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THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Developing critical thinking skills

Lecture Series
LEARNING TO LEARN:
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- what is critical thinking?
 - demonstrating critical thinking
 - strategies for critical writing
 - using evidence critically
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Defining critical thinking

Critical thinking has been defined in many different ways. Very broad definitions include 'thinking which has a purpose' or 'reflective judgement'.

Let's begin by reflecting on some approaches that critical thinkers may or may not take to problems and issues.

Read through the following statements and tick those you think may come from critical thinkers

1. “I hate talk shows where people just state their opinions but never give any reasons at all”
 2. “No matter how complex a problem, you can bet there will be a simple solution”
 3. “Just because information is in a textbook, doesn’t necessarily mean it can be trusted”
 4. “My views are probably shaped by the social and economic groups I belong to”
 5. “I hate it when teachers discuss problems instead of just giving the information”
 6. “Selling an idea is like selling cars, you say whatever works”
 7. “I like to think about whether someone’s views reflects the experience of all groups of people”
 8. “I question the authority of evidence before I accept it”
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The kind of thinking
which seeks to explore questions
about existing knowledge
for issues which are not clearly defined
and for which there are no clear-cut answers

Critical thinking involves developing skills in:

- **INTERPRETING:** understanding the significance of data and to clarify its meaning
 - **ANALYSING:** breaking information down and recombining it in different ways
 - **REASONING:** creating an argument through logical steps
 - **EVALUATING:** judging the worth, credibility or strength of accounts
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Why is critical thinking important at university?

- achieve better marks
 - become less dependent on teachers and textbooks
 - create knowledge
 - evaluate, challenge and change the structures in society
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3 important purposes of reading critically are:

- to provide evidence to back up or challenge a point of view
 - to evaluate the validity and importance of a text/ position
 - to develop reflective thought and a tolerance for ambiguity
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Strategies for reading critically

Ask Questions about:	For Example
your purpose	why?
the context of the text	why written? where? when? who? how relevant?
the structure of the text	Is there a clear argument? Do the parts fit together logically?
the arguments	are they fair? do they leave out perspectives of certain groups?
the evidence used	Is evidence given to support the point of view from an authority in this field? is the evidence evaluated from different perspectives?
the language used	Is the language coloured to present some things as more positive than others? Are claims attributed clearly?

Strategies for writing critical reviews

- select sections of the text (e.g. thesis/ methodology/ conclusion) which are open to question
 - comment (if possible from both a positive and negative perspective) on the section
 - draw on other sources to back up your comments
 - come to a conclusion on the overall worth/ validity etc of the original text
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Key instruction words for explicit critical responses include:

- Critically analyse / evaluate *recent reports...*
 - Comment on *the argument that...*
 - Review *the film ...*
 - Write a critical review *of the article...*
 - Critique ...
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At undergraduate level, critical writing typically refers to the **genre of the persuasive essay** in which a logical argument [to a stated position/ issue] is developed and presented.

Compare and contrast indigenous and western traditions of learning

Another difference between indigenous traditions of learning and the western academic tradition is in the area of access to knowledge. In the indigenous traditions, access to various kinds of knowledge is limited according to gender and according to whether elders judge you as responsible to use the knowledge wisely. In the Western academic tradition, access is, at least theoretically, open to everybody.

This is an example of critical writing where the writer has demonstrated critical thinking by opening up the possibility that an argument /evidence may be limited.

In what ways has Australia developed a positive relationship with Indonesia?

The Australian government argues that it has developed a good relationship with Indonesia over the last twenty-five years. It argues that its policies have led to improved political, economic and military cooperation between the two countries, to the benefit of both.

However, critical issues are: which sections of Australian society have cultivated these relations, and with which sections of Indonesian society, and who has actually benefited?

The professional role and status of pharmacists is under threat". Discuss.

While these factors have led to a fear that the professional role and status of pharmacists may be under threat, **this view does not take into account** the importance of consumers' support for pharmacy. Evidence for strong public appreciation for the role of the pharmacist can be found in Varnish's study on the public's perceptions of pharmacy as a profession¹. **Although some problems exist** in making generalisations from this study, **it presents strong evidence** that pharmacy is seen by consumers to fulfil the criteria necessary ...

that focus on issues raised include:

- Introduction to critical reading
 - Introduction to critical writing
 - Quoting, paraphrasing and summarising evidence
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Details of Learning Centre programs

can be found at:

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