

WHAT DOES MY TUTOR MEAN WHEN S/HE SAYS?

Walk the walk & talk the talk...I can't help you with the walk, but I can tell you a bit about the talk -- a traveller's guide to the strange dialect of academic study, in which a lot of words you already use, like "Opinion", "argument", "be critical", "discuss" mean something different at uni. People have stormed in to see me -- "Why did my tutor ask for my opinion, when he obviously didn't want it?!!" -- or sadly shown me the comment, "Where is your argument?" when, as someone said, "There wasn't anything to argue *about*."

When an assignment calls for your "opinion", it doesn't mean what you already think, or what you like. It means the judgement that you come to after reading all the relevant information and considering all the arguments: in other words, your conclusion. It's something like a judge's opinion -- it's not their private opinion, but their conclusion on the basis of the evidence.

"Argument", in the academic sense, is not a quarrel but a demonstration of an idea, with evidence that shows the reasons for it. Sometimes the idea is controversial, but often it isn't. You could argue, for example, that the composition of a painting in a church was determined by the shape of the space available. It's hard to imagine people yelling at each other about that! But we still call it argument: the way you show, in detail, why you think that. The evidence may come from the composition itself, from the methods of church decoration in the region, from notes that the painter made, etc. -- evidence just means the information that leads to your reasoning. And, because it's not a quarrel, we consider a variety of views and explanations, and try to decide what makes the best sense of the phenomena we're looking at; this may mean combining some ideas, or leaving some questions open.

"Critical", similarly, doesn't mean "finding fault", but it means questioning, and being open to the problems, complexities, and limitations in what you're reading and writing, as well as appreciating what's soundly argued and well-supported. Try to be aware of the concerns, the purposes, and the assumptions that lie behind the things you read, and influence the writer's focus, emphases, and selection of evidence. Notice how and why different writers disagree -- different questions? Different sources? Different worldviews? Ask yourself whether the evidence seems to show what this writer thinks it shows. Be aware of reasoning that doesn't follow, or questions that remain unanswered. At the same time, ask yourself what's useful about your reading, what it helps you understand.

"Discuss" doesn't mean "just say anything"! -- but what it does mean is consistent with the other ideas above. An essay topic like "Blah, blah, blah." "Discuss", means, a) What does the "blah, blah, blah" statement mean? And b) how does it apply, or not apply, to the material you're studying?

So, all of these meanings have to do with testing ideas against phenomena. The underlying assumption in all of this is that knowledge is not fixed and finished, but is constantly being remade as questions change and sources come to light. What we know depends on what we ask, and where we go for answers -- and both of these are open to inspection, criticism and appreciation by others in our field.