

Critical thinking

The process of critical thinking is the process by which we detect and analyse the assumptions that underpin the actions, decisions and judgements in our lives. Critical thinking is used when we evaluate the intellectual work of others. It searches for strengths as well as weaknesses. This is in contrast to less critical ways of learning, such as memorising facts, describing or reporting facts without comment or acknowledgment. To think critically at university, you need to know:

1. Critical thinking encompasses three stages
2. Ways to incorporate critical thinking into your own reading and assignment writing
3. Critical analysis of academic texts

1. Critical thinking encompasses three stages

Stage 1: Becoming aware that assumptions exist

Stage 2: Making assumptions explicit (i.e. naming what is implicit)

Stage 3: Assessing the accuracy and validity of underlying assumptions:

- Do they make sense?
- Do they fit reality as we have lived it?
- Under what conditions may they be true?
- Under what conditions may they be false?
- Recognise and assess arguments
- Question evidence
- Determine facts without bias or prejudice
- Decide to accept, reject or suspend judgements.

(S. Brookfield 1991, *Becoming Critical Thinkers*)

2. Ways to incorporate critical thinking into your own reading and assignment writing

An important aspect of university study is to be able to think critically. Critical thinking helps you to place your subject into its social, cultural and historical context. This shows how your subject is located in a global framework. Ask questions such as who? where? what? why? how?. This helps you understand the interrelationships between all the participants and the perspectives within an area of study. For example, if you are a teacher, you might look at the role of the teacher from the perspective of students, of educational administrators and of parents to gain a holistic, all-rounded view of the profession. In addition, you may take your enquiry further by investigating the social, cultural, religious, socio-economic factors that influence the particular situation you are examining. But critical thinking is not only a feature of university study. You will be encouraged to apply those skills in other aspects of life to make informed decisions for your actions. Think about ways that you can develop your critical thinking in your studies:

1. Understand all the evidence and theories. For example, there are a number of conflicting theories to account for global warming. To evaluate them, you must understand them.
2. Consider and respond to opposing views.
3. Only consider statements which are backed by evidence. Look at examples: are they typical and relevant?
4. Beware of those that are out-of-date, or too narrow in focus to support a broad theory.
5. Avoid emotional words and phrases in your writing. For example: 'a preemptive strike at the big soft heart of middle America'. Even words such as 'democratic' can carry emotional connotations in some contexts. Read, think and understand the meaning of a statement.

3. Critical analysis of academic texts

There are 3 stages in critical analysis: comprehension, analysis and evaluation.

Stage 1: Comprehension

Understand what the author is saying. Summarise the author's argument in your own words.

Stage 2: Analysis

This is the process of breaking down a text into component parts and examining their structure and the relationship between them. Ask yourself:

- What is the author's purpose in each section of the text?
- What assumptions are beneath the author's position?

Often writers argue from particular theoretical or political perspectives that are sometimes clear, but at other times are hidden.

What techniques does the author use to persuade us of their position?

- Logical argument (is the logic valid?)
- Appeal to authority (are the authorities reputable and relevant?)
- Empirical Data (studies can be methodologically flawed)
- Language (is it emotive, intimidating, obscure, full of jargon?)

Stage 3: Evaluation

Once you have analysed the text using the above strategies, you are now in a better position to judge its quality and validity. You can use the following questions as a checklist to help you make a sound judgement.

- Is the argument clear?
- Is the evidence adequate to support the conclusion?
- Does the writer manipulate the reader?

You should use these techniques to critically analyse your own assignments. Your markers will.

