This example is based on a paper examining the national statistics from the United States on homicides of victims aged over 60 (‘eldercides’). The first part of the exercise entails completing a critical analysis form, focused on a rather specific review question, to which the paper is only partly relevant. Our own version of the completed critical analysis form is provided, along with a brief commentary on how the review question determines the responses on the form. The next part of the exercise entails re-examining just the results section of the paper, in the light of, in turn, two different review questions. This is a useful activity, because it shows how focussing ones’ reading provides the very material one requires, while avoiding unnecessary engagement with details that are not relevant to one’s present interests and priorities.

PART ONE INSTRUCTIONS

Read the paper and complete the critical analysis form, using as your review question ‘What are the risk factors associated with violence to elderly females in residential care homes in [your country]?’ Keep in mind the need to make your responses to Question 4 specific to that review question.

Commentary on Part One

Now compare your completed critical analysis form with ours. You should not expect them to be identical. Critical analysis is the reader’s interpretation of
the claims and evidence. Because we are all different, we will often make different judgements about what we read.

In our form, the research question reads ‘…in the United Kingdom’ because that is where we are based. Your RQ may be different in this regard, and if you are based in the US, your engagement with the data in the paper is one step closer than if you are based, like us, outside.

We shall focus here on the responses to the Critical Analysis Questions most directly affected by the choice of review question:

- Critical Analysis Question 1 (identifying the review question driving the analysis);
- Critical Analysis Question 4, subsection (b) (content of the main knowledge claims and overall argument);
- Critical Analysis Question 10, subsection (a) (our overall evaluation of the paper in relation to the review question).

Critical Analysis Question 1: What review question am I asking of this text?

Note how we took the opportunity to be explicit about what we felt the paper would and would not be useful for. This is a useful approach, because your ideas may change over the course of doing a lot of reading, and unless you leave an explicit account of what was on your mind when you read this paper, you may not realise later what your priorities were. You may be rereading this section of your analysis a year or more after you wrote it, and your ideas may have moved on in the meantime. At least this way you will know in what way that is so. Also note the final comment under this response, regarding the absence of separate data on residential homes. Clearly, we could not have written this before we read the paper. In fact, we went back and added it when we noticed it in the account and realised its importance. The form does not have to be filled in linearly – it’s fine to move up and down, adding information wherever it best belongs, as you find it.

Critical Analysis Question 4: What is being claimed that is relevant to answering my review question?

(b) This subsection about the main claims and overall argument is not, it can be seen, a simple reproduction of the key findings in the text (compare how they are presented on page 63 onwards). A typical weakness in dissertations is that the literature review section gets over-long and under-focused, because it simply summarizes each study, leaving it to the reader to figure
out which aspects of the information are actually relevant. Of course it can sometimes be appropriate to provide a straight summary. But it should only be done after careful consideration because, done unnecessarily, it is wasteful of words, detracts from your story, and tempts you into being more descriptive than critical. Since the purpose of the critical analysis is to help you muster evidence from many different sources, so it can be compared and discussed in ways relevant to your own questions, the more you write specifically to a topic on this form, the better. In the second part of this exercise, we will revisit this section, to see how a different review question impacts on what is reported on the form.

Notice that we listed more than the 3–5 key findings suggested on the form. This was because the findings in this study were very particular and it would be difficult to provide a more general summary of them. The form is there for you to use in the most effective way, so it’s not a problem to do something slightly different from what is recommended. However, remember that writing more means you have more to read later. There is a useful discipline in capturing the essence of a paper in just a few words, so don’t give up on that too easily.

You will also see that we added a comment in brackets to one finding, regarding the possibility that since women live longer than men, there may be more women in the 80+ age bracket relative to men. This is simply an idea that occurred to us when recording the finding. By putting it in square brackets we remind ourselves that it is not something we read in the text. Where you have a thought about what might explain a finding, or potentially challenge a claim, it’s useful to note it down so you can think more about it later, and check out whether it is likely to be a valid addition to your discussion.

Critical Analysis Question 10: What is my summary evaluation of the text in relation to my review question or issue?

a) Here is our summary answer to the review question. This subsection is where you are likely to look, when you return to your analysis forms, to see how this text is going to fit into your comparative literature review. As with all the other parts of the form, what you put here depends on what you feel will be most useful to you later.

PART TWO INSTRUCTIONS

In order to examine how different review questions affect how one completes the form, you should now turn to the Participants (page 60–1) and Results.
(page 63 onwards) sections of the paper, and answer Critical Analysis Question 4, subsection (b) again, this time using the review question: ‘Do black males have an undeserved reputation for violence?’

Next, before looking at our version, have another go, using the following review question: ‘Should elderly people be provided with security equipment in their homes, to help keep them safe?’

**Commentary on Part Two**

These are our responses to Critical Analysis Question 4, subsection (b), when each of the new review questions was used. Your own responses may be different, depending on your judgements about what the main claims and overall argument are that relate to each review question.

**My review question is: Do black males have an undeserved reputation for violence?**

The main claims relevant to this review question are:

i) Males are five times more likely than females to commit eldercide (Table 1, page 61).

ii) Eldericide offenders are more than twice as likely to be white as black (Table 1, page 61).

**My review question is: Should elderly people be provided with security equipment in their homes, to help keep them safe?**

i) Most eldercides occur in the home (Table 5, page 65).

ii) A significant proportion of eldercides are committed by relatives [who probably have legitimate access to the home] (Table 3, page 63; Table 4, page 64).

iii) There are male-female differences in relation to several variables that would require different targeting of protection, including the age of the offender, relationship to the victim, role of alcohol and use of a gun (page 67).

Things to note:

1. The information provided in answer to Critical Analysis Question 4, subsection (b) is likely to be different in each case. This demonstrates the power of focussing,
in your reading, on precisely what you need to know. That is, what you harvest from a paper should depend on what you need.

2. There is an error in Table 3 of Krienert and Walsh’s paper. The first value in the row ‘Offender race, black’ should read 123, not 13. This can be worked out using the percentages, which are correct. We checked by e-mail with the first author of the paper, who confirmed that this was a typographical error. It would not be helpful to engage in ‘criticism’ of this error in your review, since errors can creep in during production, however careful the author is about checking the pre-publication proofs. The main issue is being alert enough, when reading, to notice when a figure is odd, and taking some steps to ensure you know the correct value. You might mention the correction of an error in a footnote in your review if your readers would be likely to find it useful. The first author also clarified to us why the N values in the legends of Tables 3, 4 and 5 do not match the totals on the columns beneath. It is because of missing information in the original datasets. The same applies to the failure of the figures within the sub-groups of the tables to add up to the values at the top of the columns. For instance, only 355 cases are mentioned for offender age x male victim, rather than the 476 at the top of the column, because the age of the offender was not always provided in the database. You might wonder whether it is acceptable practice to contact the author of a paper to ask this kind of question. The answer is yes, though it’s advisable to reread the paper first, and also talk through your questions with someone else, in case there is a more obvious answer. That way, you can avoid bothering an author unnecessarily.

3. It is not possible fully to answer either of the review questions addressed here using only the evidence in the paper. This doesn’t matter, because a review question is used to examine several different papers, and the answer to the question is derived from the combined information. So here, in addressing the question ‘Do black males have an undeserved reputation for violence?’, the answer to Critical Analysis Question 4, subsection (b) simply lists information that we might draw on later, as part of a discussion of many lines of evidence, in gradually developing an answer to that question.

4. Sometimes it is possible to derive additional information from a text that is not directly given. For example, Table 3 shows that 80% of eldercide offenders are male and that 42% are black. This would permit a calculation: of the 194 black offenders mentioned in Table 3, 80% (= 155) were probably male. We can only say ‘probably’ because this calculation assumes that the distribution of males to females is the same for black and white offenders, which might not be true. Similarly, we might want to compare the figures for black offenders given in the paper with official statistics for the proportion of black people in the US population. If the proportion of black offenders mentioned in this paper on eldercide was lower than the proportion of black people in the general population, it would be possible to propose that black people were less likely than white people to commit eldercide, offering a partial answer to the review question about an unjustified reputation for violence. Again, we cannot derive this
information directly from the paper, and any such calculation would have to be undertaken and reported extremely cautiously.

5. Turning to the second review question, the text does not provide any direct information at all about whether or not the elderly should have more security equipment at home. As reviewers, our job was to look out for any information that might be used to help warrant claims about the answer to that question – clearly this text is only of peripheral help, relative to one reporting a study of the effect on crime figures of installing security equipment in people’s homes.

6. Remember that other parts of the form would also be answered differently when there is a different review question. Clearly the responses to Critical Analysis Questions 1 and 10, subsection (a) would, but so also might some elements of other responses. However, we wanted to explore the major impact of different review questions, and for that reason have focused here on Critical Analysis Question 4, subsection (b).