Developing a Critical Approach in Academic Context

What Does it Mean to be 'Critical' in an Academic Context?

The aim of this unit is to provide an insight into what academics mean when they require you to be 'critical' in your thinking, reading and writing and to explain why it matters in research at all levels.

What is a 'Critical' Approach and Why Does it Matter?

At university level, both undergraduate and postgraduate studies, you are supposed to demonstrate 'a critical approach' to your tutors, examiners and even your peers, but what exactly is it and how do you become 'critical' in your approach?

Critical academic inquiry can be a rather abstract concept to try to put into practice. The process of academic thinking in itself takes practice and time to develop. Most academics at least seem to agree that good critical thinking is a skill that comes through practice and that you will improve your critical reasoning skills through learning by doing. Being critical entails not only asking 'why' of the external world around you and all that you read, but also examining yourself and your own underpinning research philosophy. Thus, you need to be self-critical as well in order to demonstrate the required 'critical approach'. Although you need to show an awareness of yourself, you need also to try to maintain an open mind about other researchers' ideas until evidence indicates otherwise.

In fact, the ability to think, read and write critically is considered to be an essential part of higher education across all disciplines. At graduation, you are expected to have developed a 'critical and informed perspective' and the key skills required to this effect.

Learning to Think Critically

There is a great deal in the education literature about the role of teachers in developing students' abilities to think critically. Encouraging critical thinking is important to education in general because of its direct link to creativity. It is the process of critical thinking applied to thought processes and ideas that enables students to come up with a creative solution. Browne and Freeman (2000) suggest that critical thinking rests on the comprehension of the material in hand. They suggest that this can be done through the use of questioning as a systematic approach. Other writers disagree (Bailin et al., 1999). They suggest that critical thinking is not a procedure, or a process but an iterative activity. They comment that in the education literature, critical thinking is referred to as a cognitive skill and that this equates critical thinking with mental processes and procedures, which can be improved with practice. As you read about, think and discuss your chosen topic, you will become more skilful at analyzing the

arguments and evidence put forward by others and giving your own informed opinion.

From Criticism to Appraisal
Since you have previously studied literature, you may be used to pulling text apart or deconstructing it in order to demonstrate that you can discern meaning and engage in literary criticism. It is quite common in undergraduate programmes to analyse the construction and use of argument. If you have developed skills in one or more of these areas, they will be useful to you. Thinking and research methods give a particular meaning to the idea of 'critique' or critical thinking. The expectation now and further at postgraduate level is that any person's work can be challenged, but it is the way that you challenge it that is the key.

Critical Reading
Critical reading skills are essential to successful study in universities and beyond into your professional lives. In order to get decent marks and to learn from your reading, you need to develop the ability to read effectively, to work out the author's or authors' intentions, and to extract the essential meaning.

Becoming a critical reader does not only mean to show the shortcomings of what you have read; you also need to be able to propose alternatives. Before you start reading, you really need to consider what your prime purpose is and check whether in fact the material, texts, journal articles and other secondary data you have collected will actually fulfil your purpose. Checking this early on will save time and keep your reading focused.

Because you have so much to read and time is always tight, it is really important to read efficiently. Most academic literature is not designed to be read sequentially (as in a novel) but selectively. This is especially true of textbooks. You are expected to skim read, to skip chapters that seem to be of no use to you, to use the index to find the relevant data, and to rely on chapter summaries and other shortcuts that occur to you to determine the most important parts. Journal articles are usually much more condensed and written in a much less discursive way than books, but you rarely need to read every word.

Taking Notes
The way you take notes is important, as later on they will form the basis for what you write in your research paper/dissertation, and you will not have time to keep going back to the original text because something is missing. There are two issues to think about before you start to write anything down: how you should format your note-taking to be of the greatest possible use to you when you come to use them, and how to make sure you do not end up being accused of plagiarism. If you are reading for general interest, you may like to start by asking yourself 'what, how and why' as you read. You could then form straightforward categories of notes under those headings. This will give you at least three different areas to guide your comments and may help to direct your thinking. Using these three headings, you can create your own comments on your reading, which can be supported by evidence. You will later need to transform your critical reading notes into an integrated critical written discussion.

If you are reading for a specific purpose, for example for an assignment or dissertation, then you can save yourself a lot of time by organizing your notes around the structure of the assignment, your main research objectives or into key themes, as you go along. For many people, this involves a completely different approach from note-taking. Many of us have got used to simply jotting down the main points from each source on a separate piece of paper and then keeping them filed by author. You need to think about how many times you will ever need to write anything that has been organized in this way. The answer is almost never. Perhaps if you were asked to do a book review it would make sense. Also if you were reading out of general interest and your notes were not related to any specific assignment, you would need to keep notes in this way. But for most purposes it makes a lot more sense to take and sort notes as you go along by theme or topic rather than by occasion or by author. If you do this rigorously, you can actually write the first draft of your literature review as you go along. You may start by noting down individual words and phrases. As you read further these isolated short notes can be built into sentences and then paragraphs as your reading and thinking develops. You should end up with a number of important points surrounded by pertinent support. Note that you must be scrupulous in keeping records and stating your sources. This makes even greater sense if you are hand-writing your notes, because it is much harder to sort them into different categories later by copying and pasting them into new documents, as you could do with word-processed documents. You do not need to keep your notes in sequential paragraphs either. In an interesting article that suggests three main ways in which she has helped postgraduate and undergraduate students at Sussex University to become better critical readers, Doreen Du Boulay suggests that students should organize their notes in tables. In the vertical column, her students put the topic and questions that they have generated and across the top, the titles of the works consulted (for example by creating a column for each work read). Full bibliographic information is kept on separate index cards. The student then looks in the various works for the answer to his or her questions or topics.

When taking notes from academic journal articles or any other secondary data source, it is vital that you use your own words, or make it clear to yourself when you are not using your own words. Otherwise, when you come back to them later on, you may have forgotten which words are yours and which are copied and so are someone else's. Make a point when taking notes of always summarizing what you read, with the original covered, so that your notes are written in your own words. You also need to take great care to acknowledge the source of the information and ideas you find and use in your work and you can help yourself to do this with careful referencing in your notes. If you do find yourself copying out great chunks of an author's work you should ask yourself why. Is it because you have not really understood what the author is saying? Read it again and then go and take a short break and do something different. When you come back to it, you may well find that your brain has started to sort out the meaning for you and that you can summarize it in your own words.

When you have taken notes about a book or an article, particularly if you have written rather a lot, it can be really helpful later on if you write a very brief summary at the end. This summary should be only a couple of sentences and should also record your instant reaction: It should say how/what you thought about the key message or messages you identified in your reading. When you

come back to it later, you might not agree with your instant reaction, but it will give you a vivid picture of how you actually felt about what you read at the time and you may be able to incorporate it into your literature review.

Using quotations
It is also a good idea to think about what you need to record. When you take notes, the temptation is to write too much down because you do not want to go back to the original when you are writing up. Many students think it is useful to use a lot of quotations, for example, so they copy out chunks of text into their notes. They think it makes their work look erudite. This is not, however, how it appears to the teachers who mark it. As a general rule, it is better to limit the use of quotations in your written work to illustrations which consolidate your work in a significant way, when the words are really worth quoting. You should also avoid long quotations. When you decide to quote someone, you should *copy the words and the punctuation exactly in your notes*, put quotation marks round the words you are quoting, and record precisely where it came from, *including* the full bibliographic reference and the page number, or full web page address and the date you accessed it.

Plagiarism
You must take great care when taking notes that you do not leave yourself open to accusations of plagiarism later on. Plagiarism -using the work of others without making it clear that you have done so- includes using words more or less exactly as they are found in articles, books, newspapers or any other secondary source, including the Internet; using other people's ideas without acknowledging them; and paraphrasing what you read or hear without saying where it came from.

It is unfortunately quite easy to plagiarize without really intending to do so. Whether it was deliberate or unintentional, universities take plagiarism very seriously. The penalties for being caught usually start with an automatic zero for the piece of work found to have been plagiarized and can result in failing your degree.

Plagiarism is a serious issue because it is dishonest and it devalues the hard work of academics who have produced the original work. It is also counter to the underpinning foundation of academic endeavour at universities in searching for contributions to knowledge. If universities did not penalize those students who plagiarize, the currency of the degrees offered would be completely undermined. Increasingly, plagiarism is seen as unethical and immoral behaviour and universities are now under pressure to search out and actively deal with those who plagiarize. Finally, committing plagiarism is completely unfair to those students who write using their own words and ideas.