If not, is the divergence satisfactorily explained? How can it be better explained? How accurate are the author's statement of findings? How robust are the coefficients on which the analysis is based? If the author claims the existence of a causal relationship, to what extent has he/she provided empirical proof of the relationship above and beyond the existence of co-variation. Is the author's analysis supported by the data or has he/she understated or overstated inferences? Do the findings make sense? Do you agree with the author's framing of the study's theoretical and empirical implications? Why or why not?
Synthesis	How do the assigned readings fit together theoretically, empirically, methodologically, and also in terms of implications? How have they helped to push our knowledge about these issues forward? What challenges do they highlight? What agenda do they suggest for the future?

they simultaneously reflect on the research in important ways that serve as a foundation for subsequent analysis as well as a reasoned basis for class discussion.

The second layer of analysis is to evaluate the merits of the articles and books in a systematic way. In this aspect of the analysis, my structured courses endeavor to teach students the important skills of interpretation and analysis, which moves them beyond the disorganized and esoteric critique that often comes from unsystematic analysis. This means that I encourage graduate students to use a technique of questioning that allows them to think along with the assigned writers as though they are engaged in a conversation. Toward that

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Table 3
Grading Rubric

Dimension	Excellent/Very Good	Above Average/Average	Area of Concern
Research Question	__ Accurate, but not in your own words. __ Accurate restatement in your own words. __ Accurate and clearly written statement in your own words.	__ Wording is too similar to the author's text. __ Almost accurate and clearly written.	__ You have not identified the research question. __ This is not an accurate restatement of the research question.
Prior Research	__ Complete summary of the prior research. __ Complete summary of the prior research that is well-crafted.	__ Incomplete and inaccurate summary of prior research. __ Inaccurate summary of prior research. __ Incomplete summary of prior research.	__ You have not summarized the prior body of research, but some other aspect of the reading. __ Your summary is unclear and inaccurate.
Theoretical Propositions	__ You have correctly identified the major aspect of the author's arguments. __ You have correctly identified and clearly articulated all of the author's argument, including the subtleties and fine points.	__ Your characterization of the argument is somewhat inaccurate. __ Your characterization of the argument is slightly incomplete. __ Your characterization of the argument is pretty accurate but unclear in parts.	__ This is not the author's argument.
Data and Methodologies	__ Accurate and efficient description of the data and methods employed in the study.	__ Good summary, but incomplete or inaccurate. __ Too dependent on the text.	__ Statement is largely inaccurate and unclear.
Findings	__ Accurate and complete analysis of the findings.	__ Good, but incomplete discussion of the findings.	__ Salient findings are not included in your analysis.
Synthesis	__ Excellent job at fitting the pieces of the research puzzle together. Thought-provoking discussion of existing challenges, opportunities, and future research agenda.	__ Incomplete insights. You have delineated the findings, but you have not indicated how they fit together.	__ Devote more time to thinking clearly about how the assigned readings for today fit together and establish an agenda for the future.

end, I encourage graduate students to revisit each component of the scholarly article or book—indeed, from research question to conclusion—and, also, to critique it by using a series of questions. A step-by-step analysis of each research component provides students with an opportunity to reflect on the viability of each aspect of the research in a deliberate, focused and thoughtful way. Column 1 of Table 2 lists the components of research design, while column 2 lists a sample of the questions that I encourage my students to pose when evaluating the research elements. The list of questions is not meant to be exhaustive, but instead illustrative of the types of questions that should be posed for each component of the research process. For example, I encourage students to think critically about the author's argument and inquire into the assumptions on which the argument is based, the validity of those assumptions as well as the extent to which the article or book includes all of the logical explanatory components.

In the third level of analysis, students use the components of the analytical process described above in Table 2 to discuss how the assigned readings fit into the larger research questions or literature under investigation. The final question on the analysis brief outline (Table 1) asks students to fit the pieces of the research puzzle together. Here, students have an opportunity to explore linkages among articles and/or books and compare as well as contrast research questions, methods, and theoretical propositions. This practice helps students to develop a much more logical, rational, and deliberate approach that inculcates the practice of systematic analysis. The end-result is that graduate students become part of the "intellectual engine" that moves our discipline forward.

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Assessing Student Progress

In light of the research literature, which details the power and effectiveness of rubrics, I have devised an assessment rubric to evaluate the analysis briefs (Andrade 2000) that my students complete.[1] Table 3 illustrates the rubric that I developed to evaluate the quality of each student's critique. For example, students receiving checks in column 1 are doing excellent or very good work. Also, it means that they have accurately identified the relevant research components, deftly summarized them, written with precision and clarity and offered interpretation of the readings that demonstrate thoughtful, systematic and creative analysis. During the initial few weeks, it is rare for students to receive more than one or two marks in the excellent or very good category. Rather, most students receive points or marks in column 2, the above-average or average category. That is because their initial responses are not quite accurate or are too dependent on the text. In other instances, the students do not exhibit a clear understanding of the state of prior research or the full range of methods employed by the author. Sometimes, their proffered insights about the research lack focus and serious thought.

The third column indicates areas of concern for students, who either turn in sloppy or careless work, who do not understand the underlying components of a particular article, or who offer mind-numbing critiques. During the first few weeks, it is common for even the most promising students to have marks or points in the third column, especially if they have not devoted adequate attention to critical reading and careful articulation. The grading rubric, therefore, provides students with specific comments that help them to understand the particular strengths and weaknesses of their critiques. The chart provides an easy way to indicate the student's marks or points by simply checking the appropriate box. Over the course of the semester, students can utilize the grading rubrics to measure their progress in mastering challenging components of the analytical process. In this regard, there is nothing more rewarding than to observe students' hard-won progress, as they slowly but surely improve these important foundational skills, which are among prerequisites for success in our profession.

Anecdotal Assessments of Analysis Briefs as Compared to Weekly Essay Papers

Although the analysis briefs require more time to complete than the weekly "reflection" or "idea" papers that are standard fare in most graduate seminars, students still report three distinct benefits from the analysis brief assignment. First, students credit the analysis brief structure as what forces them to read a lot more carefully. Second, graduate students report that it has helped them to identify the important components of research and, then, to ferret out the important aspects of an author's argument. One student reported that he now completes all reading assignments by using the framework of research components as a guide to understand the author's argument. Third, and most importantly, the method has provided them with the tools to know how to evaluate critically a variety of scholarship, which ranges from qualitative to quantitative studies.

In the past, I used the traditional weekly "idea paper" that is typically assigned in graduate seminars, whereby students were asked to write reflective essays about all of the assigned readings for a particular week. In contrast to these assignments, the analysis brief assignments provide a solid basis for informed class discussions. That is because students worked individually through the important task of reading and understanding the arguments as well as the findings. Consequently, discussions during the class can be geared toward the more productive questions regarding future research agenda or comparative discussions of theory and approaches. Even, students who are reportedly quiet in other graduate seminars are more willing to participate in the class discussions, where the briefs are utilized, because they have been "forced" to think seriously about the arguments and to prepare thoughtful comments in advance of our class meeting. Finally, many graduate students have reported that they have adopted the analysis briefs in other seminars, utilized them to prepare for comprehensive examinations, to keep abreast of changes in their areas of specialization, and, above all, to sharpen several aspects of their dissertation proposals.

Over the years, I have discovered that most graduate students simply need to be shown how to engage critically the research literature, and indeed, it is part of our task as teachers to train them effectively toward that end. When we systematically train our students how to think and write critically, we give an intellectual gift that keeps on giving. Most notably, there is the wonderful creation of new knowledge that our students produce, which moves our profession forward in positive and beneficial ways.

Notes

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1. Rubrics are increasingly common in undergraduate teaching. For examples of how they are used and how they can be adapted to the graduate curriculum, see www.wcer.wisc.edu/archives/cl1/flag/cat/catfram.htm and www.aaup.org/publications/Academe/2005/05nd/05ndlovi.htm.

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