

What critical thinking skills do I need to develop?

STEP

8

'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.'

William Shakespeare (*Hamlet* Act 2, Scene 2)

A Reflection

Which of these three definitions of 'critical thinking' do you think is correct?

- Critical thinking means reading what experts have said and presenting a general summary of their ideas.
- Critical thinking means saying that everything you read is wrong.
- Critical thinking means not being afraid to challenge what experts have said, and using this as a way of shaping your own view about a topic.

B Contextualization

Look at the two pieces of writing below. The first is purely descriptive (i.e., it only summarizes what other people have said, offering no authorial opinion), whereas the second is more analytical.

- Why is the second text a more appropriate piece of academic writing?

Descriptive writing

Fisher and Scriven describe critical thinking as 'a skilled, active interpretation and evaluation of observations, communications, information, and argumentation' (1997: 20). Russell states that 'the intelligent are full of doubt' (1998: 28). Facione et al. (2000: 101) argue that without scrutiny, the following type of texts would be common: 'intellectually *dishonest* (e.g., in the use of data), *intolerant* (e.g., of opposing ideas), *inattentive* (e.g., to implications of proposals), *haphazard* (e.g., procedurally), *mistrustful of reason* (e.g., hostile toward sound scientific inquiry), *indifferent* (e.g., toward new findings), and *simplistic* (e.g., naively dualistic).' Orwell has the following attributed to him: 'During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.'

Analytical writing

Critical thinking is a notoriously difficult term to define, although Fisher and Scriven's classification of it as 'a skilled, active interpretation and evaluation of observations, communications, information, and argumentation' (1997: 20) captures many of its essential details. Echoing Russell's truism that 'the intelligent are full of doubt' (1998: 28), Facione et al. (2000: 101) argue that without this doubt, academic study would allow biased, prejudiced and illogical texts to not be scrutinized properly. Although the saying attributed to Orwell that 'during times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act' may be a little too political for the academic context, the idea is still a strong one.

References

- Facione, P., Facione, N. and Giancarlo, C. (2000). The disposition toward critical thinking: Character, measurement, and relationship to critical thinking. *Informal Logic*, 20, 1: 61–84.
- Fisher, A. and Scriven, M. (1997). *Critical Thinking: Its Definition and Assessment*. Norwich: Centre for Research in Critical Thinking.
- Russell, B. (1998). *Mortals and Others: Bertrand Russell's American Essays 1931–1935*. London: Routledge.

c Analysis

Why is critical thinking important?

Critical thinking is a term which you will frequently read and hear during your time at university. Feedback for student essays often says that they 'lack critical thinking'. However, little guidance may be given as to what this means, or how you can improve. Although it is difficult to give an *exact* definition of the term, it is possible to identify some key characteristics. Three important ideas – identified here as the '3 Cs' – are as follows:

Challenge: Do not be afraid of questioning what 'experts' and scholars have written about a particular topic. They are not always right.

Consider: Reflect on what you have read, and identify what your **POSITION** is. As the second text in part B shows, good academic writing is analytical rather than just descriptive (i.e., it says *why* and *how*, not just *what*, *when* and *where*).

Combine: Having read a range of sources, you need to synthesize your ideas. Good academic writing analyzes the issues from all angles and is based on a wide range of evidence and sources.

Critical thinking is much more important in the British university system than in many other countries (see Step 3). In some cultures, it is not considered good practice to challenge the views of authorities and well-respected writers. In the UK, however, a culture of **SCEPTICISM** exists: you are encouraged to test and challenge ideas. Of course, any criticisms you make must be supported by evidence: you cannot disagree with something without saying *why*. As such, many students find critical thinking difficult, and find it strange when their essays (which would have received good marks in their home academic system) score poorly. When looking at texts critically, there are several important questions which you can ask, including:

- Are there **NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS** for the claims which are being made (i.e., based on the evidence which exists, are the conclusions reasonable)?
- Does the text show **BIAS**? For example, does the author have particular beliefs which may unfairly influence his or her writing? Or, if the research has been funded by a particular organization, might this influence the results?
- Is the text censored? Has the government, or another agency, hidden any of the information?

This is not to say that you should avoid any material which may be affected in these ways, but you should be careful about how you use it. Sources which might be considered 'propaganda' are, academically speaking, much weaker.

The word *critical*

Although the word *critical* has a purely negative connotation in day-to-day English, in academic language it means 'evaluative' or 'analytical'.

Three golden rules for successful critical thinking

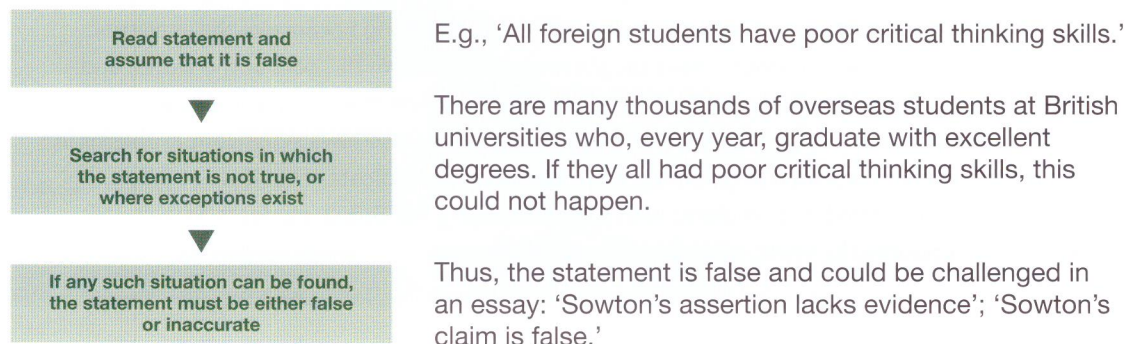
Be rational: if you are not prepared to change your view about a subject, you should not be studying at university. You should be prepared to follow your reason, wherever it takes you.

Be open-minded: one of the great opportunities of studying at university in a foreign country is to broaden your perspective. As Socrates himself said, 'I am a citizen not of Athens, but of the world' – follow the logic to get to the truth.

Be radical: do not be afraid to adopt controversial positions if you believe them to be right. Just because a view is unpopular, or is different to what the majority think, does not make it wrong. What makes it wrong is if it lacks evidence. After all, the ideas of Darwin and Einstein were once ridiculed.

Developing your critical thinking skills

The following technique, known as the Socratic method (named after Socrates, the Greek philosopher who developed it), is an effective way of testing the truth of statements. This system is based on the idea of **SCEPTICISM**, and proceeds as follows:

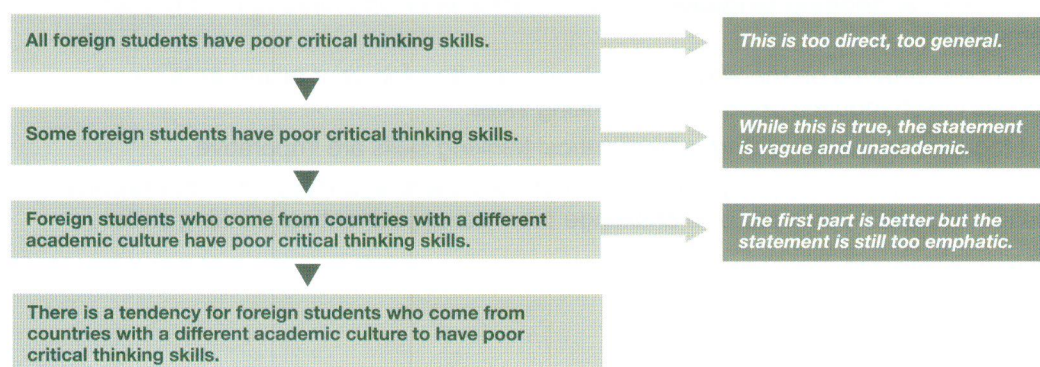


Additionally, your reaction can be modified in two ways:

- **Expanding your objection:** you might criticize the evidence or methodology which the author used – or you might present **COUNTER-EVIDENCE** which strengthens your opposition. For example:
 - Sowton's study not only focused on a small sample but also used ambiguous questions.
 - The data gathered do not support Sowton's conclusion.
 - The high number of foreign students at UK universities demonstrates the weakness of Sowton's argument.
- **Offering a concession:** you might try to explain the reason why the writer came to a wrong decision. For example:
 - Although many students come from countries where critical thinking is not valued as highly as in the UK, Sowton's conclusions are still too extreme.

Using critical thinking in your own proofreading

Critical thinking can also play an important role in checking your own writing. For example, the sentence above can be improved by repeatedly using the Socratic method, until a suitable sentence is produced.



D Activation

Read the following passage and highlight any assertion which you feel can be challenged using the strategies listed overleaf. In each case, explain *why*.

Students from countries which can broadly be said to have a 'Confucian system' (particularly China, Japan and South Korea) have difficulty with critical thinking because of the academic cultures found in these countries. I have taught many people from this part of the world, and they always seem to have difficulties. Clearly, therefore, your mother tongue is also an important factor. In my opinion, French and German speakers also have significant problems in this respect. Recent research (e.g., Smith, 2001; Barton 2004) indicates that it is not only overseas students who have problems with critical thinking, but British students as well. This research is supported by www.criticalthinkingcourses.com.

E Personalization

■ Examine a recent essay you have written and:

- highlight any unsupported arguments, or arguments which have weak supporting evidence
- challenge these arguments (following the Socratic method outlined overleaf)
- rewrite them accordingly

■ Consider whether you yourself:

- have any particular bias (e.g., political, national, cultural) which may influence either your reading or writing

■ If you decide you have, consider how you can reduce this bias, or at least minimize it.

F Extension

- Steps 6 and 7 analyzed the best way to **choose your source material**, both print and online, a process which is greatly aided by good critical thinking skills.
- Step 9 focuses on the development of **reading skills** – including critical reading – an idea closely related to this step.
- Step 23 looks at **hedging language**, which is useful when you need to modify your statements.
- Step 25 concentrates on the ways in which you can develop your **arguments** clearly, a process which requires good critical thinking skills.
- Unit J focuses on **proofreading**, where critical thinking skills are imperative.
- Appendix 2, Step 8, Activity 2 provides a list of controversial, unsupported **quotations** by so-called 'experts' – your job is to challenge them using your critical thinking skills.