

W/O

B4

Personal strategies for critical thinking

Below, three lecturers describe how they view critical thinking.

Example 1

- I may make a quick first reading to get the overall picture and check my initial response. I see whether it rings true or contradicts what I believe to be true.
 - I compare what I read with what I already know about the topic and with my experience.
 - I summarise as I go along, and hold the overall argument in my head to make sense of what comes next.
 - I look for the author's position or point of view, asking 'What are they trying to "sell me"?'
 - As I read, I check each section and ask myself if I know what it means. If not, I check again – sometimes it is clearer when I read the second time. If it is still unclear, I remind myself to come back to it later as the rest of the passage may make it clearer.
 - I then read more carefully, seeing what reasons the writers present and checking whether I am persuaded by these.
 - If I am persuaded, I consider why. Is it because they make use of experts in the field? Is there research evidence that looks thorough and convincing?
 - If I am not persuaded, then why not? I check if this is a 'gut level' thing or whether I have good reasons for not being convinced. If I have relied on a gut response, I check for hard evidence such as whether I have read other material that contradicts it.
 - I then create my own position, and check that my own point of view is convincing. Could I support it if I was challenged?
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Here the lecturer is describing an overall critical thinking strategy for reading and analysing the text. The example below indicates that, as well as the words on the page or other material being critiqued, there are wider considerations to be taken into account.

Example 2

I put my energy into looking for the heart of the issue: what is really being said, and why? The answers may not be on the page; they may be in the wider history of a debate, a cultural clash, or conflicting bids for project money. It is surprising how often the wider context, popular debates, even a desire to be seen to be saying what is currently in fashion, have a bearing on what a given passage is really saying.

The third lecturer wouldn't disagree with what has gone before, but adds another dimension.

Example 3

The trick is being able to see the wood for the trees; identifying what is relevant amongst a mass of less relevant information. It isn't enough just to understand; you have to be constantly evaluating whether something is accurate, whether it gets to the heart of the issue, whether it is the most important aspect on which to focus, whether it is the best example to use – and whether what you are saying about it is a fair representation of it.

All three examples illustrate different aspects of the critical thinking process:

- an analytical strategy for the material;
- understanding of the wider context;
- an evaluative and selective approach;
- being self-critical about your own understanding, interpretation and evaluation.

Critical thinking as a student means:

- finding out where the best evidence lies for the subject you are discussing;
- evaluating the strength of the evidence to support different arguments;
- coming to an interim conclusion about where the available evidence appears to lead;
- constructing a line of reasoning to guide your audience through the evidence and lead them towards your conclusion;
- selecting the best examples;
- and providing evidence to illustrate your argument.

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