

# Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is an essential skill for university study. It will bring you benefits such as improved attention and observation, more focused reading, improved ability to interpret and evaluate the intellectual work of others and improved ability to communicate your argument (Cottrell, 2011).

## 1. Critical thinking

The term 'critical' in everyday life is often seen as being negative or obstructive. However, in academic life, it involves not accepting information at face value. A critical thinker uses logical and rational thinking to evaluate previous research, assess its strengths and weaknesses and look for evidence to support arguments being made. Three important principles underpin critical thinking.

- **Scepticism**

Skepticism means never taking anything for granted. Always question assumptions or conclusions, and consider whether they flow logically from the evidence presented. Do not accept an assertion merely because it is in print or is delivered by a person or authority.

- **Objectivity**

Being objective means taking an impartial and disinterested approach, setting aside any emotional reactions or personal views when considering an issue. Objectivity requires that you judge a researcher's arguments or conclusions according to the logic that underlies them and the evidence presented to support them, not on subjective beliefs or assumptions.

- **Open-mindedness**

Be open-minded about what you are examining. Consider all sides of an argument, even if you have personal opinions one way or another. Open-mindedness means never ignoring potential explanations or interpretations, being flexible and willing to accept evidence that might conflict with your own personal experience.

(Quoted from Burton, 2017, p. 45)

## 2. Critical analysis of academic texts

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

### Stage 1: Comprehension

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

### Stage 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 are hidden at other times.

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?)

### **Stage 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, as your markers will.

## **3. General tips on critical writing**

- A key to writing well is to make sure you read extensively and gain a deep understanding of your research topic. Unless you really know the subject matter, you will not be able to write authoritatively.
- Make sure your arguments are based on evidence. Your work must clearly spell out the link between your arguments and the evidence being used to support them. You cannot imply a link or assume the reader will accept your argument unless you present a compelling case based on evidence.
- Consider the contribution that your study has made to the research topic. This will help you to draw conclusions about the implication or significance of your work.
- Think about the way your assignment is structured. It does not matter how ground-breaking your findings might be, if your work is not formatted and structured properly it will be of little value.

(Quoted from Burton, 2017, p. 51)

## **Reference List**

Burton, L. J. (2017). *An interactive approach to writing essays and research reports in psychology* (4th ed.). Wiley.

Cottrell, S. (2011). *Critical thinking skills: Developing effective analysis and argument* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.