

This guide looks at the concept of *criticality*: what it is, why it is important, and how you might go about developing the skills associated with it. It is likely that you will have come across 'critical thinking' prior to joining university. This is a term used to refer to certain skills like 'analysis' or 'evaluation'. *Criticality*, however, is slightly different. While it includes these skills, it is something more than 'critical thinking'.

*Criticality* refers to an approach or disposition to academic work that forms an essential element of independent learning.

Whereas 'critical thinking' might be taken as referring to a set of skills that you might 'switch on' when working on an assignment, *criticality* is a mind-set characterising the way you work, based on the constant application of the skills associated with 'critical thinking'. By embracing all aspects of your academic work, practising *criticality* will give you a much greater chance of finding academic success.

## What is it?

As noted above, *criticality* is an approach to academic work in which the skills associated with 'critical thinking' are applied across all aspects of your studies. It incorporates four key skills related to the *use* of information:

### Application

The use of any information, data or evidence in a given context (e.g. an essay question).

### Analysis

Close examination of information, data or evidence within a given context (such as an essay question or dissertation topic).

### Evaluation

Analysis of information, data or evidence within a given context combined with an informed and measured judgement (e.g., 'X is less important than Y because').

### Synthesis

Bringing together a variety of information, data or evidence and expressing it all in a coherent argument, idea or judgement.

## Why it is important?

Applying criticality is essential if you are going to obtain the highest possible marks for your work. If you look at the handbook relating to any of the modules you are currently taking, you'll see that work falling into the highest mark ranges is characterised by the application of the skills associated with criticality (e.g. analysis and evaluation).

High-scoring assessed work will display an ability to use information, data or evidence in a critical way.

## How can I be more critical?

Developing your ability to be critical requires several things:

### 1. Engagement

In order to apply criticality, you need to be fully engaged in your subject (i.e. the programme you are studying and the topics associated with it).

### 2. Thinking

Thinking is a vital part of studying; it is essential if you are going to develop the ability to analyse, evaluate and synthesise information. In order to think effectively about a subject, you need to be informed. Therefore, it is important to read as much as you can, as often as you can.

### 3. Confidence

Confidence goes hand-in-hand with thinking: you need to feel confident about your work in order to apply criticality effectively. You can boost your confidence by reading as much as you can.

### 4. Practice

Adopting criticality as an approach to your academic work means that there are plenty of opportunities for you to practice the skills involved (e.g. reading journal articles, making notes and discussing ideas).

Critique whatever you read or hear; think about links between ideas or theories; question whether something is right or wrong, or whether it should be amended, and, more importantly, ask yourself why it is right or wrong. These mark the first steps towards becoming a successful independent learner.