

What is critical thinking? – some general definitions:

“Critical thinking is a way of thinking, understanding and expressing ourselves ... and using your ability to *reason*. It's about being active in your learning and questioning ideas, arguments and findings” (University of Sussex, n.d.).

Specifically, “critical thinkers rigorously question ideas and assumptions rather than accepting them at face value. They will always seek to determine whether the ideas, arguments and findings represent the entire picture and are open to finding when they do not” (Skillsyouneed, n.d.).

In addition, “in an academic argument, ideas are organised into a line of reasoning. The writer aims to persuade the reader that their point of view is valid. Being able to understand and create structured, reasoned arguments is central to critical thinking” (University of Sussex, n.d.).

Why does critical thinking matter?

In a general sense, critical thinking helps discover the way things work and why they occur the way they do. Furthermore, it “helps us understand the world around us, to predict more accurately what might happen in the future, make wiser decisions, keep things in perspective, act fairly, and resolve problems creatively” (Cottrell, p. 253).

A crucial part of critical thinking is questioning and reflective and independent thinking, similar to detective work. This is important, for example, in the ability to recognise fake news or the reliability of information sources. In this example, you would try to recognise any weaknesses or negative points that are in the source or evidence and what implications are behind a statement or argument.

A critical thinker can:

- Understand and identify different ideas and arguments and the links between them for a particular issue (e.g. a news story or for an author’s argument in a book or journal article).
- Distinguish between *fact* and *opinion* and when a source may contain biases (e.g. a news story or speech). Note: arguments should be fact based and are therefore not opinions.
- Raise vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely as well as identify inconsistencies and errors in reasoning.
- Gather and assess relevant information and be able to interpret it effectively to determine how strong or valid the information is.
- Recognise, build and assess *arguments* (i.e. how important or relevant are they?) as well as come up with well-reasoned conclusions and solutions and effectively communicate them.
- Think open mindedly within *alternative systems of thought*, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences.
- Reflect on how justified their own *assumptions*, *beliefs* and *values* are.

(Adapted from Paul and Elder, 2006, <https://www.criticalthinking.org>)

Critical thinking in academic practice – a checklist

Identify what's important:

- ✓ What are the key ideas, problems, arguments, observations, findings, conclusions?
- ✓ What evidence is there?
- ✓ Distinguish critical from other types of writing (e.g. descriptive); fact from opinion; bias from reason.

Evaluate what you find:

- ✓ Explore the evidence - does it convince?
- ✓ What assumptions are being made and inferences drawn?
- ✓ Is there engagement with relevant, up to date research?
- ✓ How appropriate are the methods of investigation?
- ✓ Is there a consistent and logical line of reasoning?
- ✓ Do you agree with what's being said? Why?
- ✓ How is language being used (emotive, biased etc.)?

Look beyond what you're reading/hearing:

- ✓ What other viewpoints, interpretations and perspectives are there? What's the evidence for these? How do they compare?
- ✓ How does your prior knowledge and understanding relate to these ideas, findings, observations etc.?
- ✓ What are the implications of what you're reading/hearing?

Clarifying your point of view:

- ✓ Weigh up the relevant research in the area.
- ✓ Find effective reasons and evidence for your views.
- ✓ Reach conclusions on the basis of your reasoning.
- ✓ Illustrate your reasons with effective examples.

(Adapted from US 'Skills Hub' - <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/skillshub/?id=344>)

In Summary

Try to constantly evaluate what you read, hear, think, experience and observe. Assess how well ideas, statements, claims, arguments and findings are backed up so that you can make a reasoned judgement about how convincing they are. Ultimately, critical thinking is about being an active learner as opposed to a passive receiver of information. This means asking questions (e.g. who?, what?, how? and why?) and not simply accepting everything you have read or been told.

References:

Cottrell, S. (2019). *The study skills handbook* (5th ed.). Red Globe Press.

Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2006). *The miniature guide to critical thinking: concepts and tools* (4th ed.). The Foundation for critical thinking. https://www.criticalthinking.org/files/Concepts_Tools.pdf

University of Sussex skills hub. (2021). *Critical thinking*. <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/skillshub/?id=277https://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/critical-thinking.html>