CRITICAL THINKING

What is critical thinking?
At its core, it’s about being active as a learner and thinker, not taking things you see, read about or hear at face value but questioning their authenticity, accuracy, credibility etc.

Be prepared
When we are thinking critically, we explore options we/others wouldn’t normally consider. This may send us down a path that turns out to be a dead end. Don’t despair, on the way you may get insights that you can use later in your writing or research.

How do you develop critical thinking skills?
1. One way is to get into the habit of asking questions about almost everything you see, hear and read. Become sceptical.

2. Another way is to ask those who disagree with tell you their reasons for thinking the way they do. Engage in respectful dialogue.

3. A third way is to play with ideas. Use brainstorming to explore new relationships between ideas.

4. Experiment. Think of other ways that might work for you.

Critical thinking is sometimes described as thinking outside the box.

Try this
How many uses can you think of for this object?

The more you know about your subject or research area the more competent you’ll become at critically examining what you read and hear.

As with most things, practise and persistence will bring results.

It is worth persisting because critical thinking is highly valued in all aspects of university work (and in life in general).

What does critical thinking involve?
It encompasses a range of activities. These include:
- categorising and finding relationships
- making evaluations and judgements
- identifying your own biases
- identifying the writer’s assumptions/biases
- using your imagination and creativity
- checking if the writer has made unsupported generalisations
- checking if the evidence is backed by research or if it is anecdotal
Learning how to ask the right questions

The more questions you ask the better you get at asking them. Pay attention to the kinds of questions others are asking. Learn from them. Begin with general questions and then refine these for clarity and precision.

Questions to get started with

- What evidence is offered? Is it good quality?
- What is the argument?
- What is not said? Are there any gaps?
- In whose interest is it to see the world this way?
- How can this be applied?
- What assumptions are made?
- Does the conclusion follow from the evidence?
- What if …? (These sorts of questions are a great way to see the material differently. For example, ‘What would happen if X were left out of the sample?’)

Check out this example

‘People who have pets live longer’ is a claim.
We can ask ourselves if this is true or false. In order to decide this (that is, to make a judgement) we should ask ourselves a series of questions (as the basis for our evaluation).

- What evidence is given to support and or refute this view?
- What is the context for this claim (i.e. is the claim just about Western society or is it positing a universal truth?)
- Does it matter what kind of pet?
- What assumptions are being made? For example, is living longer assumed to be a good thing?
- Is it assumed that the people with the pets like having pets, or that all people like pets, or need the ‘benefits’ offered by pets?
- Are there any social or environmental costs which might reduce the value of this finding?
- Are there other ways to get the same benefits? And so on. Have fun!

Like this Survival Guide? Why not check out...
Survival Guides: Structuring essays, Writing critically, Developing essay arguments.

Want to know more about STUDY Smarter?
Find out about all our services and resources at: www.studysmarter.uwa.edu.au

Any suggestions?
We’d love to hear from you. Email us at study.smarter@uwa.edu.au

This resource was developed by the STUDY Smarter team for UWA students. When using our resources, please retain them in their original form with both the STUDY Smarter heading and the UWA logo.