

Critical thinking

The process of critical thinking is the process by which we detect and analyse the assumptions that underpin the actions, decisions and judgements in our lives. Critical thinking is used when we evaluate the intellectual work of others. It searches for strengths as well as weaknesses.

Critical thinking encompasses three stages:

1. becoming aware that these assumptions exist
2. making them explicit (i.e., naming what is implicit)
3. assessing their accuracy and validity
 - do they make sense?
 - do they fit reality as we have lived it?
 - under what conditions may they be true?
 - under what conditions may they be false?

(S. Brookfield 1991, *Becoming Critical Thinkers*)

Ways to incorporate critical thinking into your own reading and assignment writing

- Understand all the evidence and theories.
For example, there are a number of conflicting theories to account for global warming. To evaluate them, you must understand them.
- Consider and respond to opposing views.
- Only consider statements which are backed by evidence.
- Look at examples: are they typical and relevant?
Beware of those that are out-of-date, or too narrow in focus to support a broad theory.
- Avoid emotional words and phrases in your writing.
For example: 'a preemptive strike at the big soft heart of middle America'. Even words such as 'democratic' can carry emotional connotations in some contexts.

Critical Analysis of Academic Texts

There are 3 stages in critical analysis: comprehension, analysis and evaluation.

1. Comprehension

Understand what the author is saying. Summarise the author's argument in your own words.

2. Analysis

This is the process of breaking down a text into component parts and examining their structure and the relationship between them. Ask yourself:

- What is the author's purpose in each section of the text
- What assumptions are beneath the author's position?

Often writers argue from particular theoretical or political perspectives that are sometimes clear, but at other times are hidden.

What techniques does the author use to persuade us of their position?

- Logical Argument (is the logic valid?)
- Appeal to Authority (are the authorities reputable and relevant?)
- Empirical Data (studies can be methodologically flawed)
- Language (is it emotive, intimidating, obscure, full of jargon?)

3. Evaluation

Once you have analysed the text using the above strategies, you are now in a better position to judge its quality and validity. You can use the following questions as a checklist to help you make a sound judgement.

- Is the argument clear?
- Is the evidence adequate to support the conclusion?
- Does the writer manipulate the reader?

You should use these techniques to critically analyse your own assignments. Your markers will.