

What is Critical Thinking?

The word "critical" can mean different things in different contexts. For example, it can refer to the importance of something, or can also mean pointing out the negative aspects of something, i.e. to criticise something.

However, critical thinking at university does not mean looking only for the most important aspects of a topic or just criticising ideas. It is also about not accepting what you read or hear at face value, but always questioning the information, ideas and arguments you find in your studies.

Critical thinking is a key skill that should be applied to all aspects of your studies. As a university student, you need to be able to think critically about the resources and information you use in your work. You need to ask the right questions when reading the work of others; your writing needs to show you have the ability to weigh up different arguments and perspectives and use evidence to help you form your own opinions, arguments, theories and ideas. Critical thinking is about questioning and learning with an open mind.

Critical thinking should help you to:

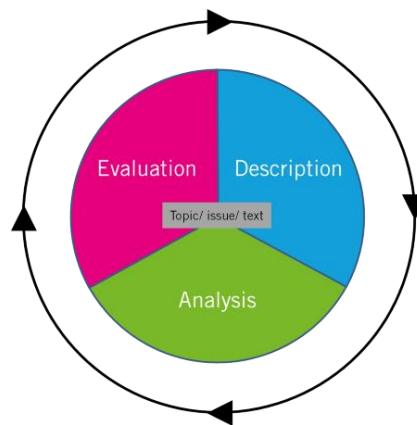
- ✓ interpret evidence, data, arguments, etc. and be able to identify the significance to your assignment question.
- ✓ develop well-reasoned arguments of your own for your assignments.
- ✓ use and draw on evidence to justify your arguments and ideas.
- ✓ synthesise your thoughts and the thoughts of differing authors/researchers/theorists.

A model for Critical Thinking

Try using our critical thinking model to help you develop a more systematic and analytical approach to your studies and to develop your critical thinking, reading and writing skills.

The model shows you how to use common questioning words such as "What?", "Who?", "How?", "Why?" and "What if?" to take you through the stages of description, analysis and evaluation:

- ✓ **Describe** what you are reading.
- ✓ **Analyse** the material's core arguments and conclusions.
- ✓ **Evaluate** its significance and its successes / failures.



Description

We start with the descriptive segment of the model. At this stage you should ask yourself: "Who?", "What?", "Where?", "When?" and "Why?"

These questions will generate purely descriptive answers. You will gain a general understanding of who wrote the text, when it was written, and what the main ideas or arguments are.

Through answering these questions you will only be able to reiterate what an author has said, but not demonstrate your understanding of the significance of the text.

Whilst these questions are important to gain an initial understanding of an issue, topic or text, this is not thinking critically. For that we need to ask more in-depth and challenging questions.

Analysis

We now move on to the analysis stage. We are not going to accept at face value what we have read, seen or heard.

We need to:

- ✓ pull it apart and explain and examine how each part fits into the whole
- ✓ give reasons, comparing and contrasting different elements
- ✓ show our understanding of relationships.

At this stage we are interested in the process or method, as well as the causes, theories and evidence. These questions, especially 'how?' and 'why?', will help you to develop more analytical answers and deeper thinking.

For example, you might ask yourself:

- How has the author reached their conclusions?
- What method has been used and was the method appropriate?
- Why does the author think what they think?
- Is relevant and reliable evidence used to support any arguments, ideas or conclusions presented?
- Does the data presented support the conclusions made?

Evaluation

Finally we come to the evaluative segment. This involves judging the failure or success of something, its implications, significance and/or value.

Evaluation leads us to conclusions or recommendations. This contains questions such as 'what if?' and 'so what?'

Asking these questions will help you to assess the worth and significance of what you have read.

Questions might include:

- How relevant is this text to your purpose?
- What do you think about what you have read?
- What is your position on the subject?
- How does this relate to other information you have read or heard?
- Does it contradict, support or challenge other evidence?

You won't need to think or read about everything in this much depth. Sometimes just asking the descriptive questions may be enough, for example if you are just reading something to gain a basic understanding of a topic. It is when you need to make sense of and produce assignments, in particular, that you need to engage critically with a topic and this model can be used to help you.