

Barriers to critical thinking

i) Mistaking information for understanding: many students prefer facts and answers rather than learning the skills that help them to make well-founded judgements for themselves.

*Student: 'I want you to give me an answer to the question; I want to know the **right** answer.'*

Teacher: 'I want you to become critical thinkers, which means you need to evaluate answers through active questioning.'

ii) Misunderstanding of what is meant by criticism: some students make only negative or positive comments; critical analysis means identifying both positive and negative aspects.

iii) Insufficient focus: critical thinking activities require focus on the exact task, rather than becoming distracted by other interesting ideas. Poor criticism can also result from making judgements too general.

iv) Not applying theoretical knowledge to actual situations/not making links with other topics: students need to be able to illustrate concepts with real examples and recognise connections between topics/subjects.

v) Over-estimating your reasoning abilities/lack of precision: it is easy to fall into poor thinking habits. Winning an argument does not necessarily mean that you have the best case; it may only mean that your opponent did not recognise a poor argument, or chose to agree for their own reasons, such as to avoid conflict. Critical thinking also involves precision/accuracy and this requires attention to detail. Illogical, imprecise and inaccurate thinking does not help to develop the mental abilities required for higher-level academic work.

vi) Reluctance to critique experts: some students think it is rude to question academics who they know are more expert than them. However, critical analysis is an expected activity in most English-speaking universities: lecturers expect students to question even published material.

vii) Emotional reasons: it can be hard to hear deeply held religious, political or ideological beliefs challenged in any way at all. It is important to remember that you can consider an argument to be effective, even if you do not agree with it.

Adapted from: *Critical Thinking Skills* by S. Cottrell, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005 and *EAP Essentials* by O. Alexander, S. Argent & J. Spencer, Garnet Publishing Ltd., 2008

