# Contents

Introduction: Building our ‘critical muscle’ viii  
Do critical thinking skills matter? ix  
About this book x  
Glossary xiv  
Acknowledgements xvi

1 What is critical thinking? 1  
Introduction 1  
What is critical thinking? 2  
Reasoning 3  
Why do critical thinking skills matter? 4  
Underlying skills and attitudes 5  
Self-awareness for accurate judgement 6  
Personal strategies for critical thinking 7  
Critical thinking in academic contexts 8  
Barriers to critical thinking 10  
Critical thinking: Knowledge, skills and attitudes 13  
Priorities: Developing critical thinking abilities 14  
Summary 16

2 How well do you think? 17  
Introduction 17  
Assess your thinking skills 18  
Scoring sheet 22  
Focusing attention 23  
Focusing attention: Identifying difference 24  
Focusing attention: Recognising sequence 25  
Categorising 27  
Activity: Categorising text 28  
Close reading 29

3 What’s their point? 33  
Introduction 33  
The author’s position 34  
Activity: Capturing the author’s position 35  
Argument: Persuasion through reasons 36  
Identifying the argument 37  
Activity: Identifying simple arguments 40  
Activity: Reasons and conclusions 41  
Hunting out the conclusion 42  
Summary of features 43  
Summary 44

4 Is it an argument? 45  
Introduction 45  
Argument and disagreement 46  
Activity: Argument and disagreement 47  
Non-arguments: Description 48  
Non-arguments: Explanations and summaries 49  
Activity: What type of message? 50  
Distinguishing argument from other material 52  
Activity: Selecting out the argument 53  
Summary 55

5 How well do they say it? 57  
Introduction 57  
How clear is the author’s position? 58  
Internal consistency 59  
Activity: Internal consistency 60  
Logical consistency 61  
Activity: Logical consistency 62  
Independent reasons and joint reasons 63  
Activity: Independent reasons and joint reasons 64  
Intermediate conclusions 65  
Intermediate conclusions used as reasons 66  
Activity: Intermediate conclusions 67  
Summative and logical conclusions 68  
Activity: Summative and logical conclusions 69  
Logical order 70  
Activity: Logical order 71  
Summary 72

6 Reading between the lines 73  
Introduction 73  
Assumptions 74  
Activity: Identify the underlying assumptions 75  
Identifying hidden assumptions 76  
Implicit assumptions used as reasons 77  
Activity: Implicit assumptions used as reasons 78  
False premises 79  
Activity: False premises 80  
Implicit arguments 81  
Activities: Implicit arguments 82  
Denoted and connoted meanings 83  
Activities: Associations and stereotypes 85
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>12 Critical reflection</th>
<th>187</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is critical reflection?</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why engage in critical reflection?</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide your approach and purpose</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach: Outcome, focus, model, method</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach: Method and audience</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach: Relating experience and theory</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide your approach: Summary</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource: Outline approach to reflection</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection phases 1 and 2</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of phase 1 reflection</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of phase 2 reflection</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Models of reflection</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding on your model for reflection</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Core Model for critical reflection</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying reflection to professional practice</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection and professional judgement</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good and bad critical reflection</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting your reflection to others</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>13 Critical thinking for your future career and employability</th>
<th>211</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thinking critically about your life and career planning</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-evaluation: Thinking critically about your career path</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking critically about your career: Taking action</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Applying critical thinking when looking for a job | 217 |
| Critical consideration of the ‘best fit’ jobs for you | 218 |
| Use the clues: Information provided by employers | 219 |
| Where do job applicants go wrong? | 220 |
| Where job applicants go wrong: Examples | 222 |
| Employer demand for critical thinking skills | 223 |
| How critical thinking skills are useful in work roles | 224 |
| Demonstrating critical thinking to employers | 225 |
| Critical self-evaluation of job applications: Checklist | 226 |
| Summary | 228 |

| Texts for Activities in Chapters 8, 9 and 11 | 229 |

| Practice activities on longer texts | 235 |

| Appendix: Selected search engines and databases for online literature searches | 274 |
| Answers to activities | 275 |
| Bibliography | 303 |
| Index | 307 |
Introduction

This chapter provides a general orientation to critical thinking. It examines what is meant by ‘critical thinking’, the skills associated with it, and the barriers that can hinder effective development of critical approaches. Many people can find it difficult to order their thoughts in a logical, consistent and reasoned way. This book starts from the premise that skills in reasoning can be developed through a better understanding of what critical thinking entails, and by practice.

Critical thinking is a cognitive activity, associated with using the mind. Learning to think in critically analytical and evaluative ways means using mental processes such as attention, categorisation, selection and judgement. However, many people who have the potential to develop more effective critical thinking can be prevented from doing so for a variety of reasons apart from a lack of ability. In particular, personal and emotional, or ‘affective’, reasons can create barriers.

You are invited to consider, in this chapter, how far such barriers could be affecting your own thinking abilities and how you will manage these.

Chapter 1

What is critical thinking?

Learning outcomes

This chapter gives you opportunities to:

- understand what critical thinking is
- recognise some of the benefits associated with critical thinking skills
- recognise the personal qualities associated with critical thinking
- recognise barriers to the development of good critical thinking skills
- assess your current understanding of critical thinking and identify your priorities for improvement

What did my mom say about no such thing as a free lunch?

Critical thinking as a process

Critical thinking is a complex process of deliberation which involves a wide range of skills and attitudes. It includes:

- identifying other people’s positions, arguments and conclusions;
- evaluating the evidence for alternative points of view;
- weighing up opposing arguments and evidence fairly;
- being able to read between the lines, seeing behind surfaces, and identifying false or unfair assumptions;
- recognising techniques used to make certain positions more appealing than others, such as false logic and persuasive devices;
- reflecting on issues in a structured way, bringing logic and insight to bear;
- drawing conclusions about whether arguments are valid and justifiable, based on good evidence and sensible assumptions;
- synthesising information: drawing together your judgements of the evidence, synthesising these to form your own new position;
- presenting a point of view in a structured, clear, well-reasoned way that convinces others.

Scepticism and trust

Ennis (1987) identified a range of dispositions and abilities associated with critical thinking. These focused on:

- the ability to reflect sceptically;
- the ability to think in a reasoned way.

Scepticism in critical thinking means bringing an element of polite doubt. In this context, scepticism doesn’t mean you must go through life never believing anything you hear and see. That would not be helpful. It does mean holding open the possibility that what you know at a given time may be only part of the picture.

Critical thinking gives you the tools to use scepticism and doubt constructively so that you can analyse what is before you. It helps you to make better and more informed decisions about whether something is likely to be true, effective or productive. Ultimately, in order to function in the world, we have to accept the probability that at least some things are as they seem. This requires trust. If we can analyse clearly the basis of what we take as true, we are more able to discern when it is reasonable to be trusting and where it is useful to be sceptical.

Method rather than personality trait

Some people seem to be more naturally sceptical whilst others find it easier to be trusting. These differences may be because of past experiences or personality traits. However, critical thinking is not about natural traits or personality; it is about a certain set of methods aimed at exploring evidence in a particular way. Sceptical people can require structured approaches that help them to trust in the probability of an outcome, just as those who are more trusting require methods to help them use doubt constructively.

Critical thinking and argument

The focus of critical thinking is often referred to as the ‘argument’. Chapter 3 identifies the features of an argument in critical thinking. The argument can be thought of as the message that is being conveyed, whether through speech, writing, performance or other media. Critical thinking helps you to identify the obvious and the hidden messages more accurately, and to understand the process by which an argument is constructed.
Knowing our own reasons

Critical thinking is associated with reasoning or with our capacity for rational thought. The word ‘rational’ means ‘using reasons’ to solve problems. Reasoning starts with ourselves. It includes:

- having reasons for what we believe and do, and being aware of what these are;
- critically evaluating our own beliefs and actions;
- being able to present to others the reasons for our beliefs and actions.

This may sound easy, as we all assume we know what we believe and why. However, sometimes, when we are challenged on why we believe that something is true, it becomes obvious to us that we haven’t really thought through whether what we have seen or heard is the whole story or is just one point of view. There are also likely to be occasions when we find we are not sure what we consider to be the right course of action or a correct interpretation.

It is important to examine the basis of our own beliefs and reasoning, as these will be the main vantage points from which we begin any critical analysis.

Challenging our own assumptions

Our brains like to assume that they are right. Research has shown that we are wired to make quick assumptions – to take the easiest route to jump to the most likely conclusion rather than to slow down and examine our reasoning (Kahneman, 2011). This means we can easily miss essential information and omit relevant considerations.

Focusing on our reasons, and examining the foundations of these systematically, can help us uncover our assumptions. When we are more aware of these, we can test them out, too, in a systematic way.

Critical analysis of other people’s reasoning

Critical reasoning usually involves considering other people’s reasoning. This requires the skill of grasping an overall argument, but also skills in analysing and evaluating it in detail.

Critical analysis of other people’s reasons can involve:

- identifying their reasons and conclusions;
- analysing how they select, combine and order reasons to construct a line of reasoning;
- evaluating whether their reasons support the conclusions they draw;
- evaluating whether their reasons are well founded, based on good evidence;
- identifying flaws in their reasoning.

Constructing and presenting reasons

Reasoning involves analysing evidence and drawing conclusions from it. The evidence may then be presented to support the conclusion. For example, we may consider that it is a cold day. Someone who disagrees may ask why we believe this. We may use evidence such as a thermometer reading and observation of weather conditions. Our reasons may be that the temperature is low and there is ice on the ground.

We use basic examples of reasoning such as this every day. For professional and academic work, we are usually required to present our reasoning using formal structures such as essays, or reports with recommendations. This requires additional skills such as knowing how to:

- select and structure reasons to support a conclusion;
- present an argument in a consistent way;
- use logical order;
- use language effectively to present the line of reasoning.
Sharpening our minds

As we have seen, we often assume that we have the full story, the right answer, or the best solution when that is not the case. It is easy to slip into simply repeating something we have heard, or describing what we have read, without much thought. We may consider that we are using critical skills when we are merely stating what we believe to be self-obviously true.

Such thinking leads to mistakes, weak understandings, unconscious bias, unfairness, and errors of judgement. Most of these won’t be significant, but some could have serious consequences. Critical awareness sharpens our minds so that we are better able to identify where we need to slow down and apply more systematic critiques of our thinking processes and actions.

For academic and professional life

Advances in knowledge and professional practice are made through recognising where improvements can be made to what has gone before. This involves being able to break down existing understandings and practice into their component parts, such as what are assumed to be facts, or good evidence, or sound methods, or the assumptions made about how different pieces of information are connected.

Academic study and research-based enquiry require us to slow down our processing of information. The methodologies used for conducting research, and the feedback received from peers, help in identifying flaws in the way we arrive at conclusions. That has an impact on the speed, accuracy, efficiency, and fairness of our thoughts and actions.

Realistic self-appraisal

Good critical thinking skills, if applied well, can help us to make much more realistic and accurate appraisals of our own abilities, interests and thinking processes. This is useful in helping us to make decisions about where to focus our energies when looking for work, pursuing further training, or making life choices.

Benefits of good critical abilities

1. Ability to spot your own and other people’s assumptions.
2. Ability to spot inconsistencies and potential errors that merit further investigation.
3. Ability to make fair, sound decisions.
4. Less likelihood of being misled or cheated.
5. Ability to notice what is relevant and significant – so saving time and effort.
6. Ability to bring greater accuracy and precision to different parts of a task.
7. Clearer thinking and communication.
8. Better problem-solving skills, such as in identifying where improvements could be made and evaluating potential solutions.
9. Ability to take a systematic approach, to ensure essentials are not overlooked.
11. Confidence in taking on more complex problems and challenges.
12. Possibility of seeing the world through different eyes – with sharper awareness.
Critical thinking rarely takes place in a vacuum. Higher-level critical thinking skills usually require some or all of the skills and attitudes listed below.

**Underlying thinking skills**

Critical thinking assumes abilities in a range of skills such as categorising, selection and differentiation, comparing and contrasting. These skills are examined in Chapter 2.

**Knowledge and research**

Good critical thinkers can often detect a poor argument without a good knowledge of the subject. However, critical thinking usually benefits from background research. Finding out more about a subject helps you to make a more informed judgement about whether relevant facts, alternative explanations and options have been covered sufficiently.

**Emotional self-management**

Critical thinking sounds like a dispassionate process but it can engage emotions and even passionate responses. This should not surprise us when we consider that reasoning requires us to decide between opposing points of view. In particular, we may not like evidence that contradicts our own opinions or beliefs. If the evidence points in a direction that is unexpected and challenging, that can rouse unexpected feelings of anger, frustration or anxiety.

The academic world traditionally likes to consider itself as logical and immune to emotions, so if feelings do emerge, this can be especially difficult. Being able to manage your emotions under such circumstances is a useful skill. If you can remain calm, and present your reasons logically, you will be better able to argue your point of view in a convincing way.

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**Perseverance, accuracy and precision**

Critical thinking involves accuracy and precision and this can require dedication to finding the right answer. It includes:

- **Attention to detail**: taking the time to note small clues that throw greater light on the overall issue.
- **Identifying trends and patterns**: this may be through careful mapping of information, analysis of data, or identifying repetition and similarity.
- **Repetition**: going back over the same ground several times to check that nothing has been missed.
- **Taking different perspectives**: looking at the same information from several points of view.
- **Objectivity**: putting your own likes, beliefs and interests to one side with the aim of gaining the most accurate outcome or a deeper understanding.
- **Considering implications and distant consequences**: what appears to be a good idea in the short term, for example, might have long-term effects that are less desirable.

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**Reflection: Emotional self-management**

For me, the emotions that are most difficult to manage when others disagree with me are:

I deal with these by:

Good critical thinking involves making accurate judgements. We noted above that our thinking might not be accurate if we are not fully aware of the influences that affect it. These can include such things as our own assumptions, preconceptions, bias, dislikes, beliefs, things we take for granted as normal and acceptable, and all those things about our selves and our world that we have never questioned.

People who are outstanding at critical thinking tend to be particularly self-aware. They reflect upon and evaluate their personal motivations, interests, prejudices, expertise and gaps in their knowledge. They question their own point of view and check the evidence used to support it.

Reflection: Influences on my thinking

For me, the influences on my own thinking that I need to be most aware of so they don’t prejudice my thinking are:

I will deal with these by:

Reflection: Challenging opinions

For me, the things I find most difficult about challenging the opinions of other people are:

I deal with these by:
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 whether 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?

**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. Analysis encourages a focus on the detail, and on considering many different angles. This can generate a large body of evidence or a long list of points for consideration. An important aspect of your critical analysis is to sift through this wealth of information, and make good judgements about what is the most significant.

**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.
Development of understanding

Students are expected to develop critical thinking skills so that they can dig deeper below the surface of the subject they are studying and engage in critical dialogue with its main theories and arguments. This is usually through engaging in critical debate in seminars, presentations or writing produced for assessment or publication.

One of the best ways of arriving at a point where we really understand something is by doing, or replicating, the underlying research for ourselves. However, as undergraduates, and indeed in everyday life, there simply isn’t time to research everything we encounter. The depth of understanding that comes through direct experience, practice and experimentation has to be replaced, at times, by critical analysis of the work of other people.

Students need to develop the ability to evaluate critically the work of others. Whilst some find this easy, others tend to accept or apply the results of other people’s research too readily, without analysing it sufficiently to check that the evidence and the reasoning really support the main points being made. Bodner (1988), for example, describes chemistry students as being unable to ‘apply their knowledge outside the narrow domain in which it was learnt. They “know” without understanding.’ Bodner suggests that, instead of focusing primarily on standard chemical calculations in books, students should be looking for answers to questions such as ‘How do we know …?’ and ‘Why do we believe …?’

Bodner’s description is likely to be just as true of students in other subjects. It is not unusual for students, and for people generally, to rely unquestioningly on research that is based on a small sample of the population, or that is based on faulty reasoning, or that is now out of date. Evidence from small or isolated projects is often treated as if it were irrefutable proof of a general principle, and is sometimes quoted year after year as if it were an absolute truth. Chapter 8 looks further at critically examining and evaluating evidence.

Reflection: ‘Knowing without understanding?’

Do you recognise anything of yourself in Bodner’s description of students? What effect would the approach he suggests have on your learning and understanding?

Both positives and negatives

In academic contexts, ‘criticism’ refers to an analysis of positive features as well as negative ones. It is important to identify strengths and satisfactory aspects rather than just weaknesses, to evaluate what works as well as what does not. Good critical analysis accounts for why something is good or poor, why it works or fails. It is not enough merely to list good and bad points.

Comprehensive: Nothing is excluded

For most academic programmes, students are expected to take a well-reasoned, evidence-based, critical approach to what they hear, see, read, and learn. That is the case even when considering the work of respected academics.

Normally, any theory, perspective, data, area of research or approach to a discipline could be subjected to critical analysis. Some colleges, such as religious foundations, may consider certain subjects to be out of bounds, but this is not typical.
The idea or the action, not the person

A distinction is usually drawn between the idea, work, text, theory or behaviour, on the one hand and, on the other, the person associated with these. This is also true when making critical analyses of other students’ work, if this is a requirement of your course. Even so, it is worth remembering that people identify closely with their work and may take criticism of it personally. Tact and a constructive approach are needed. Giving difficult messages in a way other people can accept is an important aspect of critical evaluation.

Dealing with ambiguity and doubt

With the internet at our fingertips, we are used to obtaining answers within minutes of formulating a question. However, in the academic world, questions are raised in new areas and answers may not be found for years, or even lifetimes. This can feel uncomfortable if you are used to ready answers.

This does not mean, though, that vague answers are acceptable. If you look at articles in academic journals, you will see that they are very closely argued, often focusing on a minute aspect of the subject in great detail, and with precision. Students, too, are expected to develop skills in using evidence, even if drawn from other people’s research, to support a detailed line of reasoning.

It is worth remembering that in academic work, including professional research for business and industry, researchers often need to pursue lines of enquiry knowing that:

- no clear answers may emerge;
- it may take decades to gain an answer;
- they may contribute only a very small part to a much larger picture.

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;
- providing evidence to illustrate your argument.

Non-dualistic

In our day-to-day lives, we can slip into thinking everything is right or wrong, black or white. In the academic world, answers may occur at a point on a continuum of possibilities. One of the purposes of higher-level thinking is to address questions which are more complicated and sophisticated, and which do not lend themselves to straightforward responses. You may have noticed yourself that the more you know about a subject, the more difficult it becomes to give simple answers.

Your work’s rubbish, of course but as a human being, you’ll do, I suppose!

Irma wasn’t famed for her tact.
Critical thinking does not come easily to everyone. Barriers vary from person to person, but can usually be overcome. This section looks at some key barriers to critical thinking and encourages you to consider whether these might be having an impact on you.

**Misunderstanding what is meant by criticism**

Some people assume that ‘criticism’ means making negative comments. As a result, they refer only to negative aspects when making an analysis. This is a misunderstanding of the term. As we saw above, critical evaluation means identifying positive as well as negative aspects, what works as well as what does not.

"Your art lacks any real sense of line, tone, colour, emotion, conceptual development, originality – it's lop-sided and hasn't got a frame."

Others feel that it is not good to engage in criticism because it is an intrinsically negative activity. Some worry that they will be regarded as an unpleasant sort of person if they are good at criticism. As a result, they avoid making any comments they feel are negative and make only positive comments. They may not provide feedback on what can be improved. This is often an unhelpful approach, as constructive criticism can clarify a situation and help people to excel.

"And in your essay, Angela, you refer to Napoleon as 'she' throughout. What a marvellously unique and creative approach!"

**Over-estimating our own reasoning abilities**

Most of us like to think of ourselves as rational beings. We tend to believe our own belief systems are the best (otherwise we wouldn’t hold those beliefs) and that we have good reasons for what we do and think.

Although this is true of most of us for some of the time, it isn’t an accurate picture of how humans behave. Most of the time our thinking runs on automatic. This makes us more efficient in our everyday lives: we don’t have to doubt the safety of a tooth-brush every time we brush our teeth.

However, it is easy to fall into poor thinking habits. People who get their own way, or simply get by, with poor reasoning, may believe their reasoning must be good as nobody has said it isn’t. Those who are good at winning arguments can mistake this for good reasoning ability. Winning an argument does not necessarily mean that you have the best case. It may simply mean that your opponents didn’t recognise a poor argument, or chose to yield the point for their own reasons, such as to avoid conflict. Imprecise, inaccurate and illogical thinking does not help to develop the mental abilities required for higher-level academic and professional work.
**Lack of methods, strategies or practice**

Although willing to be more critical, some people don’t know which steps to take next in order to improve their critical thinking skills. Others are unaware that strategies used for study at school and in everyday situations are not sufficiently rigorous for higher-level academic thinking and professional work. With practice, most people can develop their skills in critical thinking.

**Reluctance to critique experts**

There can be a natural anxiety about critically analysing texts or other works by people that you respect. It can seem strange for students who know little about their subject, to be asked to critique works by those who are clearly more experienced. Some students can find it alien, rude or nonsensical to offer criticism of practitioners they know to be more expert than themselves.

If this is true of you, it may help to bear in mind that this is part of the way teaching works in most universities. Critical analysis is a typical and expected activity. Researchers and lecturers expect students to question and challenge even published material. It can take time to adapt to this way of thinking.

If you are confident about critical thinking, bear in mind that there are others who find this difficult. In many parts of the world, students are expected to demonstrate respect for known experts by behaviours such as learning text off by heart, repeating the exact words used by an expert, copying images precisely, or imitating movements as closely as possible. Students of martial arts such as tai chi or karate may be familiar with this approach to teaching and learning.

**Affective reasons**

We saw above that emotional self-management can play an important part in critical thinking. To be able to critique means being able to acknowledge that there is more than one way of looking at an issue. In academic contexts, the implications of a theory can challenge deeply held beliefs and long-held assumptions. This can be difficult to accept, irrespective of how intelligent a student might be.

This is especially so if ‘common sense’ or ‘normality’ appears to be challenged by other intelligent people or by academic research. It can be hard to hear deeply held religious, political and ideological beliefs challenged in any way at all. Other sensitive issues include views on bringing up children, criminal justice, genetic modification, and sexuality.

When we are distressed by what we are learning, the emotional response may help to focus our thinking, but very often it can inhibit our capacity to think clearly. Emotional content can add power to an argument, but it can also undermine an argument, especially if emotions seem to take the place of the reasoning and evidence that could convince others. Critical thinking does not mean that you must abandon beliefs that are important to you. It may mean giving more consideration to the evidence that supports the arguments based on those beliefs, so that you do justice to your point of view.
Barriers to critical thinking (3)

Mistaking information for understanding

Learning is a process that develops understanding and insight. Many lecturers set activities to develop expertise in methods used within the discipline. However, students can misunderstand the purpose of such teaching methods, preferring facts and answers rather than learning the skills that help them to make well-founded judgements for themselves.

Cowell, Keeley, Shemberg and Zinnbauer (1995) write about ‘students’ natural resistance to learning to think critically’, which can mean acquiring new learning behaviours. Cowell et al. outline the problem through the following dialogue:

Student: ‘I want you (the expert) to give me answers to the questions; I want to know the right answer.’

Teachers: ‘I want you to become critical thinkers, which means I want you to challenge experts’ answers and pursue your own answers through active questioning. This means lots of hard work.’

If you feel that critical thinking is hard work at times, then you are right. There are lecturers who would agree with you. However, if it wasn’t difficult, you would not be developing your thinking skills into new areas. In effect, you are developing your ‘mental muscle’ when you improve your critical thinking skills.

Insufficient focus and attention to detail

Critical thinking involves precision and accuracy, and this, in turn, requires good attention to detail. Poor criticism can result from making judgements based on too general an overview of the subject matter. Critical thinking activities require focus on the exact task in hand, rather than becoming distracted by other interesting tangents.

When critically evaluating arguments, it is important to remember that you can find an argument to be good or effective even if you don’t agree with it.

Which barriers have an effect upon you?

On the table below, tick (✓) all those barriers that you consider might be affecting your critical thinking abilities.

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<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Has an effect?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Misunderstanding what is meant by criticism (page 10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-estimating my reasoning abilities (page 10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of methods and strategies (page 11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of practice (page 11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctance to criticise those with more expertise (page 11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective reasons (page 11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistaking information for understanding (page 12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient focus and attention to detail (page 12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflection: Managing barriers

Consider what you could do to manage these barriers in the next few months.
# Self-evaluation

For each of the following statements, rate your responses as outlined below.

Note that ‘strongly disagree’ carries no score.

4 = ‘strongly agree’  3 = ‘agree’  2 = ‘sort of agree’  1 = ‘disagree’  0 = ‘strongly disagree’

| Rating 4–0 |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 I feel comfortable pointing out potential weaknesses in the work of experts. |  |
| 2 I can remain focused on the exact requirements of an activity. |  |
| 3 I know the different meanings of the word ‘argument’ in critical thinking. |  |
| 4 I can analyse the structure of an argument. |  |
| 5 I can offer criticism without feeling this makes me a bad person. |  |
| 6 I know what is meant by a line of reasoning. |  |
| 7 I am aware of how my current beliefs might prejudice fair consideration of an issue. |  |
| 8 I am patient in identifying the line of reasoning in an argument. |  |
| 9 I am good at recognising the signals used to indicate stages in an argument. |  |
| 10 I find it easy to separate key points from other material. |  |
| 11 I am very patient in going over the facts in order to reach an accurate view. |  |
| 12 I am good at identifying unfair techniques used to persuade readers. |  |
| 13 I am good at reading between the lines. |  |
| 14 I find it easy to evaluate the evidence to support a point of view. |  |
| 15 I usually pay attention to small details. |  |
| 16 I find it easy to weigh up different points of view fairly. |  |
| 17 If I am not sure about something, I will investigate to find out more. |  |
| 18 I can present my own arguments clearly. |  |
| 19 I understand how to structure an argument. |  |
| 20 I can tell descriptive writing from analytical writing. |  |
| 21 I can spot inconsistencies in an argument easily. |  |
| 22 I am good at identifying patterns. |  |
| 23 I am aware of how my own up-bringing might prejudice fair consideration of an issue. |  |
| 24 I know how to evaluate source materials. |  |
| 25 I understand why ambiguous language is often used in research papers. |  |

## Interpreting your score

Going through the questionnaire may have raised some questions about what you know or don’t know about critical thinking. The lower the score, the more likely you are to need to develop your critical thinking skills. A score over 75 suggests you are very confident about your critical thinking ability. It is worth checking this against objective feedback from your tutors or colleagues, for example. If your score is less than 100, there is still room for improvement! If your score is under 45 and remains so after completing the book, you may find it helpful to speak to an academic counsellor, your tutor or a supervisor to root out the difficulty.
Priorities: Developing critical thinking abilities

- In column A, identify which aspects of critical thinking you want to know more about. Give a rating between 5 and 0, giving 5 for ‘very important’ and 0 for ‘not important at all’.
- In column B, consider how essential it is that you develop this aspect soon. Give a rating between 5 and 0, where 5 is ‘very essential’ and 0 is ‘not essential at all’.
- Add the scores in columns A and B to gain an idea of where your priorities are likely to lie.
- Column D directs you where to look for more information on that point.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I want to:</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D See Chapter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>understand the benefits of critical thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>remain focused on the exact requirements of an activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pay better attention to small details</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>know what is meant by a line of reasoning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>identify the component parts of an argument for critical thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recognise the words used to signal stages in an argument</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distinguish argument from disagreement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distinguish argument from summaries, descriptions and explanations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pick out the key points from background information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be able to analyse the structure of an argument</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluate whether arguments are internally consistent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understand what is meant by an intermediate conclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be able to structure an argument</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5, 10, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspects I want to develop further</td>
<td>A Want to know more?</td>
<td>B How essential to develop it now?</td>
<td>C Priority score</td>
<td>D See Chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to:</td>
<td>Rate from 0 to 5 5 = ‘very important’</td>
<td>Rate from 0 to 5 5 = ‘very essential’</td>
<td>Add scores for columns A and B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 be better at reading between the lines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 recognise underlying assumptions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 recognise when an argument is based on false premises</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 recognise implicit arguments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 understand what is meant by denoted and connoted meanings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 be aware of how cause, effect, correlation and coincidence can be confused</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 be able to check for ‘necessary and sufficient conditions’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 identify unfair techniques used to persuade readers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6, 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 recognise tautology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 recognise flawed reasoning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6, 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 be able to evaluate source materials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1, 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 understand what is meant by authenticity, validity, and reliability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 evaluate when samples are representative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 understand what is meant by ‘triangulation’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 check for levels of probability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 apply critical thinking when making notes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9, 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 use language more effectively to structure argument</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3, 10, 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 present my own arguments clearly in writing/for essays</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10, 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 be able to undertake good critical reflection for assignments or my job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is critical thinking?
Priorities for action

- Look back over the priorities table. Identify the three aspects to which you gave the highest scores. If more than three have the highest score, select three to start with.
- Write the three priorities here as actions starting with ‘I will …’, using words that are meaningful to you – e.g. ‘I will find out what tautology means.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. I will</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. I will</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I will</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

Critical thinking is a process that relies upon, and develops, a wide range of skills and personal qualities. Like other forms of activity, it improves with practice and with a proper sense of what is required. For some people, this may mean changing behaviours, such as paying attention to detail or taking a more sceptical approach to what they see, hear, and read. Some need to focus on developing critical thinking techniques, and this is the main purpose of the book.

For others, weaknesses in critical thinking abilities may stem from attitudes to criticism, and anxiety about potential consequences. Barriers associated with attitudinal and affective responses to critical approaches were considered in this chapter. Sometimes, it is sufficient to become more aware of these barriers, and to recognise the blocks to effective thinking, for the anxiety to subside.

If you find that these difficulties persist, it is worth speaking to a student counsellor about your concerns. They will be familiar with such responses and may be able to help you to find a solution that fits your personal circumstances.

Developing good critical thinking skills can take patience and application. On the other hand, the rewards lie in improved abilities in making judgements, seeing more easily through flawed reasoning, making choices from a more informed position and improving your ability to influence others.

Having undertaken an initial personal evaluation of your critical thinking skills, you may now wish to follow up the priorities you identified. This is a particularly useful approach if you have already worked on your critical thinking skills. If you are new to critical thinking, you may find it useful to progress directly to Chapter 2 in order to test, and practise, your underlying thinking skills. Alternatively, proceed now to Chapter 3 and work through the chapters in turn, to develop a systematic approach to enhancing your critical thinking abilities.
abstracts, using, 110
academic writing, 48, 107, 109, 131, 144, 147, 148–9, 152
see also essays; writing critically
accuracy, 5, 6, 9, 48, 134, 299, 152
see also precision
agreement, 46
ambiguity, 8, 36
analogy, 96–7, 294, 201, 272
analysis, critical, 1, 4, 8, 45, 48, 52, 54, 101, 137, 148
use analysis rather than description, 52, 185
when writing, 147–62, 164–6
see also argument, identifying; comparison; categorising; selection; evidence, evaluating; selection
argument, xiv, 34, 46
arguments as reasons, 34
contributing arguments, 34
counter arguments, 53–4, 59, 101, 149, 155–6, 163, 175, 181, 182, 183, 240, 241, 258, 260
features, 33, 34, 36, 37, 43, 57, 236
flawed arguments, 89, 90–105, 176
identifying arguments, 33, 37–9, 43, 45–55
implicit arguments, 73, 81, 292
and non-argument 45, 48–55, 282
overall argument, xiv, 34
and theoretical perspective, 131, 132
see also structuring an argument
‘winning’ an argument, 10
assertions, xiv
assumptions, 73–8, 87, 249, 250
ideological, 81, 292
implicit assumptions, 76–7
unsupported, 81, 83, 90, 91, 96, 100, 270, 271
used as reasons, 77–8, 289–90
attention, focusing, 1, 17, 23–6, 29, 45, 277
to detail, 5, 12, 13–15, 17
audience, x, 148
authenticity, 112, 297
author, xii
author’s position, 34–5, 36, 280, 46, 57, 58, 59, 72, 283–4, 96, 163, 175, 181, 182, 183, 240
dealing with evidence against, 163

background information, necessary and unnecessary, 177, 240, 258, 259, 269
see also description
barriers to critical thinking, 1, 10–12, 16
benefits of critical thinking skills, 4
career planning and critical thinking, 211–8
castle of cards, 100, 271
categorising, 17, 19, 27–8, 133
grouping points, 149
reasons and arguments, 299, 182
theories, 123, 132, 133, 299
cause and effect, 90–2, 105, 294, 271
citations 167
see also references
clarity in critical thinking, 58, 59, 148
close reading, 20, 29–31, 129
comparisons, making, 18, 21, 24, 27, 96
complicity, with the reader, 98, 250, 251, 272
conclusions, xiv, 37, 42, 43
as deduction, 42, 68, 175
evidence-based, 115–6, 175, 177, 181, 184, 158–61
interim, see intermediate
location of, 39, 41–3
logical conclusions, 68, 242, 261
see also deduction
as reasons, see conclusions, intermediate
as summaries, 42, 43, 54, 68, 286, 241, 242, 261
supported by reasons, 240
tentative conclusions 159
writing conclusions, 156–7, 160, 162, 166, 167, 176
connoted meanings, 83–4, 86
consistency
checking your own writing for, 185
internal, xii, xiv, 59–60, 283–4, 175, 177, 270–2
logical, xii, xiv, 61–2
contributing arguments, see argument
correlation, 91–2
counter arguments, see argument
credible sources, 176
critical reflection, see reflection
critical thinking
in academic contexts, 7–9, 11, 12
as cognitive activity, 1
as process, 2, 16
what is critical thinking, viii, 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9
why it matters, ix, 4
criticism
of peers, 8–9
what is criticism, 2
currency, 113
deduction, 42, 43, 68
and unwarranted leaps, 100
deflection, of the reader, 98, 251, 270
denoted meanings, 83–4, 86
description, 48, 54, 55, 175, 240, 259
  identifying background information, 38–9, 45, 52, 53, 54
difference, identifying, 24
disagreement, 46, 47
distortions to argument, 175, 181, 185

emotion, and critical thinking, 1, 5, 11
emotive language, 101, 176, 248, 250, 270
employability and critical thinking, 211–28
  when looking for a job, 217–8
  applying for jobs, 219–22, 226
  understanding employers’ needs, 219–23, 226
  demonstrating critical thinking to employers, 225
  critical self-evaluation of job applications, 226–8
  using the person specification, 219, 226
  where job applicants go wrong, 222, 302–3
essays, 3, 152, 161–7, 209
  see also academic writing; writing critically
evidence, 107–27, 297
  evaluating the evidence, 3, 8, 9, 107, 109, 110, 126, 127, 299
  interpreting evidence, 6
  reputable sources, 111
  selecting evidence, 114–16
  using supporting evidence, 175, 176–7, 181, 182, 185, 240, 249, 250
  see also primary sources; secondary sources; triangulation
  exclusion, 98
explanation, 49, 53, 54, 55
extraneous material, 52
eye-witness testimony, 124

facts, 123, 185
false analogies, 96–7, 250, 272, 294
false correlations, 91–92
false premises, 38, 73, 79–80, 270, 291
features of an argument, see argument flawed arguments, see argument
following directions, 19
frames of reference, 23

generalisations, 121, 176

identifying arguments, see arguments
influences on judgement, 6
in-groups, 98
interim conclusions, see conclusions, intermediate
  intermediate conclusions, see conclusions
  introductions, for critical writing, 150, 164
jobs, see employability; reflection and critical thinking;
  career planning
journal articles as evidence, 111
  notes from, 139
  references from, 145
judgements, making critical, 165, 206

key features of an argument, see argument, features

latent messages, 84
line of reasoning, see reasoning
literature searches, 110
  on-line, 110, 241
  writing up, 152
  see also primary source; secondary source
logical conclusions, 68–9, 286
logical order, 57, 70–1, 72, 149, 175, 177, 181, 283, 287
  see also sequencing

misrepresentation, 103, 249, 270

necessary conditions, meeting, 93–5, 249, 272 295–6
non-sequitors, 76,
ote-making, 129, 146
  to support reading, 135
  selecting what to note, 140–143
  structuring notes, 137–9
  why make notes, 135
  see also references, quotations

objectivity, 5
opinion, 123
out-groups, 98

personal attacks, 9, 101, 249, 272
personal strategies, 6, 9, 12
personality and critical thinking, 2
persuasion
  and audience, 43, 46, 96, 147, 148
  through flawed argument, see argument, flawed
  through reasons, 36, 43, 46
  through latent methods, 73, 81, 87, 98
  see also presenting an argument
plagiarism, 146, 168
  see also references
position, see author’s position
precision, 5, 6, 8, 10, 59, 249, 269
predicate, xiv, 38, 79
premises, xiv, 38, 79
  see also false premises
presenting an argument, 2, 3, 4, 9, 14–15, 23, 46, 72
  see also line of reasoning; persuasion; writing critically
priorities for developing critical thinking, 13–17
probability, levels of, 119, 120, 121, 185
professional life, and critical thinking, 4, 8, 17, 107, 190, 211–16, 218, 223–4
propositions, 37, 38, 39, 43

quotations, choosing, 136
  see also quotations; references
Index

reading
  and accurate interpretation, 134, 152, 299
  close reading, 29–31, 134, 163
critically, 2, 4, 129, 163
efficiently, 33, 45, 57, 129, 135
information for job applications, 217–9, 222
  selectively, 133, 136
  see also note-making
reasoning, 3
  line of reasoning, xiv, 43, 46, 81, 104, 153–4, 158, 177, 184
  see also logical order
reasons, xv, 3, 167, 173
  and implicit assumptions, 77
  independent and joint, 63
  intermediate conclusions as reasons, 65–6
  supporting the conclusion, xiv, xv, 38–9, 53–54, 63, 65, 289–91, 93–4, 184, 280–1
references, 152, 167–8, 184, 185
  using other people’s, 109
  to other people’s work, 114, 136, 144–5, 152, 175, 180, 181
  poor referencing, 249, 250, 269, 271, 273
  see also quotations
reflection and critical thinking, xiii
  good and bad, 207–8
career planning, 211–16, 218
  characteristics of, 188–9, 198
  experience, 188, 189, 207
transformative role, 188, 189, 201
  and theory, 189, 194, 195, 207, 209
  and professional practice, 190, 205–6, 211, 223–4
  approaches to (methodology), 191–7
  audience, 193, 195, 208
  models of, 192, 195, 201–4
  confidentiality, 195
  phases of reflection, 198–200
  relevance to the argument, 3, 4, 45, 115, 116, 175, 181, 184, 259
  see also selection
  see also barriers; self-awareness; self-evaluation
  replication, 113
reputable sources, see evidence
research skills, 5, 7
salient characteristics, 27, 48
samples
  representative, 117–8
  significance, 120–2
scepticism, 2, 9
  selection, 8, 114, 133, 140–3, 148
  see also relevance
self-awareness and critical thinking, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10
  see also barriers; reflection and critical thinking
self-evaluation, 4, 6, 10, 13–15, 18–22, 214–5, 226–8
  sequencing, 18, 25–6
  in critical writing, 149
  see also logical order
signal words, 4, 6, 147, 149, 153–8, 181–3, 241, 258–62
signposting, 149
  see also line of reasoning; signal words
similarities, recognising, 21
skills associated with critical thinking, 4, 5, 17
  see also primary sources
sleight of hand, 100, 184
stereotyping, 84–5, 250, 270, 293,
  structure of an argument, 57, 89, 147
  using intermediate conclusions, 65–6
  when writing, 148–9, 175, 176–7, 181, 184, 258
  see also signal words
substantive points, xv
sufficient conditions, meeting, 94–5, 272, 295–6
summary, 53–4
  conclusions, 42
  similarity to argument, 49
  summarising the argument, 177, 184, 258
synthesis, 166, 198
tautology, 104, 251, 269
theoretical perspective, 131
  theory and argument, 132, 183
types of theory, 133
  using when writing, 185
triangulation, 124, 125–6
two wrongs don’t make a right, 104
unwarranted leaps, 100, 249, 251, 270
validity, 112
value judgements, 48
  and own prejudices, 6, 13
variables, 112
  controlling for, 122, 297
vested interest, 36, 46, 113, 176, 182
writing critically, 147, 168
  and audience, 74, 147, 148
  characteristics of, 148–9
  evaluating critical writing, 171–86, 235–73
  evaluating your own writing critically, 184–5, 186
  introducing the line of reasoning, 153
  setting the scene for the reader, 74, 147, 150–1, 169, 258
  signalling the direction of the argument, 154–8, 258
tentative style, 159
  see also author’s position; consistency; line of reasoning; signposting