How to think critically: A beginner’s guide to critical thinking and how to use it at university.

It is generally agreed that students need to be critical and that critical thinking is a transferable skill that is useful in many areas of life. Being critical involves constantly questioning what is put in front of you, not accepting things at face value, working out if something is true or correct and how you can determine that. In its simplest form critical thinking means asking yourself:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Is it true? How do you know?</th>
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<tr>
<td>What do you need to know to evaluate it?</td>
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Critical thinking in everyday life:

The good news is that you will already be thinking critically. The following are examples of how critical thinking is employed in everyday life.

Don’t take things at face value If someone said to you ‘the world is flat’ you would question it, looking to what you already know and what other people have told you.

Seek more detail and clarification If you were told ‘coffee is better than tea’ you might think what do you mean, does better mean better value, or better taste?

Be aware of bias You might agree or disagree with something because of your own experience (eg if you like coffee or tea better) but thinking critically would lead you to be aware of your own sway towards agreeing with something or not.

Check alternatives If you were looking for a flat to rent, you wouldn’t just look at one advert and take the flat you would want to see the alternatives to make sure you took the best one for you.

It’s important to note that this is just as important for the arguments you like and agree with as it is for those, you’re not that keen on or disagree with.

Ask lots of questions An important skill in critical thinking is knowing what questions to ask.

Imagine you were asked to think critically about this statement?
“China will soon become the number one English speaking country in the world”

What sort of questions would you ask?
Some questions you could ask are:

- How are they learning it? Is it being taught in schools?
- Is it desirable? Who thinks they should be speaking it and why?
- How do you know?
- What are your sources?
- How soon is soon?
- How well will they speak?
- What kind of English eg Chinese, American, UK English?
- What is the evidence to back up this claim?

Applying Critical thinking at University

Critical thinking affects all aspects of study and is a process that is applied to reading and writing but is also needed when beginning to think about your assignments.

Critically considering ideas for an assignment

When thinking about what to include in your assignment and how to take a critical approach ensure you are being focused, comprehensive, even handed and in-depth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focused</th>
<th>Think about the criteria and instructions for your assignment making sure that all your content is relevant. It is not critical if you include lots of irrelevant material.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>Think about the breadth of possible ideas for those topics, thinking of as many ideas as you can. Don’t look at your topic too narrowly. Make sure you cover all the key points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even-handed</td>
<td>Treat opposing views fairly. Don’t just think of the positives but also consider negatives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-depth</td>
<td>You need to go beyond what is available to the general public and look at your topic from a specialist viewpoint, this links to research in the field that you will be reading from journal articles.</td>
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Critical reading: Thinking critically about what you read.

Just because something is in print in a journal or a book it doesn’t mean it is necessarily good quality, that you should believe it or that it’s relevant to you. Thinking critically about what you are reading is an important skill at university and the critical reading model below can help you evaluate what you are reading.

Critical Reading Model

When reading think about the case the author is making - the point or points they want you to take away from the piece, this is the argument. Then look at how they are trying to prove the point - this is the evidence. So, when reading books/ articles/ research critically you need to work out the argument and the evidence.

Judging an argument

A good argument should

- be clear - you should be able to understand the point the author is putting across.
- have a logical structure - the argument should make sense and be based on logic.
- be even-handed - it should treat the subject fairly and not be obviously biased.

A poor argument is:

- Unclear - it is difficult to understand what the author is arguing.
- Based on flawed reasoning - there are problems with the logic of the case being presented, so when you look closely at the argument you realise that it doesn’t make sense.
- Biased - arguments are presented in an unfair way or not showing both sides. The author could have an interest in persuading the reader to believe it.
Questioning

Having established what the author is arguing you then need to ask:
Why should I believe this?
Does this claim need evidence to support it? If there is no evidence, then this is an opinion or assertion and you need to question the dependability of the claim based on no evidence. If there is evidence, you need to ask how good is the evidence?

It can help to think about what evidence would someone need to provide for you to think that this is probable/dependable? It can often be difficult to prove anything is the absolute truth.

Looking for the evidence.

There are different types of evidence. Some of the types of evidence you will come across are statistics, case histories, examples, findings from experiments, data from surveys, questionnaires or case studies. It can often be other people’s research (citations/references). When you are reading try to find the evidence that is being presented to support the author’s argument. Look for it and highlight it. Think about whether the evidence is valid – don’t accept it just because it is in print.

Critically evaluating sources

To help you think critically about what you read and ask the right questions we have created a checklist to use when reading research. The checklist helps you evaluate your sources of information in terms of QUALITY and RELEVANCE by asking questions about What, Who, When and How.
Using the checklist, you are guided to look for meaningful information in the research by breaking down the 4 elements into specific questions regarding:

WHAT? … type of source is it? … approach has been taken?
WHO? … wrote or produced the source? … is the target audience?
WHEN? … was it published or last updated?
HOW? … was it written?

The checklist can be accessed from the critical thinking LibGuide and via this link: http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/id.php?content_id=32494813

Critical Writing

Thinking critically about your own writing is an important skill and you can find resources to help you with this on the Critical Writing LibGuide: http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/critical_writing
Useful Resources

Critical Thinking LibGuide: http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/critical_thinking

Being Critical video: https://youtu.be/YVLjziA5U2o

How to read an academic article https://libguides.tees.ac.uk/read_article/help

How to read academic research quickly http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/ld.php?content_id=14149970


