

Critical thinking

Learning outcomes for most papers at University will mention 'critical thinking'. Moreover 'A' grades for most assignments generally require critical thinking to be demonstrated. So, what is critical thinking and how do you do it?

What is critical thinking?

- **Critical thinking is not just 'being negative':** In everyday language being 'critical' means being negative and expressing disapproval or saying what you think is bad about something or someone. However, in an academic language being 'critical' does not mean being merely negative. Rather, it means considering both the good and the bad. One dictionary definition of critical thinking is "making fair, careful judgements about the good and bad qualities of somebody/something" ("Critical Thinking", 2000, p. 298).
- **Consider both sides of the coin:** Another definition of critical thinking could be acknowledging the strengths or weaknesses of something i.e. an idea, theory, research method, study, article or book.
- **Other terms for critical thinking:** Sometimes the terms "analysis", "evaluation", "argument," "critical analysis," or "critical examination" are used at University, but they all mean the same thing as critical thinking.
- **Present a well informed and reasoned argument:** When writing an essay or assignment, you will often need to have an argument or thesis statement. Presenting an argument at University does not mean being argumentative or negative. Rather, it means taking a point of view or position, which you argue consistently throughout your paper. The ultimate goal of critical thinking is to present a well-informed, well-reasoned argument.

How do we 'do' critical thinking?

Doing 'critical thinking' means not taking something that is said in a source for granted. Critical thinking might seem like a mysterious process. However, there are some practical strategies you can use to ensure that you are engaging in critical thinking. We discuss some below:

View issues from many angles: When preparing your answer, you must look at the question from various angles. Your answer will have a particular point of view, or argument and you must consider ideas that not only support your point of view, but also ideas that challenge your views. You then need to decide to either agree with contrary views (thereby changing your mind about something) or completely reject these views. You should *explain why you agree or disagree with these ideas*. Do not ignore ideas that oppose your position, or think that everyone agrees with you.

Consider alternative views: In addition to considering opposing views, you may want to examine alternative views. It is important to realise that there may be other views that are not in direct conflict with your views, which suggest other ways to explain something. Again, this is an important step in critical thinking and you may need to acknowledge alternative theories when writing your essay or assignment.

Examine strengths & weaknesses: You will need to examine the strengths and weaknesses of particular ideas. In science related disciplines, ask questions such as: Does this theory work under certain conditions? Does it work at all? Or, is the research flawed in some way? e.g. too many variables, impact of outside influences, small sample. In arts related disciplines, theories may have identifiable flaws. There may also be gaps in available research, or there may be author biases in ideas or research that you can identify e.g. class, race or gender bias.

Read widely: When thinking critically, you will also need to show evidence that you have read widely. Do not limit your reading to a few authors or ideas, but examine a variety of authors and ideas. Eventually, you will come up with an overall judgement of the relative worth of an idea. Sometimes you support it, reject it, or you may think that more research is required due to conflicting findings. *Narrow reading may lead to narrow ideas and a biased essay or assignment; wide reading shows critical thinking in action.*

Common faults in critical thinking

Ad hominem arguments: These arguments attack the *person*, as opposed to their *argument*. Rather than commenting on the person who made a particular assertion, you should address the issue itself and see whether what they have said or written stands up to critical examination.

Appeal to authority: Make sure that your sources are credible e.g. primary or secondary research, peer reviewed articles, edited books. On the other hand, do not be seduced by the reputation of a particular researcher or academic. Make sure that your argument relies on evidence or logic, rather than status.

Analogies: An analogy seeks to find a similarity between two things. However, a *false analogy* finds similarities between two things that actually aren't that similar, with the 3 differences between the two things being completely ignored e.g. *Violence is like a volcano that can erupt at any moment*. Even when used correctly, analogies do not usually improve an argument and are more poetic than logical.

Appeal to popular belief: Do not write: *"everybody knows that dogs are friendlier than cats"*, or other similar statements. This statement relies on what is meant by the term "friendly" as well as lacking evidence for the assertion.

Ignoring contradictory views or evidence: This type of error simply ignores contradictory views or available evidence. To avoid this error, you need to *read widely* and acknowledge opposing views and/or research evidence.

Arguing off the point: Arguing off the point is usually used because you don't want to examine the main issue – *don't do it!*

Lack of evidence: Make sure statements are backed up by evidence. Acknowledge shortcomings or qualify (put limitations on) your statements. If the evidence is weak or scant then it won't support your argument.

Straw man: This type of argument sets out to purposefully set up a weak opposing argument so that you can easily refute it. By citing *poor examples* of an opposing view, you can easily disprove this view, thus apparently, *but not really*, strengthening your own position. This is not good critical thinking.

Taking the temporary to be permanent: This occurs when you believe that a temporary event has long-lasting effects whilst disregarding the circumstances surrounding the event e.g. *Mr Smith was reported to a noise control officer at the day care centre following the birth of his baby daughter. His boisterous antics preclude him from any position of responsibility at the day-care centre.*

Vague statements: State clearly any definitions or terms you are using so that the reader can follow your arguments. The reader can tell if you don't know what you're talking about, especially if your essay is vague and mysterious, rather than clear and to the point.

References

"Critical Thinking" (2000). *Critical Oxford advanced learner's dictionary* (6th ed). Oxford, England: University of Oxford.

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