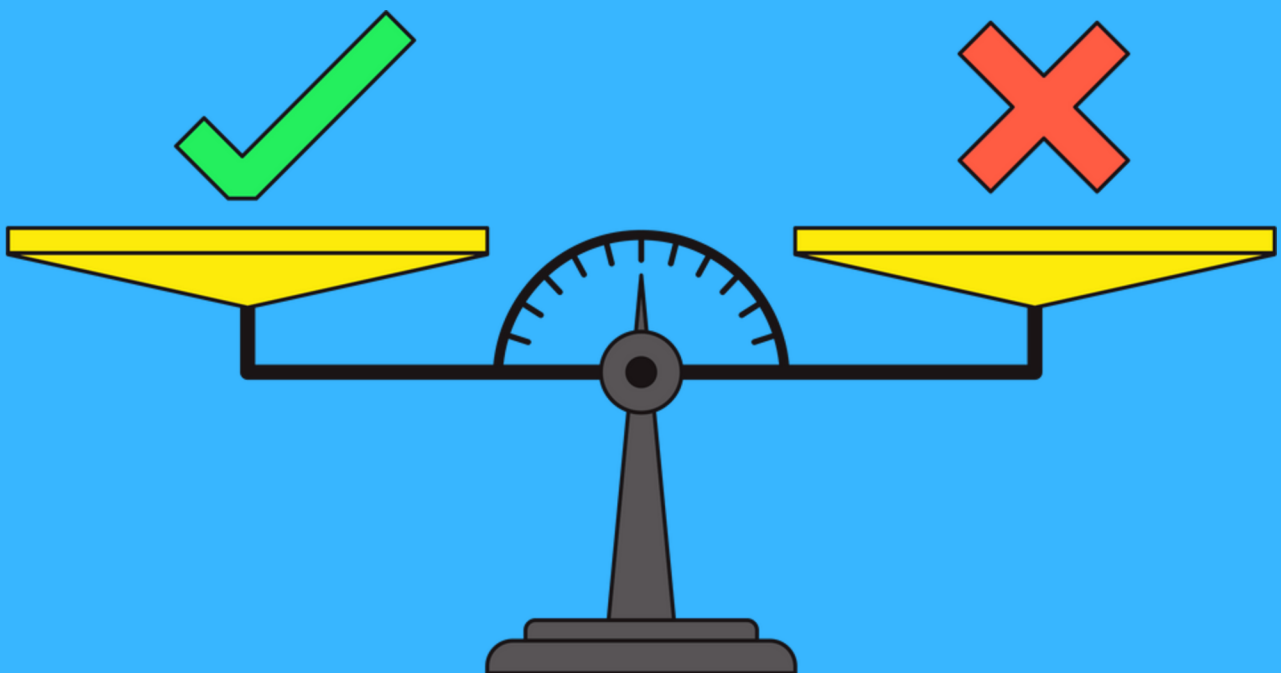


E-GUIDE

CRITICALITY

THINKING
ANALYSING
REFLECTING



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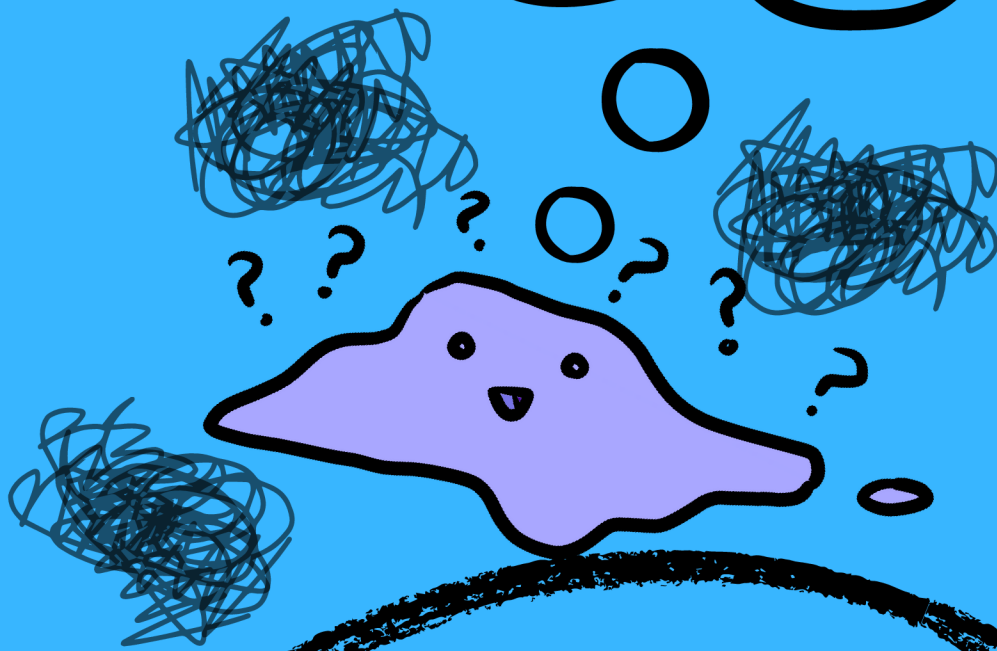
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Introduction

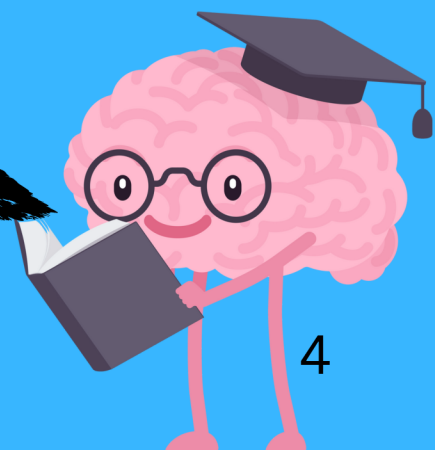
This easy-to-read guide has been created to help you understand what Criticality is and how you can use it to improve your academic thinking and writing.

This guide should *not* be referenced in your assignments. However, you can find a handy selection of academic resources in the Reference List and Bibliography.

What is Criticality?



Criticality is often confused with negativity. But criticality isn't just about positive vs negative. It's about considering **different perspectives** of the same topic and can include where those perspectives **overlap**.



Criticality, cont.

You might find yourself asking;

Why is developing Criticality important?

Aside from Criticality being a great life skill to have, it's also a skill you need as a student.

Criticality is proof that:

- You think independently in a deep and meaningful way.
- You question assumptions and don't just accept information as it is.
- You understand the topic and surrounding research.
- You form your own judgments and perspectives without parroting what other people say.
- You are objective and consider different points of view; biases, gaps in research and the strength of the *source* of the evidence as well as the strength of the *evidence itself*.
- You can build a strong argument.
- You can meet the academic expectations required at this level of study.

Criticality, cont.

It's really important to remember -
Criticality is NOT Description

Description asks us to recall information like a list:

- **Who** was involved?
- **What** happened?
- **When** did it happen?
- **Where** did it happen?

Whereas **Criticality** asks us to examine:

- **Why** did it happen? Why did I/they behave/react that way? Why does the event/research/opinion matter?
- **How** did it happen? How did I/they react? How could things have been done differently? How would it have made a difference?
- **What if** this happened/didn't happen? What if I'd acted differently? What if I'd tried a different technique/method?
- **What next?**

Criticality, cont.

However...

we can adapt descriptive questions to make them critical!

We can do this by thinking about *how* we're applying the question, and we can *add another question* connected to the thought process to make it critical, e.g.;

Who?

Who conducted the research **AND** are they an authority figure on this topic? Who funds their research **AND** why did they fund it?

Who published this research **AND** why? Who is impacted by this research being done **AND** why does it matter that they're impacted?

What?

What was the purpose of the research **AND** why was the research topic chosen **AND** how recent was the the research conducted?

What biases do I have **AND** how might/did this impact my research?

Criticality, cont.

When?

When was the research conducted **AND** is it up-to-date **AND** did the sociopolitical environment at the time have any impact on the research and its findings?

Where?

Where was the research conducted/Where did the event happen **AND** how did this influence the research/event? Where are my research participants from **AND** what is their socio-economic/political/religious/cultural background **AND** why might this impact my research data and findings?

These are just a few examples - *why not try making your own?* Asking critical questions like this help to provide **context** and **meaning** which allow you to **synthesise the information** you find into a series of **cohesive ideas** in your assignments.

Criticality, cont.



Example:

Imagine you're writing an essay on Carbon Footprint [CF].

You could research **Who** has the lowest CF in the world? **What** is CF? **When** was the phrase CF founded? **Where** does CF come from?

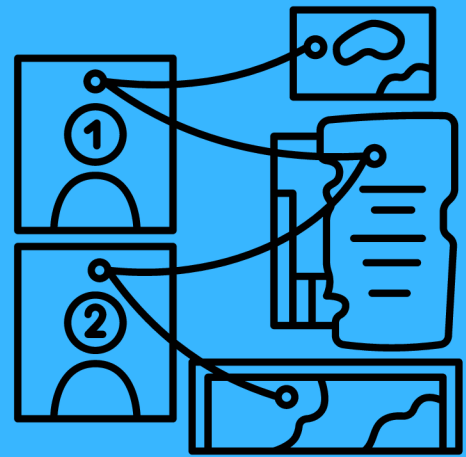
But these are... descriptive questions! The answers to these create a list of information. Now, we have to think of critical questions to find the answers to.

Who created the phrase CF **AND why** did they create it? **How** is CF calculated **AND why** does it matter? **How** are lesser-economically-developed countries affected by CF in comparison to richer ones **AND why** does this matter **AND what** can be done to change this? **Who** contributes the most to global CF rates **AND what** can be done to reduce their CF?

Top Tip: Search for the answers to the questions on this page to practice descriptive vs critical thinking. Use the new information you find to create further critical questions.



Critical Thinking



‘If we are uncritical we shall always find what we want [...] and not see whatever might be dangerous to our pet theories.’ (Popper, 1957, In: Chatfield, 2022:6)

Uncritical Thinking: Taking information at face-value. Believing new information without question of its truthfulness, accuracy or reasonability.

Critical Thinking: Being an active thinker i.e. choosing to think, thinking about the process of thinking. Being objective and using reasoning and evidence to evaluate the information you find or are given.

Adapted from: (Chatfield, 2022:7 - 11)

[Click here to watch a short video of Dr Tom Chatfield explaining Critical Thinking.](#)

(Sage Students, 2022: 00:00 - 04:09)

Critical Thinking, cont.

Critical thinking is a process that requires curiosity, openness, self-awareness, scepticism and objectivity.

Curiosity: Having interest in knowing. Wanting to find out more.

Openness: Considering multiple points-of-view. Being prepared to discover information/opinions you haven't considered or may disagree with.

Self-awareness: Knowing the reasons for your decisions; beliefs and actions. Checking that your reasons and assumptions are logical, and if not, taking action to challenge them.

Scepticism: Question everything, *politely*. Using doubt as a tool to see that the information you're given isn't the full picture, so whilst some things might be true, there may be other things to take into consideration.

Objectivity: Understanding, from a neutral perspective. Analysing the information you've found to make a decision about it without letting your personal thoughts and feelings influence your decision.

Critical Analysis

‘Analysis: The study of the parts of an intellectual or material whole and their interrelationships in making up a whole.’ (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2006, In: Chafee, 2019:556).

Let’s use this slice of cake to understand analysis:

- What parts to the cake are there?
- Look at each part, what can you find out about them?
- How do they work together?

Part: Strawberries.
About it: Fresh fruit, sweet but slightly tart, grown in a patch, seasonal.
What does it do: Adds a different texture/flavour to the cake and makes it so the cake has to be eaten while they’re still fresh.

Part: Sponge cake.
About it: Made of sugar, butter, and self-raising flour.
What does it do: Adds structure to the cake, compensating for softer ingredients.



Part: Buttercream frosting/filling. **About it:** Made of butter, icing sugar, and a small amount of vanilla extract. **What does it do:** Adds sweetness and sticks the cake layers and fruit together.



Examining the parts that make up each section of the cake and also the relationships between each part of the cake = analysis.

Critical Analysis, cont.

Let's make that analysis *critical*.

Looking back at the Criticality questions on pages 6 - 9, what questions can we ask about this cake, its parts, and how they interrelate?

Why? Why did the baker pick these components? Why do these flavours go well together? Why this cake and not a different one? Why did the baker use fresh strawberries instead of jam?

How? How was the sponge cake made? How much time it take to make the cake and why does that matter?

What if? What if the baker used a different flour? Would that change how the icing and strawberries interrelate with the sponge? What if the icing was a different flavour?

What next? What happens after the cake is eaten and there's none left?

Can it be reproduced? Will a reproduction be exactly the same as the first cake? Is there a better way of making a cake? What is it?



Critical Analysis, cont.

In Academic Context

The situation:

You have an assignment which requires critical analysis.

The theme/argument:

You've identified the main theme/argument of your assignment.

The Research:

You've done your reading and secondary research, and you've identified appropriate sources to cite.

The Critical Analysis:

Analyse the information found in your secondary research and break it down to find the reasons behind it and the impact of it. Then ask critical questions about how these pieces of secondary research **connect** and **interact** to create a larger picture.



When done well, Critical Analysis includes related issues or circumstances that might not have been considered by the researcher, and/or criticisms by other voices of authority about the actions taken.

Critical Reflection

Reflection is about consciously thinking about your actions, thoughts and feelings in a given circumstance. Reflection can happen while the action is happening or after it.

Critical Reflection takes it a step further and requires us to examine the reasons behind our actions, thoughts and feelings; and to take full ownership of the positive and negative impact/s they had on ourselves, on others, and on the situation. After reflecting, it requires us to use this new understanding to change our actions in the future to create better outcomes.

For Academic purposes, critical reflection requires us to relate our experiences to theory.



Critical Reflection can be difficult to do because you're critically analysing your actions, beliefs and feelings. However, that **doesn't mean** the critical reflection is a criticism of you as a person. Critical reflection asks us to be really honest about what we did/how we felt in a particular situation, why that might have been, and what we can do in the future to change. It is a tool for improvement, not judgment.

Critical Reflection

The Stages of Critical Reflection

Adapted from: (Cottrell, 2023:203-210)

Selection

Don't pick the whole experience. You probably won't have the time; word count or sustained energy to go into enough depth. Instead, pick one or two areas of experience to focus on.

Changing Perspective

Think back to the sequence of events. What actions did you take, or what feelings did you experience, that seemed insignificant at the time of the event but with hindsight it was important. Identify why it was important, and if there are any themes or patterns to your actions, thoughts and feelings **[ATFs]**. Was there anything influencing how you acted/behaved/felt, e.g. political or social influence?

Compare your experiences to published theories and research - do your experiences support or contradict them?

Critical Reflection, cont.

The Stages of Critical Reflection, cont.

Adapted from: (Cottrell, 2023:203-210)

Returning to Experience

When reflecting critically on your experience/s, you can focus on:

- **A significant, one-off incident** - do all the analysis on one situation to improve your understanding of your ATFs, and what you could do to change in future similar situations; **OR**
- **A recurrent situation** - a repeated event where you would reflect after each experience. This is so you can build a record of observations over a longer period of time and identify patterns or themes to your ATFs; **OR**
- **A particular issue or theme** - in regular intervals, return to a particular issue or theme that happens often so you can identify patterns in your ATFs; **OR**
- **A particular project or challenge** - Throughout the projects duration, record observations of your ATFs in relation to the experiences you have with/in the project. Analyse these observations to make conclusions about your role, your ATFs and the reasons for these. Consider the impact of these on the project, on yourself/others and future actions you could take to better these.

Critical Reflection, cont.

The Stages of Critical Reflection, cont.

Adapted from: (Cottrell, 2023:203-210)

Analysis of your own role

Focus on analysing **your** ATFs and the deeper reasons and meanings of them, e.g. assumptions, unfounded fears, personal biases; and whether these had a positive or negative influence and impact on the situation. Identify and analyse any changes to these over time.

Drawing on received wisdom

Connect and relate your experiences to theory by:

- selecting an area of your experience to focus on based on if there's suitable published research on this issue. These could be established or new theories in your subject/profession, and could include support or criticism. Consider whether;
 1. Your experiences support or contradict these theories.
 2. The theories support or contradict your experiences.
- using reputable and suitable resources to illuminate an area of your ATFs that you've identified as something you struggle with, for example, if you have issues with getting distracted easily, theories on focus and attention span could help you improve this. Consider;
 - 1). What has happened and why?
 - 2). Why you ATF the way you do and the impact of this?
 - 3). How wider issues impact you and everything around you.
 - 4). How you could ATF differently and how this could create a 18 different outcome.

Critical Reflection, cont.

The Stages of Critical Reflection, cont.

Adapted from: (Cottrell, 2023:203-210)

Deepening your understanding

Actively look for meaning in your raw experiences with total honesty and examine your role within these experiences. Identify your significant ATFs in the experience/s - these are your key insights. Use them to learn from the experience.

Using insights to effect change

The end-goal of critical reflection is to transform your outlook on yourself, your experiences, the world and the people in it by taking action to act and think differently in ways informed by your reflection and analysis of your experience/s.



Critical Reflection is not meant to be easy but *it* is meant to be honest. By taking full ownership and responsibility for your actions, contributions and influences on events and other people; you can find ways, supported by theory, to change and improve your personal and professional practice.

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