



Critical Thinking – an Introduction

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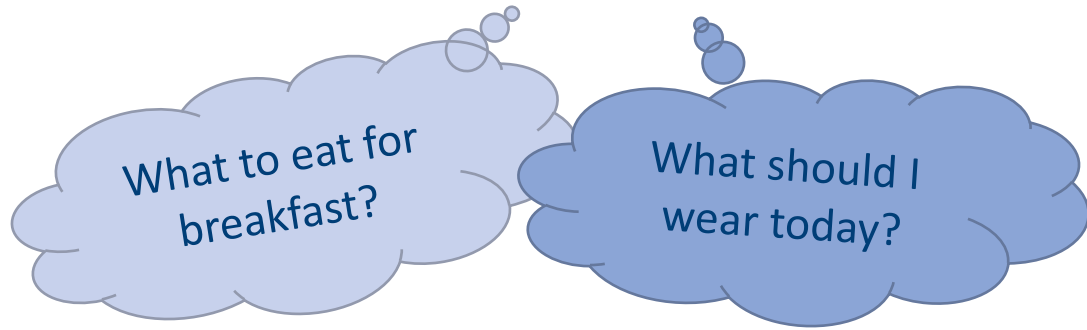
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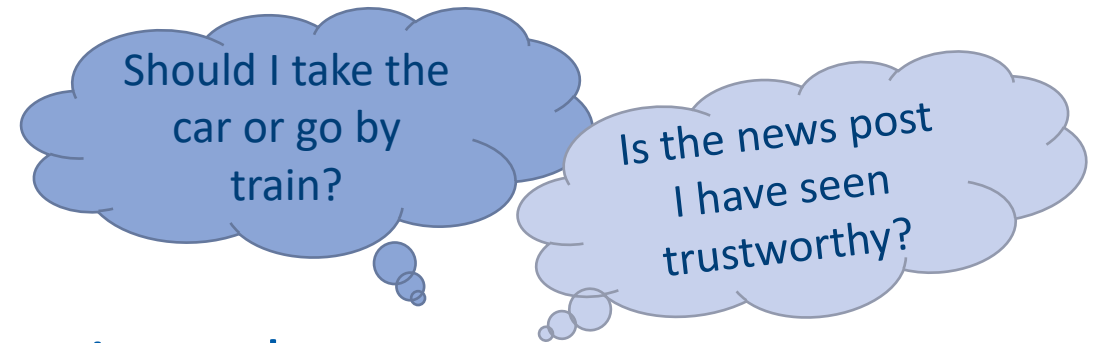


1. What is Critical Thinking?

Every adult human makes around 35,000 decisions each day...
... some decisions are simple and straightforward...



... others are more complex and require more deliberation...



... and this is where Critical Thinking comes into play.



1. What is Critical Thinking?

“Critical thinking is the ability to make clear, reasoned judgments based on interpreting, understanding, applying and synthesising evidence’ using the information you have gathered.”

Burns and Sinfield 2022, p.92



Moskovkina, N. (2026)(CC BY-SA 4.0)



1. What is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking depends on reasoning and logical decision making.

Critical Thinking includes:

- Healthy scepticism about information and its origins,
- Being open to new ideas and perspectives,
- Asking questions and actively seeking additional information,
- Understanding your own biases,
- Making decisions with logic instead of emotions,
- Following the evidence to a rational conclusion

Critical Thinking is not an ability we are born with. We learn as we gain knowledge and experience, honing it as a tool to make sound judgments.



2. Critical Thinking Examples

Here is an example for Critical Thinking:

You read a social media post on high unemployment rates in your city. The post states that too many people are too lazy to work real jobs and are happy to live off the government welfare programme.

You could accept this post at face value and adopt its narrative (unemployed people are lazy, the government welfare is too comfortable).

Or you could challenge those assumptions, check where that post comes from and if it might push a certain agenda, check what sources have been used (if any) to back those assumptions up, and consider the complexity of the issue, like a lack of training or qualification or underlying health issues contributing to the unemployment.



2. Critical Thinking Examples

Critical Thinkers...	Non-Critical Thinkers...
... understand that most situations have nuance and complexity and require consideration.	... see things as black and white and fail to recognise nuances.
... recognise patterns and links between ideas and opinions.	... have difficulties seeing the patterns and connections between ideas and opinions.
... do not accept easy „yes“ or „no“ answers, searching for the complex layers of an answer.	... are more comfortable accepting a simple „yes“ or „no“ answer without digging deeper.
... can adapt different points of view and see their validity.	... view their own point of view as the only valid one.
... seek information that challenges their belief system.	... seek information that confirms and reinforces their belief system.

Critical thinking leads to better decision-making and a deeper understanding of yourself and the world around you. Employers also value critical thinking skills, since they allow employees to solve everyday problems more independently.



Practising the following habits will help you to develop your Critical Thinking skills:

- Do not accept information at face value. Reject assumptions without investigating where they come from and how reliable the information is.
- Gain more knowledge and widen your horizon. The more you know, the more resources you have at your disposal.
- Instead of blindly dismissing/accepting ideas that don't/do support your own beliefs, ask more questions about them. Unjustified claims usually do not withstand scrutiny and questioning.



3. Critical Thinking Process

“Critical thinking requires us to use our imagination, seeing things from perspectives other than our own and envisioning the likely consequences of our position.”

Hooks 2009



Bell Hooks, Wikimedia.org. (2014)(CC BY-SA 4.0)



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Critical Thinking is a multi-step process. Sometimes, it is automatic and subconscious, and sometimes it is a more deliberate process where one has to go actively through each step:



Step 1 – Identify the problem

Step 2 – Gather relevant information

Step 3 – Analyse your findings

Step 4 – Determine what is most important

Step 5 – Consider different points of view

Step 6 – Draw your conclusions

Step 7 – Reflect on the process



Step 1 – Identify the problem

Before you can solve any problem, you need to know and clearly understand it. The following questions will help you to define the problem, issue or situation:

- What is the situation as I understand it?
- What is asked of me?
- What do certain words (e.g. a task in an assignment) mean?
- Is this the real problem, or is it part of a larger issue?
- What are the core issues that need to be addressed?



Step 1 – Identify the problem

The „Close Reading“ technique as a tool to identify the problem:

Paul & Elder (2003) described five levels of Close Reading and Substantive Writing as essential foundations to identify problems and think critically.

- Level 1 – Paraphrasing – accurately translate the author’s wording into your own words;
- Level 2 – Explicating – elaborate, exemplify, and illustrate the thesis of a text;
- Level 3 – Analysis – identify the author’s intent and the most significant information in a text;
- Level 4 – Evaluation – assess the text using standards as clarity, precision, significance, depth, breadth, logic, and fairness;
- Level 5 – Role-Playing – put yourself in the author’s shoes and his context.

Levels 1 and 2 are part of the first step of the Critical Thinking process.



Step 2 – Gather relevant information

Search for relevant information from credible sources that will help you make an informed decision or solve the given problem, e.g.:

- Academic textbooks;
- Lecture notes;
- Peer-reviewed articles in scientific journals;
- Statistical data & empirical evidence;
- International NGO reports (e.g. from U.N. bodies);
- Trustworthy online resources;
- Expert advice.



Step 3 – Analyse your findings

Analyse the gathered information carefully and methodically. Read and understand the information you found. This includes:

- Separating fact and opinion (Is the information provable? Is there a bias?);
- Examine the source of the information (Is the source trustworthy? Does the source have a special interest?);
- Consider the age of the information (Is the information outdated? Are there new best practices available?).



Step 4 – Determine what is most important

Sort and rank the information based on its importance to your specific situation. Questions to ask yourself are:

- Which information is most significant for the situation?
- What resources will be most helpful in the decision-making?
- What information can be discarded as irrelevant?



Step 5 – Consider different points of view

Now stop and consider other points of view, even if you do not agree with them.

Think about your preferred solution / opinion from an opposing perspective and try to identify gaps and problems.

Do not dismiss different opinions outright, analyse and weigh them and check their validity.



Step 6 – Draw your conclusions

After analysing and weighing all the information you gathered, and after looking at the problem from different points of view, draw your conclusions and identify your justified opinion / solution.

In an academic context (e.g. writing a thesis) as well as in a community engagement setting (e.g. running a local project), you now have to communicate your findings – explaining, in detail, how you arrived at your conclusion, elaborating on different points of view and considering all relevant sources. This shows the validity of your solution and minimizes misunderstandings and confusion.



Step 7 – Reflect on the process

Take some time for reflection and consider these questions:

- What went well?
- Which part of the process was the most challenging one?
- What would you do differently next time?
- What part of the process could be improved and how?

Using self-reflection and feedback from others can strengthen your Critical Thinking skills.



- Critical Thinking benefits you in a variety of ways. Improved decision-making skills will lead to better work and life outcomes.
- Critical Thinking is not an innate ability, but a skill that needs to be trained.
- Critical Thinking relies on logic and reason instead of emotions.
- If you find yourself failing to fact-check, acting purely on emotion, or dismissing other points of view out of hand, take a step back. Could you approach the issue again through a more critical lens?
- The Critical Thinking process focuses on finding logical and effective solutions. Following all seven steps intentionally can strengthen your Critical Thinking skills and help you making more informed decisions.



Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2022) Essential Study Skills: The Complete Guide to Success at University. 5th Ed. London. Sage

Hooks, B. (2009) Teaching Critical Thinking – Practical Wisdom. Taylor & Francis

Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2006) Critical Thinking Reading & Writing Test – How to Assess Close reading and Substantive Writing. The Foundation for Critical Thinking.
www.criticalthinking.org

