

## CRITICAL THINKING

Adapted from David Hill (2011)

### Why critical thinking?

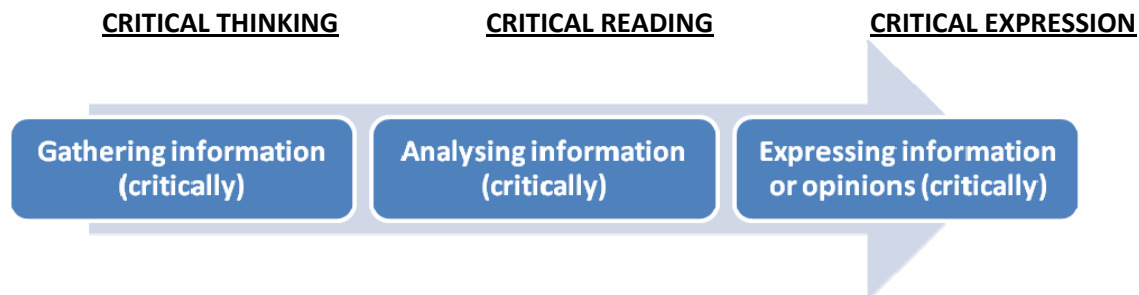
As we become exposed to increasing amounts of information from diverse sources and increasing ideas from diverse cultures, critical thinking becomes an important skill to negotiate modern, multicultural environments. Yet, many newcomers come from environments

### What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking involves the ability to think and analyse information and draw conclusions independently of those of the author or source.

### Three aspects of critical thinking:

Critical thinking develops in three intersecting areas associated with gathering, analysing, and expressing information. These critical skills are developed through critical research (analysing sources), critical reading (analysing information), and critical thinking (analysing expressions).



#### I. **Gathering Information** (Critical Thinking)

Critical thinking skills associated with gathering information develop through reading and listening, but also through researching for writing or speaking. Traditional comprehension questions are artificial indicators of 'understanding' what you read or encounter. Instead, students need to be able to detect and identify the following qualities of a text or source to interpret its information and value:

- main ideas / supporting ideas
- inferences
- degrees of certainty
- attitudes, tones, emotion
- purpose (why is the author writing this text)
- distinguishing facts from opinions

#### II. **Analysing Information** (Critical Reading)

Critical thinking develops significantly through critical reading and, by inference, critical listening. This requires an introspective process of questioning what is heard or read. In many countries around the world, educational systems have been slow to encourage critical reading or thinking, so many newcomers are unaccustomed to these expectations or skills. Therefore, it is important to teach them explicitly in adult EAL settlement or academic contexts. Skills associated with critical reading and critical analyses of information include the following:

- **Relate to the Text**
  - pose/answer 'reaction' questions (vs. 'comprehension' questions)
  - evaluate ideas
  - form initial opinions
- **Question the Context**
  - identify author affiliation / potential bias / ulterior motives / reason to influence or sway
  - compare with other texts
  - identify any important or obvious omissions
  - identify ideas of others accurately / inaccurately addressed
- **Question the Evidence**
  - **Quality of the evidence?**
    - fact/opinion
    - references
    - reasoning (valid or not)
    - assumptions
  - **Quality of the conclusions?**
    - evidence
    - reasoning

### III. **Expressing Information or Opinions** (Critical Expression)

Critical thinking is ultimately recognized or judged as critical expression (writing, speaking, representing). Therefore, students need support in

- **Why?** Be clear about the intention of writing in this topic, its relevance, and your own bias. This should affect the genre and writing style you choose.
- **How?** The following are explicit aspects of critical expression that can be taught:
  - **Genre:** There are different genres associated with writing an opinion or position (e.g., position paper) versus a factual discussion of a topic (e.g., research paper).
  - **Lexical or Functional Approaches:** There are lexical bundles and functional aspects of language (e.g. connectors) that convey degrees of objectivity or bias.
  - **Explicit thinking in writing:**
    - define terms
    - pose questions implicitly or explicitly that are answered in as many ways as possible before being judged as more or less valid

**A Critical Thinking (Reading) Checklist  
for EAL Teachers and Learners**

The following checklist can be used by either teachers or learners to develop or engage in critical thinking lesson- or project-planning or completion.

<b>Gathering Information</b> (Critical Research)	<b>Identify the following in the text</b> (source, story, presentation, reading):								
	main Idea	supporting idea(s)	inference(s)	degree of certainty	attitude, tone, emotion	purpose	fact	opinion	
<b>Analysing Information</b> (Reading / Listening)	<b>Relate to the Text</b>			<b>Question the Context</b>			<b>Question the Evidence</b>		
	react	evaluate ideas	form opinions	author bias?	other texts?	omissions?	accuracy?	evidence?	conclusions?
<b>Expressing Information or Opinions</b> (Critical Expression)	<b>Why?</b>				<b>How?</b>				
					<b>Genre</b>	<b>Lexical or Functional</b>	<b>Explicit Thinking</b>		

NOTES:

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## Four Strategies for Teaching Critical Thinking

- I. **Start from where students are.**
  - probe students for their pre-existing ideas or thoughts on the topic
  - explore students' reactions were they in comparable situations (imagined or empathic)
- II. **Show students where they are going.**
  - give students a clear sense of objectives through marking rubrics or exemplars
- III. **Habituate the questioning.**
  - repeat the same patterns of reaction questions and inquiry (e.g., see the checklist) to habituate yourself (as teacher) and learners to the processes of critical inquiry
  - make the process of questioning explicit and externalized
- IV. **Get students to do things with the texts.**
  - go beyond comprehension and influence – encourage students to identify their own reactions and views
  - compare texts with differing perspectives
  - ask student to take things from a text and apply them elsewhere (e.g., in their lives or experiences.)

### References

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- Vandermerstrugghe, J. (2004). The unbearable vagueness of critical thinking in the context of the Anglo-Saxonization of education. *International Education Journal*, 5(3), 417-422.

The above summary was adapted and elaborated from a talk by **David Hill** entitled "**Critical expression: Strategies for teaching critical thinking**" as part of Pearson-Longman's (2011) Tertiary Week of English. To listen to the talk, register on the Pearson Longman site by following the link below: <http://www.pearsonlongman.com/tertiaryplace/members/twe-timetable.html>