

# Critical analysis

- [What is critical analysis?](#)
- [How do we think critically?](#)
- [Key terms](#)
- [Asking questions](#)
- [The big picture](#)
- [Argument and evidence](#)
- [Style](#)
- [Answering questions](#)
- [Useful resources](#)

## What is critical analysis?

This is a central process in all academic work. It involves thinking critically, which is applying rational and logical thinking to deconstructing the texts you read (and write) at university.

Browne and Keeley (2001, p.2) define critical thinking as:

1. awareness of a set of interrelated critical questions
2. the ability to ask and answer critical questions at appropriate times
3. desire to actively use the critical questions.

## How do we think critically?

When we think critically we are being active; we are not passively accepting everything we read and hear, but questioning, evaluating, making judgements, finding connections and categorising. It means being open to other points of view and not being blinded by our own biases.

Critical thinking is useful for most activities associated with tertiary study, such as forming judgements in lectures, tutorials and when reading, writing essays and assignments, making decisions and developing arguments.

Critical thinking involves various processes in the disciplines:

**Science and technology:** asking questions, identifying problems, describing, predicting, analysing, categorising, establishing cause and effect.

**Arts and social sciences, commerce:** asking questions, identifying problems and solutions, relating theory to practice, stating an argument and supporting it with evidence, making comparisons, evaluating.

## Key terms

From: Windschuttle, K & Elliot, E 1999, *Writing, researching, communicating: communication skills for the information age*, 3rd ed, McGraw-Hill, Sydney.

**Logic** – the study of correct and incorrect reasoning and the application of correct reasoning.

**Argument** – a group of statements or premises leading to a conclusion. If the premises are false or if the argument is invalid, the conclusion is likely to be incorrect.

**Premise** – a beginning statement of an argument.

**Deductive argument** – one that arrives at a conclusion that is inherent in the premises. These arguments are either valid or invalid according to the correctness of the logic.

**Inductive argument** – one that examines the real world to find evidence towards a conclusion. (These are what are mostly used in writing essays in the Arts and Social Sciences). Such arguments should be assessed according to whether they are weak or strong.

## Asking questions

Asking questions - and then answering them - is a central skill for critical analysis.

Start firstly by asking questions that relate to the context and the 'big picture' of a text. Then ask questions about the author's argument and the evidence provided to support it. You should also consider the style of writing and how it affects the clarity with which the author's argument is presented.

These points are explained in the sections that follow.

## The big picture

These questions help to you identify the significance of a text:

- What is this author saying? (What is his/her argument?) Try to put this into your own words.
- What are the main points of this text? Highlight these or note them down.
- What is the quality of the evidence?
- Who is the author and when was this written?
- Was it written in response to another text? Is this a new piece of research?
- What is the author's standpoint and what are the underlying values in this text?
- Is this a significant work in its field?

## Argument and evidence

These questions help you to judge the validity of the argument or the author's point of view:

- Examine the conclusion carefully and ask: is this the correct conclusion from the points made in the argument?
- Is every point relevant? Does one point lead logically to the next? (This is a way of checking whether it flows logically.)
- Which parts do I agree with and why?
- Which parts do I disagree with and why?
- What are the strengths of this text?
- What are the weaknesses?
- What assumptions does the author make?
- Do I agree or disagree with these?
- What has been left out and is this significant? Why?

## Style

These questions help you to examine how the language and the style of writing used can contribute to how clearly (or not) the author conveys the argument/point of view in a text:

- Is the argument clearly expressed? Is it written in plain language or language that obscures?
- Is the aim of the text clearly expressed in the introduction?
- What is the quality of the evidence?
- Is there a clear conclusion?
- Are any words and phrases ambiguous?

## Answering questions

In answering the questions you have posed about a text you will develop a body of useful insights and knowledge about it. You can then use this information in discussions, in tutorials, in your thinking and decision making, and in your academic writing. This is how people develop critiques of articles, reviews of texts and appear to be very knowledgeable! Try it!

## Useful resources

Browne, M & Keeley, S 2001, *Asking the right questions: a guide to critical thinking*, 6th edn, Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River, N.J.

Windschuttle, K & Eliot, E 1999, *Writing, researching, communicating: communication skills for the information age*, 3rd ed, McGraw-Hill, Sydney.