



Critical Thinking

Arguments, non-arguments and evidence

Critical thinking involves being able to identify, analyse and evaluate:

- The **overarching argument** or **thesis**
- **Contributing arguments** in support of the overarching argument, and the **evidence** upon which those arguments are based
- **Counter-arguments** that can be marshalled against the contributing arguments, and the **evidence** upon which those arguments are based
- **Non-arguments**: assertions that appear to support or undermine the overarching argument, but which, on closer inspection, cannot be considered true arguments

This applies both when you are critically evaluating the work of others and when you are producing your own work. As you progress with your studies, your analytical and evaluative skills will become more finely tuned, and it will get much easier to deploy these skills effectively. When starting out on your critical thinking journey, here are **three key points** to bear in mind:

Objectivity and balance: Try to be objective when evaluating your own, or other people's, work. This means looking at all sides of an issue (not just the side that 'feels right' to you). Try to list **all** of the arguments for and against a particular point of view.

Now consider whether they are truly arguments, or whether they are actually non-arguments (for example, statements of fact, assertions made without supporting evidence, descriptions, explanations, or summaries).

If they are arguments, what evidence are they based upon? Does the evidence stand up to scrutiny? Has the author (or have you) taken a balanced approach to gathering, analysing, presenting, and evaluating the evidence? Does the evidence lead logically to the argument presented, or could it be interpreted in other ways, or used to support a different argument?



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The quality of your sources: When analysing and evaluating arguments and the evidence offered in support of them, consider where they have come from. Who has made the argument or collected the evidence, and can you trust them? Which should you trust more: evidence published in an academic journal or evidence that shows in your Facebook feed? Why or why not? What about newspaper articles? Is there any possibility of bias or error? Good critical thinkers are always alert to the reliability and validity of the evidence that they scrutinise.

Reaching a conclusion: Don't be afraid to **question the conclusions of others** – classmates, lecturers, tutors, and the authors of the books, journal articles, and other learning materials that you encounter. Strong critical thinkers don't just accept the words of others without question.

When you are confident that you have fully analysed and evaluated the material under review, you should be ready to draw some inferences or reach some kind of logical conclusion of your own. This involves making a reasoned judgement about the strength of the various arguments that you have considered, and deciding whether they should stand, or are open to question.

It's OK to have an opinion – as long as it is an **informed opinion** and you can back it up by reference to the available evidence. Remember that you don't always have to come down on one side or the other of an argument. You may decide that further evidence or research is required, or that different perspectives have equal value or merit. In this situation, your conclusion might tease out some of the possible consequences of these different perspectives or approaches.

Further reading

Cottrell, Stella. 2011. *Critical thinking skills: developing effective analysis and argument*. (2nd edition)
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan