

CRITICAL THINKING.

Study Guide

» INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is a disciplined process which can help individuals to use reflective, reasonable, rational thinking to gather, interpret and evaluate information in order to make a judgment on the authenticity, accuracy, and/or worth of knowledge, claims and arguments.

Critical thinkers need to be able and willing to investigate viewpoints which may differ from their own in a way that is neither dogmatic nor naïve; they must also accept that they may be wrong. To think critically means being open-minded and sceptical when seeking out the facts, information sources, examining issues from as many sides as possible; rationally looking for the good and bad points of the various sides examined.

Critical thinking is a neutral and unbiased process for evaluating claims or opinions. It is not a means of thinking negatively to find fault or flaws, nor a process leading to people thinking alike.

» KEY ACTIONS

1. Critical thinking – how does it help?

Critical thinking will aid you in your assignments by giving you the means to judge and analyse the work of others. Tutors often say that the main reason for low marks on assignments is an absence of critical reasoning, rather than a lack of knowledge or too little description.

Critical thinking will give you the ability to:

- › identify and challenge assumptions
- › identify and formulate problems, and propose and evaluate ways to solve them
- › understand the importance of context and how the cultural environment influences assumptions
- › explore alternatives or different options
- › be reflectively sceptical
- › think differently on the basis of critical questioning and reflection
- › draw reasonable conclusions from information found in various sources and to defend one's conclusions rationally
- › recognise and use inductive and deductive reasoning and identify fallacies in reasoning.

2. Some principles for evaluating writing using critical thinking

In order to help you in identifying critical thinking in your own writing, and that of others, ask yourself some or all of the following questions:

- › Are issues clearly identified and described?
- › Does the writer clearly articulate a stance?
- › Is opinion presented as fact, and what is the value of the supporting evidence for the proposition?

- › Are other types of arguments included in the writing?
- › If the writing has an appeal to shared values, beliefs or principles then who are the assumed audience and what are their values?
- › Is the evidence anecdotal or the result of scientific study or research and does the writing argue from examples or evidence?
- › Is the evidence referenced and is it recent?
- › Does the author use data or statistics as part of their argument?
- › Does the writing have an appeal to precedent or history?
- › Does the writing argue from logic, compassion, sympathy, experience or from other emotions?
- › Are counter-arguments or opposing points of view adequately acknowledged or recognised?
- › Are fallacies in opposing arguments identified?
- › Are counter-arguments and opposing points of view refuted or rebutted?
- › Is there any ambiguity, vagueness, or obscurity that hinders a full understanding of the argument?
- › Does the author have the necessary qualifications or level of understanding to make the claims which are made?
- › Does the writer or source have a reputation for accuracy?
- › Does the writer have a motive for being inaccurate or overly biased?
- › Are there any reasons for questioning the honesty or integrity of the source?

3. Adopting the attitude of a critical thinker

Critical thinking involves a particular approach to the way in which information is sought and treated. Therefore, critical thinking can be contrasted with the mere acquisition and retention of information alone.

A critical thinker should look for information sources which are credible, unbiased, and accurate. These will depend on such things as the qualifications, integrity and reputation of the writer, or the source of the information. The quality of critical thinking relies on, among other things, the quality and depth of experience in a given area of thinking or with respect to a particular set of questions.

In addition to those questions posed above, ask yourself what the author's approach or perspective is. Is there was another approach which might have been taken? Take time to consider the language of the writer, does the tone, or choice of examples reveal any biases? If so, do these biases reduce the writer's credibility? Consider also if the author is writing from an insider or an outsider's perspective and how this may this have affected what is included or excluded from the text.

Ask yourself if you agree with the points the author is making and if valid reasoning is being used. Consider also whether the ideas of others are accurately or fairly represented or are these distorted or presented out of context, using unfair persuasion tactics such as appeals to prejudice or fear?

To think critically is to think logically or analytically, but also rationally or objectively. Remember that arguments based on critical thinking are not necessarily the most persuasive and that the most persuasive arguments can be those which are designed to appeal to basic human or emotional needs rather than to a sense of objectivity. Take a step back from what you are reading or writing in order to reflect on it and consider it in the most unbiased and rational way that you can.

» ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

The art of thinking clearly, Rolf Dobelli
London: Sceptre, 2013

The 5 elements of effective thinking, Edward B Burger and Michael Starbird
Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012

Thinking, fast and slow, Daniel Kahneman
London: Penguin Books, 2012

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from CMI's Management Library. More information at: www.managers.org.uk/library

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