
Academic Skills for

Bachelor of

Social Work

Undergraduate Program

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Example of critical analysis of a text

The following extract (pp.109-114) is from “Terra Nullius Reborn” by Henry Reynolds (2003). It is published in *Whitewash: on Keith Windschuttle’s Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, a collection of essays edited by Robert Manne. Windschuttle’s book is *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One, Van Diemen’s Land 1803-1947* (2002).

Note how, in critically analyzing Windschuttle’s argument, Reynolds is implicitly asking the questions listed on p.16 “Questions for critically analysing and evaluating an argument”.

Terra Nullius Reborn

Henry Reynolds

Reynolds states
Windschuttle’s
central claim

There is no doubt about Keith Windschuttle’s ambition. He seeks to bring the concept of *terra nullius* back to life. That is a central feature of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. He tells us that the notions of the exclusive possession of territory and the defence of it either by law or force ‘were not part of the Aborigines’ mental universe’. In short the Tasmanians ‘did not own the land’. The concept of property was ‘not part of their culture’.¹

Establishes the
significance of the
claim

Much follows from this assertion. The incoming Europeans were not taking land belonging to someone else. They introduced tenure to a place where none had previously existed. Aboriginal attacks on the settlers had nothing to do with resisting encroachments on their land because they had no sense of trespass. In the absence of such motivation they must have been spurred to violence by baser, more personal motives – by the desire for vengeance and for plunder. Therefore the Tasmanians were not at war with the settlers. They were criminals – burglars and cutthroats, not warriors or patriots.

Raises critical
points:

Much then turns on this question. Remove this building block and much of the argument in *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* collapses. It is not possible, as some reviewers have wished, to cast doubt on Windschuttle’s vision of *terra nullius* while leaving the rest untouched. The soundness of argument and evidence in this area are all-important.

Generalisation

Lack of evidence
or lack of
convincing
evidence

He begins at a high level of generalisation. Unless it can be proved to the contrary, it must be assumed that hunters and gatherers have no sense of land ownership. It’s an heroic claim which flies in the face of 200 years of jurisprudence and at least 150 years of ethnography. Windschuttle provides no evidence, no references to ground this heroic proposition. We are expected to receive it as an axiom that is beyond argument. But it is not a good start. And things get worse.

Presents
Windschuttle’s
claim re language,
and evidence put
forward in support.

The most powerful proposition we are presented with is that the Aborigines did not have a word for property. This argument has caught the public’s eye and has been repeated numerous times in reviews. Clearly it has been seen to be a clincher – an argument of great discursive power. But we should begin with Windschuttle’s own words:

The Aborigines did not even have a word for it. None of the four vocabularies of Tasmanian Aboriginal language compiled in the nineteenth century, nor any of the lists of their phrases, sentences or songs, contained the word ‘land’. Nor did they have words for ‘own’, ‘possess’ or ‘property’ or any of their derivatives.²

The source for these claims is a series of appendices in the 1899 book, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, by H. Ling Roth.³ Given the great significance of the linguistic evidence it is remarkable that Windschuttle has apparently read nothing on Tasmanian Aboriginal linguistics published in the twentieth century. But leaving that aside, two points should be made. We have no idea at all of what percentage of total Aboriginal vocabularies were ever recorded – particularly by the informants whose work is reprinted in Roth. A modern authority has written:

Only limited and generally quite unreliable notes and materials, mostly word lists and some sentence materials, had been collected in the Tasmanian languages, from which only a superficial picture of them can be obtained. Those few short texts that are available are of dubious value, as they were compiled by Europeans, with, it seems, little real knowledge of the languages.⁴

Other scholars support this proposition.⁵ So while we know how many words *were* listed by European witnesses we have no idea of how many *weren't*.

N. J. B. Plomley, the doyen of Tasmanian Aboriginal scholarship, observed that 'we are quite ignorant of the range of Aboriginal thought because so few topics were explored in conversation with them.'⁶ All Windschuttle can legitimately say is that words for land don't appear in the vocabularies printed in Roth. That is a much-diminished claim. The word lists themselves create further difficulties. Apart from George Augustus Robinson, whose extensive vocabularies weren't available to Roth, 'no one did more than record in a desultory way the aboriginal words for common words and activities.'⁷ If the European enquirers didn't ask the Aborigines about land, ownership and trespass, they didn't hear the relevant words or write them down for posterity. It is as simple – and as obvious – as that. The only significant collection of words consulted by Windschuttle was the one compiled by Joseph Milligan on Flinders Island in the 1840s. Plomley observed that Milligan's vocabulary contained no tribal names at all, which is not all that surprising given that his informants had already been living in exile on Flinders Island for ten years.⁸ He may have made no enquiries about tribal organisation as it had once been. However Milligan's lists included the names of 31 men and 24 women. Each is accompanied by a reference to their homeland – e.g. a native of Ben Lomond, a native of Circular Head District, a native of George's River, a native of Port Davey.⁹ For all we know, this may have been the way that Milligan's informants characterised themselves – identifying with a clearly defined, specific homeland.

Roth himself did not draw the conclusion that Windschuttle extracts from the vocabularies. In his chapter on 'Nomadic Life' he adduces, without comment, numerous nineteenth-century authorities who observed that the Tasmanians confined themselves to their own well-defined territory.¹⁰ It seems particularly perverse to say that linguistic evidence proves that the Aborigines had no sense of property. The problem is that so few settlers showed any interest in Aboriginal thought or languages. To use that fact in order to establish that Tasmania was a *terra nullius* demonstrates a determination to make totally fragmentary records reveal what the author desires them to reveal.

But the most serious problem with the Windschuttle position is that he didn't consult the most important contemporary work on Tasmanian languages – N. J. B. Plomley's 1976 book, *A Word List of the*

Presents claim re language, and the evidence put forward by Windschuttle in support of claim re language.

Note that details of "other scholars" are provided in a footnote

Some points are more important, i.e. hierarchy of criticism

Criticizes Windschuttle's claim re language:

evidence used is dated (1899).

Limited and unreliable records of Aboriginal languages (e.g. percentage of vocabularies recorded is unknown; and word lists mostly fragmentary).

Windschuttle didn't consult key work (Plomley) on topic

Significance of Plomley's work

Reynolds explains key point, the use of 'country' to refer to land.

Provides evidence for this counter claim, i.e. that Aborigines *did* have words relating to territory or ownership.

Tasmanian Aboriginal Languages. The result of 26 years' research in Australia and Europe, it represents a benchmark in relevant scholarship – an authority which cannot lightly be dismissed. So how does Plomley's work help us to pursue the question of land ownership? At first sight it would appear to support the Windschuttle position. There are no entries for 'land', 'property' or 'possess'. But everything is not as it seems.

When Aborigines talk about land, they most commonly refer to 'country'. Hence we hear of 'caring for country', 'returning to country', 'claiming country', 'living on country'. It was not unreasonable, then, for Plomley to categorise all words relating to land under the rubric of country. And it's there that all the words will be found – a page and a half of them – 23 relating to country, three meaning 'my country', six meaning 'where is your country?' Some of the entries are variations of a single word. But each one was collected separately. And they come from all over Tasmania – from the Western, Northern, North Eastern and South Eastern tribal groups. The record is even more geographically specific, with relevant words recorded at Port Sorell, Bruny Island, Cape Grim, West Point, Mount Cameron, Cape Portland, Ben Lomond, Oyster Bay. The majority were collected by George Augustus Robinson, who was the only person among the settlers who had even a slight grasp of the Tasmanian languages. But other words were contributed by Charles Robinson, Jorgen Jorgenson and Alexander McGeary. In his commentary on the words relating to country, Plomley wrote:

Although the phrases 'my own country' and 'where is your country?' clearly refer to a tribal territory, it does not follow that all the words translated as 'country' do so. Many of them almost certainly have the meaning of tribal territory, but at least one may have the meaning of countryside.¹¹

The fact that Robinson's papers have so many references to Aboriginal tribal divisions and sense of property makes nonsense of Windschuttle's claim that 'nowhere, in Robinson's extensive diaries ... is there any suggestion of land as property'. On the basis of those diaries Plomley drew up both a table and a map of Aboriginal tribes and their territories. He observed that, 'along the coast at any rate the natives lived within a defined territory, which was regarded by other groups as belonging to it'.¹²

If Windschuttle had looked more carefully at his word lists, he would have found numerous references to 'country'. Joseph Milligan's vocabulary incorporated the translation of a legend on the origin of fire. It contained two pertinent references – one to 'a hill in my own country', the other to 'my countrymen', a phrase which is mentioned twice.¹³ In another song published by T. H. Braim, there is a line that runs:

When I returned to my country I went hunting but did not catch any game.¹⁴

The vocabulary provided by Alexander McGeary included two words relating to country – one related to 'the country all around' but the other clearly referred to country as territory.¹⁵

Conclusion
of critique of
Windschuttle's
claim re language

Points out lack of
acknowledgment
of contrary
evidence.

Points out that
Windschuttle
builds his case on
an unsubstantiated
assumption

Where does this leave Windschuttle's claim that the Aborigines had no words relating to territory or ownership or possession? Clearly it cannot be sustained. But was he simply unaware of Plomley's linguistic work? Was it just a case of not doing his homework? It does seem extraordinary that he was willing to rest such a critical argument on what was known at the end of the nineteenth century. Is it possible that he actually consulted the *Word List* but did not like what he saw? He listed nine other Plomley works in his bibliography. If one were to adopt Windschuttle's own view of things and employ his inimitable language, we would have to assume that this was one piece of information that he was 'careful to keep from' his readers.¹⁶

If the use of linguistic evidence leaves much to be desired, the treatment of the historical record is equally flawed. This is particularly so when Windschuttle comes to discuss the views about Aboriginal land ownership current among the colonists in the nineteenth century. In one sense his response is – and has to be – pre-determined. If you start from the *a priori* assumption that the hunter-gatherers have no sense of property, that they don't own the land and have nothing in their language to suggest otherwise, then contemporaries who thought differently must have been mistaken. In that situation one would know in advance that they were imposing their Eurocentric views on the indigenous people. An alternative strategy is to deny that there is any evidence at all relating to the question. Windschuttle therefore insists, as he logically must, that there is no contemporary evidence that the Tasmanians had a sense of territory or property. The solution to the problem is simply to leave out evidence to the contrary. And yet there is an unbroken tradition in European writing from the 1820s to the present which has recognised Aboriginal land ownership. Many of the witnesses are people whom Windschuttle himself quotes approvingly when other issues are concerned.

NOTES

1. K. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One, Van Diemen's Land, 1803–1847*, Sydney, Macleay Press, 2002, p. 111.
2. *Ibid*, p. 110.
3. H. Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*, F. King and Sons, Halifax, 1899.
4. S. A. Wurm, *Languages of Australia and Tasmania*, The Hague, Mouton, 1972, p. 168.
5. See T. Crowley, *Tasmanian Aboriginal Language*, in M. Walsh & C. Yallop, *Language & Culture in Aboriginal Australia*, Canberra, AIATSIS, 1992, pp. 51–72.
6. N. J. B. Plomley, *A Word List of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Languages*, Hobart, Tasmanian Government, 1976, p. xiv.
7. *Ibid*, p. 4.
8. N. J. B. Plomley, *The Tasmanian Tribes and Cicatrices as Tribal Indicators, etc.*, Launceston, Queen Victoria Museum, 1992, p. 7.
9. Roth, *Aborigines*, appendix B, pp. xlv, xlvi.
10. *Ibid*, pp. 104–5.
11. N. J. B. Plomley, *A Word List*, pp. 191–3.
12. N. J. B. Plomley (ed.), *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829–1834*, Hobart, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1966, appendix 5, pp. 968–76.
13. J. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Dialects of Some of the Aboriginal Tribes of Tasmania*, Hobart, Tas. Govt. Printer, 1890, p. 13.
14. Roth, *Aborigines*, appendix B, p. xlvi.
15. *Ibid*, p. ix.
16. Windschuttle, *Fabrication*, p. 89.

Thinking strategies

P.M.I.

Edward deBono, a noted educationist and thinker, devised a simple tool for students to help them start thinking about a topic. He believed that when looking at a topic or idea for the first time we should not limit ourselves to simple facts, but should allow ourselves to be open to all suggestions or ideas presented by a topic.

DeBono called this tool a:

P.M.I.

There are several ways that you can help your self to remember what this stands for. This is one way of looking at it:

P = +

M = -

I = ?

and this is another:

P = PLUS

M = MINUS

I= INTERESTING/INTRIGUING

Using a P.M.I. when we are presented with a new topic, or even an old one, allows us to think in a more creative way. It also helps us to develop a more critical thinking attitude by giving a jumping off point to a topic. When using a P.M.I. we are allowed to think of anything at all. It doesn't matter how outlandish, silly or comical our thinking is, all propositions are useful. So when we look at a topic for the first time, or are looking for a new approach to a topic, we should ask ourselves three questions.

- What are the plusses or advantages that I can see in this topic?
- What are the minuses or disadvantages that I can see in this topic?
- What is interesting, intriguing or raises questions in this topic?

By starting our thinking with a P.M.I. We allow ourselves to become actively involved with our learning. Once we have become involved with our learning it is much easier to engage in critical thinking about the topic. Doing a P.M.I. on a subject or topic also allows us to develop a more balanced view. It starts us on the 'pros and cons' road. (DeBono 1995)

The book review

Your goal in writing a book review is to assess a book by describing its content and commenting on its theoretical assumptions, its consequent analysis and other practical aspects (such as accuracy of data, sources used, time written, biases, how clearly it is written, how easy it is to understand etc.)

Structure:

1. *General Description* of the book and or the views or the position of the author

Here you present the 'field' and the author's hypothesis in an introductory paragraph.

2. *Summary* of the main items discussed in the book and of the ideas put forward

3. *Evaluation* of the overall usefulness or importance of the book.

Here you present the strengths and weaknesses. This often includes an exposition of the reviewer's own views and a discussion of points raised as well as a positive or negative judgement. Here you may offer solutions or alternatives that the writer or the book has omitted.

4. *Conclusion*

Summarises the book's worth overall and its contribution to the field or study and the ideas in the book.

The literature review

What is a literature review?

A literature review is an examination of the research that has been conducted in a particular field of study. Hart (1998) defines it as:

- The **selection** of available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic, which contain information, ideas, data and evidence. [This selection is] written from a particular standpoint to fulfil certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated, and
- The effective **evaluation** of these documents in relation to the research being proposed (p. 13).

It is always invaluable to read the literature reviews in other theses. These will provide possible structural models for your own literature review. The UNSW library now has many theses available on-line, so it is easy to locate examples of current theses in your area of research. Check out the UNSW library website for the Australian Digital Thesis database <<http://adt.caul.edu.au>>. Another useful strategy is to examine how literature reviews are undertaken in journal articles, although these are generally much shorter.

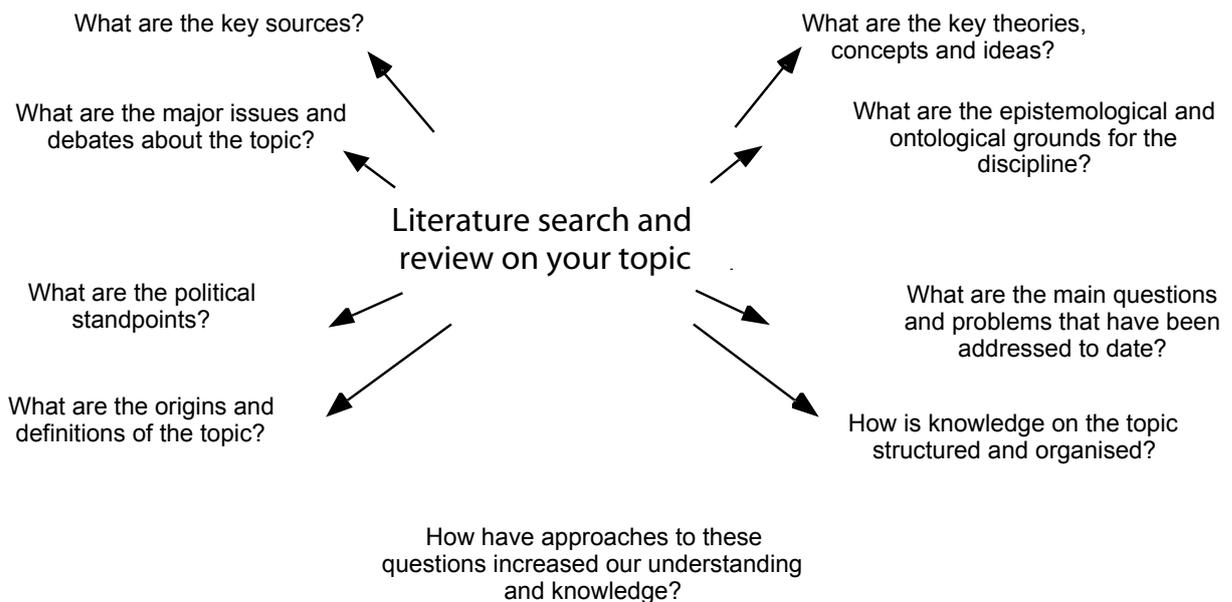
What is the purpose of a literature review?

- To demonstrate your scholarly ability to identify relevant information and to outline existing knowledge.
- To identify the 'gap' in the research that your study is attempting to address, positioning your work in the context of previous research and creating a 'research space' for your work.
- To evaluate and synthesise the information in line with the concepts that you have set yourself for the research.

- To produce a rationale or justification for your study.

Initially, you may read quite broadly on the topic to enrich your understanding of the field. This is useful for refining your topic and establishing the perspective that your research will take. For example, reading broadly may help you work out where there are gaps in the research, which may provide you with a niche for your research. It may also enable you to establish how your research extends or enhances the studies already done.

However, remember that the literature review needs to relate to and explain your research question. Although there may seem to be hundreds of sources of information that appear pertinent, once you have your question you will be able to refine and narrow down the scope of your reading.



Some of the questions the review of the literature can answer

Source: Hart, C. (1988) *Doing a literature review. Releasing the social science research imagination*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, p. 14.

What do I need to be able to do in order to write a literature review?

Please be aware that the following steps are not necessarily linear and you may have to revisit them at various points. Remember that undertaking your literature review is really an on-going process throughout your thesis. However, there will be times when you focus more specifically on reviewing the literature.

- **Identify your research question.** This is essential in helping you direct and frame your reading.
- **Identify and locate appropriate information.** Consider searching library catalogues, data bases, CD Roms, media releases, research publications etc.—these will depend on your discipline.
- If you are a postgraduate and are unsure about how to use the library’s print, electronic or internet resources effectively, then make an appointment for a Research Consultation with the UNSW library (this can be done online at <<http://info.library.unsw.edu.au/skills/consultations.html>>). This service is available to postgraduate research students and academic staff. A PRAC consultation will help you to develop and refine your research skills in the area of print, electronic and/or internet resources.
- **Read and critically evaluate the information that you locate.** Examine its strengths and weaknesses in relation to your research. Take notes of not only the information that you read, but also your thoughts about this information. This will help you draw your ideas together when you start writing your literature review section.
- **File and store your readings and notes.** Use an effective method that lets you retrieve information quickly and easily. Remember that there is no one ‘right’ way of organising your materials. However, it is

Paragraphs in academic writing

A good paragraph is important because it makes a text easier to read and comprehend. Poor paragraphs make no clear point; they leave the reader with a number of ideas and information but no clear sense of how the information is related. Therefore, it is the writer's task to make the main points and the reasoning behind them clear. A paragraph:

- is a related group of sentences;
- develops one main idea;
- expresses the main idea in a 'topic' sentence;
- expands on the main idea using supporting sentences that are organised in a logical pattern (i.e.: classification, cause and effect, enumeration, problem and solution);
- maintains cohesion by using repetition, synonymous words and phrases, transition signals and parallelism.
- sometimes has a concluding sentence that acts as a transition to the next paragraph.

Topic sentences

Topic sentences are mostly commonly at the beginning of a paragraph, and in the example, the topic sentence signals to the reader what the rest of the paragraph is about. Without topic sentences, paragraphs can be difficult to read as well as difficult to write.

Topic sentence states main idea of the paragraph

Note that use of definite article indicates that the social constructionist approach has already been mentioned, thus linking this paragraph with previous ones.

Note repetition to achieve cohesion.

Note the use of 'this' to achieve cohesion by referring to words or ideas previously stated, although possibly in different words. Also 'this' + a summary word can make explicit the meaning and enhance the flow of the writing.

The social constructionist approach has at its core a focus on the

family's perspective of the situation at hand. 'Just as individuals

within a family system hold unique perspectives of the family

situation, it is expected the worker's cultural values will influence

his or her perception of the family problem and possible solutions.

According to constructionism, both the family and the worker

share their perspectives of the family situation in order to enhance

family knowledge and extend identification of possible solutions.

In this sense, the worker is not the expert with the answers, but a

collaborative partner with the family system. It is this telling and

revising of experience, by both family and worker, which intersects to

create new meanings and understandings of experience. This ability

of families to 'reshape and shift their perceptions and definitions of

reality is a critically important resource in their efforts to deal with the

problems. Clients' capacity to change is connected to their ability to

see things differently.' (De Jong and Berg 2002, p.284).

NB linking words/phrases.

Elaborates on the social constructionist approach in a social work situation.

Explains what it would mean in practice.

Restates this point in more direct language. NB use of transition signal 'In this sense'.

Explains the result of this approach.

States its significance. The use of a quotation adds authority as well as an apt restatement of points.

Transition signals in writing

Connecting words and phrases

Transitional signals are connecting words or phrases that act like bridges between parts of your paper. They link your sentences and paragraphs together smoothly so that there are no abrupt jumps or breaks between ideas. Transitional signals indicate to the reader the order or flow of your writing and make it easier to follow your ideas. They help carry over a thought from one sentence to another, from one paragraph to another, or from one idea to another. Writing benefits greatly from clear transitions.

There are several types of transitional devices. Some lead your reader forward and imply the ‘building’ of an idea or thought, while others make your reader compare ideas or draw conclusions from the preceding thoughts.

To indicate sequence or to logically divide an idea:

first, second third	next, last, finally	first of all	first of all
followed by	next, before, after	at this point	at this time
subsequently	previously	simultaneously	concurrently

To indicate time:

immediately	thereafter	soon	after
finally	previously	formerly	then, later

To introduce an example:

for example	for instance	in this case	on this occasion
take the case of	to demonstrate	to illustrate	

To compare:

similarly	likewise	whereas	like, just like
conversely	by comparison	while	balanced against

To contrast:

in contrast	however	but	unlike
on the other hand	on the contrary	differing from	a different view is...,

To introduce an additional idea:

in addition	one can also say	also	another view is . . .
furthermore	further	and then	finally

To introduce an opposite idea or show exception:

on the other hand	however	instead	in contrast
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