

Orientation Lecture Series: LEARNING TO LEARN

Developing critical thinking skills

Outline of Lecture

- what is critical thinking?
- demonstrating critical thinking
- strategies for critical writing
- using evidence critically

Defining critical thinking

Critical thinking has been defined in many different ways. Very broad definitions include 'thinking which has a purpose' or 'reflective judgement'. However, these definitions are often too general to be useful to students.

Let's begin by reflecting on some approaches that critical thinkers may or may not take to problems and issues.

Exercise 1

Read through the following statements and tick those that you think may come from critical thinkers.

"I hate talk shows where people just state their opinions but never give any reasons at all"

"No matter how complex a problem, you can bet there will be a simple solution"

"Just because information is in a textbook, doesn't necessarily mean it can be trusted"

"My views are probably shaped by the social and economic groups I belong to"

"I hate it when teachers discuss problems instead of just giving the information"

"Selling an idea is like selling cars, you say whatever works"

"I like to think about whether someone's views reflects the experience of all groups of people"

"I question the authority of evidence before I accept it"

A useful definition of the type of critical thinking you need to develop at university level is

The kind of thinking which seeks to explore questions about existing knowledge for issues which are not clearly defined and for which there are no clear-cut answers.

In order to display critical thinking, students need to develop skills in

- ◆ interpreting: understanding the significance of data and to clarify its meaning
- ◆ analysing: breaking information down and recombining it in different ways
- ◆ reasoning: creating an argument through logical steps
- ◆ evaluating: judging the worth, credibility or strength of accounts.

Why is critical thinking important at university?

In general, students who develop critical thinking skills are more able to

- ◆ achieve better marks
- ◆ become less dependent on teachers and textbooks
- ◆ create knowledge
- ◆ evaluate, challenge and change the structures in society

Displaying critical thinking in reading and writing

Reading

Three important purposes of reading critically are

- ◆ to provide evidence to back up or challenge a point of view
- ◆ to evaluate the validity and importance of a text/ position
- ◆ to develop reflective thought and a tolerance for ambiguity

Strategies for reading critically

Ask Questions about	For Example
your purpose	why?
the context of the text	why written? where? when? who? how relevant?
the structure of the text	Do the parts fit together logically? Is there a clear argument?
the arguments	are they fair? do they leave out perspectives of certain groups?
the evidence used	Is evidence given to support the point of view? is the evidence from an authority in this field? is the evidence evaluated from different perspectives?
the language used	Is the language coloured to present some things as more positive than others? Are claims attributed clearly to specific sources?

Writing

Written assignments may call for Critical thinking either explicitly or implicitly.

Explicit types of critical writing are generally known as **critical reviews**. These assignments directly ask you to evaluate some aspects of

- ◆ a literary text or artwork
- ◆ a research article
- ◆ an argument or interpretation of an issue, text or artwork.

Strategies for writing critical reviews

While it will be necessary to summarise the ideas of the original text, you will also need to

- ◆ select sections of the text (e.g. thesis/ methodology/ conclusion) which are open to question
- ◆ comment (if possible from both a positive and negative perspective) on the section
- ◆ draw on other sources to back up your comments
- ◆ come to a conclusion on the overall worth/ validity etc of the original text

Key instruction words for critical reviews include

- ◆ Critically analyse/ evaluate...
- ◆ Comment on the argument that...
- ◆ Review the film ‘ ‘
- ◆ Write a critical review of the article ‘ ‘
- ◆ Critique ...

Implicit types of critical writing

At undergraduate level, critical writing typically refers to the genre of the persuasive essay in which a logical argument [to a stated position/ issue] is developed and presented.

Critical thinking is a process that challenges an individual to use reflective, reasonable, rational thinking to gather, interpret and evaluate information in order to derive a judgment.

The cognitive process of critical thinking brings to light and questions ‘accepted’ views and assumptions and can offer alternative perspectives

Examples of assignment questions with more or less critical responses

Question	Less critical response →	More critical responses	
		More balanced	More negative
“The film ‘Dead Poets’ Society’ demonstrates how the individual can break free from and overcome the artificial constraints of schooling” Do you agree?	Yes. The teacher Keating represents an agent of freedom for the repressed creative spirit of the boys. Through his influence they examine and reject the repressive and meaningless structures around them and learn to express themselves in new and creative ways	While Keating is instrumental in assisting students to challenge the repressive structures around them, the strategies he gives them do not always help them to overcome those constraints.	No. There is little evidence that the students achieved any real freedom or power. Keating, their ‘radical’ teacher, set up false expectations and, ultimately left them without effective strategies for coping with or challenging school life.

Question	Less critical response →	More critical responses	
		More balanced	More negative
What, if any, benefits, has Reconciliation brought to Aboriginal communities?	Reconciliation has had a number of benefits e.g. legal (Mabo); social; cultural; political.	Reconciliation has had benefits, however there is still a great deal of work to be done to change conditions and attitudes.	Reconciliation will bring no lasting benefit until the structures which exclude indigenous voices from power have been reexamined and reformed (Dodson M. 1994)

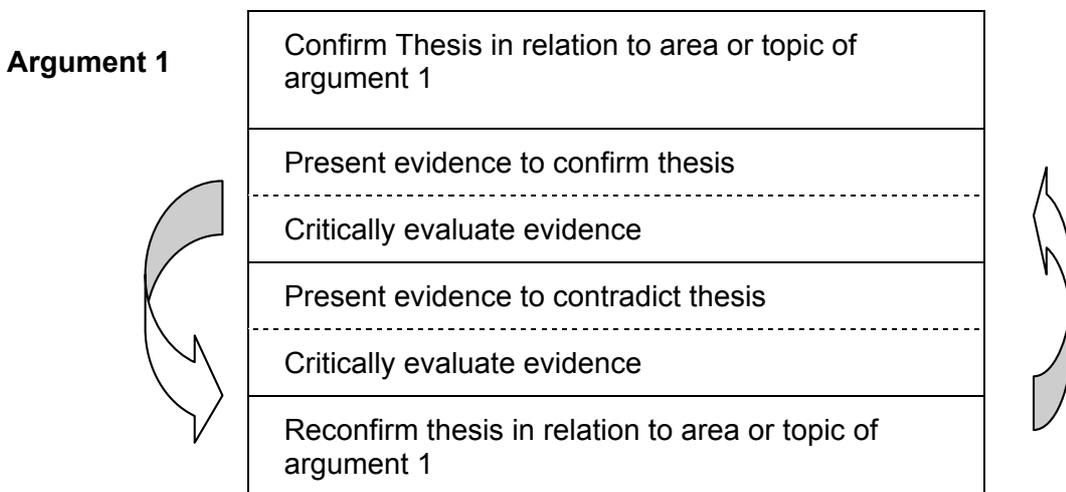
General Strategies for critical writing

- ◆ Read critically (e.g. check validity of references used in source text)
- ◆ Be fair. Take into account accepted standards of judgement used in the particular discipline or field.
- ◆ Use evidence taken from sources which are considered authoritative in the field

- ◆ Consider viewpoints from a range of perspectives (e.g. male and female, different socio-economic and ethnic groups)
- ◆ Use inclusive language (e.g. non-gender specific, non-absolute terms such as ‘often’ and ‘could’ rather than ‘always’ and ‘is’)

Using evidence critically

Critical writing is only valued if it is based on authoritative evidence. It is particularly important to take a critical approach to the evidence you use to answer the question in an essay. The following table demonstrates how evidence might be presented and critically evaluated within an argument of an essay



Example of using evidence critically within an essay

Essay Thesis: *The rapid rise of Islam can be explained through the dualism of religion and force*

Argument	Elements
The caliphs saw the <i>jihad</i> as their religious duty. Yet, the mass of Arabs had to be motivated to spread Islam for they would be the soldiers of this holy war.	<i>Open debate in relation to area 1 (jihad)</i>
Pinder-Wilson argues that Bedouin tribes were actuated as much by a desire for booty as by zeal for spreading the faith.	<i>present argument from perspective 1</i>
Lewis points out that initially conquests were an expansion of the Arab nation, driven by the pressure of over-population on the peninsula.	<i>present argument from perspective 2</i>
Yet, over-population cannot explain the instigation of the second campaign in the early eighth century. The countries captured in the first tide of conquests would have easily provided enough new land for the Arabs and by the end of the	<i>evaluate perspective 2 (with evidence)</i>

seventeenth century extensive migration had occurred relieving the pressure upon the peninsula.	
Lewis does however identify the role of religion as an important factor in the later tide of conquest. He argues that Islam became a symbol of Arab unity and victory where none had existed before. The Islamic faith was inspiring great nationalistic pride and the success of the conquests endowed the Muslim forces with prestige, encouraging more Muslims to join the cause.	<i>present additional argument from perspective 2</i>
In contrast, Donner sees religion as playing a much more fundamental role from the outset. He argues that the success of Arab militarism lay in the organisational breakthrough that Islam had achieved. It was religion that united the tribesmen into a state which could be effectively organised as a fighting force. Once the tribesmen were recruited they were settled in garrison towns on the fringes of the desert, where they could be more easily controlled.	<i>evaluate argument from perspective 2/ present perspective 3</i>
Essentially, it was religion that had allowed Mohammed to integrate fragmented Arabia into an easily controlled political unit with the same military and political objectives.	<i>present position</i>

Displaying critical thinking in indirect and subtle ways

It is possible to give your marker evidence that you are aware of different perspectives in subtle, yet powerful, ways. It is important to remember that critical writing does not necessarily have to challenge an entire perspective or try to set up an entirely different perspective.

Text 1 is an example of critical writing where the writer has demonstrated critical thinking by opening up the possibility that an argument or evidence may be limited.

Exercise 3

Identify the language used to display evidence of critical thinking in Texts 2 and 3

Text 1 Essay question:

Compare and contrast indigenous and western traditions of learning

Another difference between indigenous traditions of learning and the western academic tradition is in the area of access to knowledge. In the indigenous traditions, access to various kinds of knowledge is limited according to gender and according to whether elders judge you as responsible to use the knowledge wisely. In the Western Academic Tradition, access is, at least theoretically, open to everybody.

Text 2 Essay question:

In what ways has Australia developed a positive relationship with Indonesia?

The Australian government argues that it has developed a good relationship with Indonesia over the last twenty-five years. It argues that its policies have led to improved political, economic and military cooperation between the two countries, to the benefit of both. However, the critical issue is which sections of Australian society have cultivated these relations and with which sections of Indonesian society and who has actually benefited.

Text 3 Essay question

“The professional role and status of pharmacists is under threat” Discuss

While these factors have led to a fear that the professional role and status of pharmacists may be under threat, **this view does not take into account** the importance of consumers’ support for pharmacy. Evidence for strong public appreciation for the role of the pharmacist can be found in John Varnish’s study on the public’s perceptions of pharmacy as a profession¹. Although some problems exist in making generalisations from this study, it presents strong evidence that pharmacy is seen by consumers to fulfil the criteria necessary for an occupation to be seen as a profession

Learning Centre workshops which deal with issues raised in this lecture

LEARNING CENTRE WORKSHOPS WHICH WILL SUPPORT YOU WITH SOME OF THE ISSUES RAISED IN THIS LECTURE:

- ◆ Introduction to critical reading
- ◆ Introduction to critical writing
- ◆ Quoting, paraphrasing and summarising evidence

Details of workshop blocks and programs can be found at
<http://www.usyd.edu.au/lc>