

Critical Thinking



Critical thinking is a key skill for success at university. It involves examining ideas, and considering their strengths and weaknesses. Every piece of information you come across can be questioned: what you read or hear is almost certainly not the whole picture, and should be evaluated carefully.

When reading anything at university, it is not enough to ask yourself “What is this person saying?”, or “how can I understand and memorise this?” You need to move beyond that, and start to consider that particular text in broader contexts – your module, your course, the literature in your field, and the world at large.

Reading Critically

Being critical means questioning what you are reading – not just being negative about it, but also recognising good ideas and reliable findings. Here are some examples of questions to ask...

To evaluate the quality of the text and ideas, relative to others in your area:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of this?
- Am I prepared to accept this position? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Does the author have any biases or make any assumptions?
- What evidence is the author using and how reliable is it?
- Do other claims support this idea?
- What is the basis for the author’s argument? Is it logical and why?

To evaluate a research study:

- What is the research question?
- What are the main findings?
- Have the findings been honestly / reliably reported?
- What methodology was used and why?
- Was that a suitable methodology for this question?
- How many participants were there?
- What sampling method was used?
- Are the discussion and conclusion soundly based on the findings – or do they go too far?
- How do these findings relate to other research studies in the field?

To make connections with the contemporary political, social and economic climate:

- Who wrote this text, when and why?
- What is the strategic purpose of this idea? Or, why this, now?
- What does the author want me to believe and why?
- What has led to this idea?
- What would this idea lead to if implemented?

To make connections with the real world:

- What are my experiences with this idea?
- How can this idea be applied to practical situations?
- What practical problems does this idea create or solve?
- What are the practical strengths and weaknesses?

Writing critically

- Be balanced: look at both sides of the argument.
- Be thorough: consider both the pros and the cons of all ideas.
- Be academic: support all claims with evidence and logical argument.
- Be clear: use precise terms and examples when needed.

Avoid just citing what other writers say -- engage with their ideas:

- Evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.
- Compare and contrast different authors' ideas: identify similarities and differences.
- Synthesise ideas: link them together to form broader concepts.
- Identify relevant theories and evaluate them by applying them to practice.
- Explain observations through theories.
- Identify and analyse connections such as cause and effect or correlations.
- Point out problems and identify solutions.
- Explain the significance of events and theories.
- Highlight implications and draw conclusions.

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