



# Critical Thinking Skills

Developing Effective Analysis and Argument

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# 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

### 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.

# What is critical thinking?

## 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;
- *presenting a point of view* in a structured, clear, well-reasoned way that convinces others.

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.

## 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 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.

## 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 such 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.

