The PMI strategy: A simple tool to get started with critical writing

The PMI strategy (de Bono, 1988) is a fast and straightforward way to approach critical writing if you're not sure how to demonstrate critical and analytical skills, or if you've been told that your writing is 'too descriptive'. There are more sophisticated strategies available for developing your critical skills, but this is a great place to start.

How does it work?

PMI stands for Plus, Minus, and Interesting. When you're reading a text (whether it's a primary source, a journal article, a data set or a book), you make a list of positive, negative and otherwise notable things about it. Here are some examples of what you might consider:

Critical question	Description	Example
Positive	Something positive about the source	Meaningful findings, clear communication, effective methodology, large sample size, transparency about limitations, convincing argument
Minus	Something negative about the source	Novel approach or method(s), findings differ from similar sources, insightful argument, innovative style/structure/presentation of data
Interesting	Something interesting about the source	Novel approach or method(s), findings differ from similar sources, insightful argument, innovative style/structure/presentation of data

How can I use it?

Critical writing involves assessing and evaluating the material you're working on, not just describing the content. With your PMI list, you can construct an analytical appraisal of the text you're discussing, rather than simply narrating what the text is saying. Here are two examples of how it looks in practice:

Example 1:

> "Whilst the study is partly based on self-reported data that is difficult to verify, it offers useful evidence that genetic predisposition to Type 2 diabetes is frequently overlooked, and raises valuable questions about the role of primary care staff in facilitating long- term behavioural and lifestyle changes."

- **P (plus) -** Authors successfully highlight significance of genetic predisposition when assessing risk of Type 2 diabetes
- **M (minus) -** Too reliant on self-reported data regarding lifestyle/behavioural changes - likely to be unreliable evidence
- **I (interesting) -** Highlights role of primary care staff in patient counselling/advice

Example 2:

> "This is an important and expressive contribution to the longstanding debate about the use of the term 'renaissance'. However, the author's consistent neglect of the substantial primary evidence which contradicts his argument means that his overall approach to this debate is difficult to defend."

- **P (plus) -** Useful discussion about whether the idea of renaissance really adds anything to our understanding of the past
- **M (minus) -** 'Cherry picks' evidence and ignores all the texts/sources which don't match up with his main argument
- **I (interesting) -** Unusual use of emotive language; makes us think about whether the concept of 'renaissance' really means anything