

2012

Critical reasoning: Reading 1

OER University

The aim of this course is to provide an opportunity to acquire critical thinking tools to critically analyse and evaluate knowledge claims. These tools are crucial to making informed decisions in study, work and private situations. Reading 1 provides an orientation to the course as a whole and to the nature of critical reasoning in particular.



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Orientation to the course

What can I expect to gain from this course?

The course has been designed to give you the opportunity to explore the basic tools of critical reasoning and to empower you to think for yourself.

The ability to think critically is of great value in helping you deal competently with ethical, social and political problems in the work situation and everyday life. In most humanities courses at universities lecturers expect students to understand cultural diversity, to critically evaluate information and knowledge claims and to make responsible decisions. However, students are rarely given the opportunity to acquire these abilities in a systematic way.

The aim of this course is thus to give you the opportunity to acquire critical thinking tools to critically analyse and evaluate knowledge claims. If you work diligently you will acquire the skills to develop a critical attitude to cultural stereotypes and biases. These tools are crucial to making informed decisions so that, when you are faced with difficult situations in your professional or even private lives, you will be able to make appropriate reasoning choices.

In this course you will be asked to use a “hands-on” approach. This means that you will have to actively participate in the learning process by answering questions, participating in activities and even by contributing to the curriculum. In this way, you will develop the competencies needed by an initiate into the community of critical thinkers. Such competencies will help you not only to understand what critical reasoning is about, but also to apply your knowledge and skills to make and to justify choices in difficult situations you may encounter in your work environment, your home life and in interaction with your community. Remember that the skills and knowledge you obtain in the course, Critical Reasoning, can also assist you with your studies of other disciplines, such as Psychology, History, English, Political Science, Communication Science, Health Care, Development Studies, Sociology and Public Administration.

Course overview

The course is divided into six topics. These topics are designed in such a way as to provide you with the opportunity to focus on realistic approaches to solving real-world problems. The Readings, Resources and Activities that comprise the course will act as your coach or mentor and will stress the interrelatedness of the skills you acquire in this course with the skills needed in everyday life. Together with other course participants should take great care to look at the world from multiple perspectives instead of looking at it through only a personal set of biased lenses.

As a student of the OER University, you will often have to do self-analysis and self-evaluation.

Below we provide a very brief overview of the topics covered in the different stages. Although these topics are interrelated, they are also autonomous and each one stands on its own feet, so to speak. This means that you could start with any topic. For instance you could start with Topic 3, explore Topic 2 and then Topic 4, and so on.

Topic 1: Introduction to critical reasoning

In Topic 1 you are given the opportunity to explore what critical reasoning is and what it means to think for yourself. This topic sets the foundation for everything that follows and should take about 10 hours to complete.

Topic 2: Obstacles to clear thinking

Topic 2 gives you the opportunity to gain insight into a number of common faults (fallacies) in reasoning; you will begin to understand what they are and why they should be avoided. You will get the opportunity to reflect on your own thinking and will start on your journey to develop a critical attitude towards all kinds of stereotypes and biases. Topic 2 should take about 20 hours to complete.

Topic 3: Analysing arguments

Topic 3 is designed as an active space where you can try out your newly acquired skills in identifying and analysing arguments. You will be given the opportunity to deconstruct the components of an argument, discuss the structure of an argument and analyse simple and complex arguments. You need to spend about 25 hours on Topic 3.

Topic 4: Evaluating arguments

In Topic 4 we look at different types of arguments and you will be given ample opportunity to practise your competence at evaluating different kinds of arguments. You need to spend about 25 hours on Topic 4.

Topic 5: The use of arguments in different kinds of writing

In Topic 5 we consider how arguments are constructed. As an initiate, you will construct your own arguments. We will also explore key aspects of writing good critical essays. The competencies acquired here will be of great value to you throughout your studies. On Topic 5, you need to spend about 20 notional hours.

Topic 6: Preparing for formal recognition at Unisa (optional)

Topic 6 is optional. Having worked through Topics 1 to 5 you will have acquired knowledge and skills that you could use in a variety of situations. Topic 6 is targeted at students interested in further studies with Unisa. It provides guidelines on how to prepare for formal recognition of your critical reasoning studies for credit towards a Unisa qualification. It will take about 20 hours to complete.

What should a critical thinker be able to do?

Take special note that various learning outcomes are set for each topic. Consider these outcomes carefully because they not only reflect the key aspects of the course but, most importantly, they are indicators of how you will benefit from the course if you participate actively.

This course is designed to enable you to

- demonstrate independent thinking, that is, thinking for yourself
- show the ability to make informed decisions that are based on facts and substantiated claims
- reflect on your own thinking and develop a critical attitude to cultural stereotypes and biases
- analyse and evaluate information and knowledge claims critically
- apply the key concepts of critical reasoning to constructing your own arguments and writing critical essays.

Keep these learning outcomes at the back of your mind while working through this course.

Keeping a journal

The critical reasoning course contains many activities that give you the opportunity to develop your critical reasoning competence. A good way to keep track of your answers and reflections on questions and activities is to keep a journal. The journal will also help you to monitor your progress towards becoming a critical thinker. Spoil yourself by buying an A4 hardcover exercise book with lots of space in which you can write down your responses and reflections. It is never a good idea to keep loose pieces of paper as these get lost or mixed up with other documents. A journal is a practical and easy to keep and you can also take it with you to discussion forums. During the semester you can also refer to your critical reasoning journal and check your earlier responses and reflections against new insights and conclusions you may have arrived at. If you have access to a portable device such as a netbook or tablet, you could instead choose to keep a digital journal.

Remember that critical reasoning is not a “swot” subject where you merely memorise facts, definitions and key concepts. Rather you should reason, think for yourself and arrive at your own well-informed opinions about socio-historical, political, economic and ethical issues. Keeping a journal will also motivate you to link your previous knowledge and experience to new insights you gain on your journey to becoming a critical reasoner. While you participate in the activities in the course, ask yourself the following questions: Do I agree with this viewpoint? Why do I agree or disagree? What is the relevance of this study material and the prescribed book to my professional, academic and personal contexts? What new insights, knowledge and skills have I gained from my studies? How can I apply these to my professional and home environment? What do I need to change about my worldview, ideas, beliefs and character in order to engage critically with the world and to make well-informed and responsible decisions?

Plagiarism

Take care not to commit plagiarism. Plagiarism is a serious offence and legally punishable. Plagiarism is the act of copying word for word without acknowledgment from your course materials, or from any other sources, such as extracts from books, articles, textbooks, previous tutorial letters, or from the Internet. Note that you also commit plagiarism if you copy the assignment of another student. This does not mean that you should not work together and form study groups, but do write your own assignments.

An assignment is designed to be a product of your own study and your own thoughts. It is not intended to be a piece of work which merely reproduces details, information or ideas from a study guide, from books or articles, or from the Internet. If you do this, you commit plagiarism. All sources consulted and references in the assignments must therefore be acknowledged.

Why is plagiarism not permitted?

- It is an immoral act, because you are stealing another person's words and ideas. It is therefore an act of dishonesty.
- It is an illegal act, because theft of another person's property (in this case, their ideas and their writing) is against the law. The act can therefore be legally punished.
- It is a self-defeating act, because if you apply for formal recognition and accreditation, your lecturers cannot give you marks for work that is not your own. You disadvantage yourself because your lecturer will not be able to judge whether you have understood the work, and so will be in no position to help you.
- The way to avoid committing plagiarism is straightforward. You must acknowledge the information and the ideas you have used in the preparation of your written work. General ideas derived from other sources can be acknowledged in the source list or bibliography at the end of the assignment. Exact quotations will need a more precise reference. When you acknowledge your sources properly and fully, you will not be guilty of plagiarism.

Gender-sensitive language

In this discussion we have tried to be gender sensitive in our use of language. As a philosophy department, we consider gendered language use irrational, discriminatory, unjustified and unacceptable, because it excludes women who are rational and active members of society and at all levels of the workplace. Moreover, gendered language is based on stereotypical prejudices and fallacious assumptions about men and women. Rather than using exclusive language (that is, using only male pronouns such as "he" and "his", or speaking only of "man" or "men"), we have used inclusive language. Sometimes we speak of "she", other times of "he" and, yet other times, of "she or he". We also speak of "humanity", "humans", or "human beings" rather than "mankind", or "brotherhood". Gender sensitivity is important, not only in terms of language use, but also in all spheres of life pertaining to perceptions, attitudes and conduct.

TOPIC 1:

Introduction to critical reasoning

If you actively participate in the learning opportunities provided in Topic 1, you will acquire the competence to:

- think for yourself
- think in an informed way
- do critical self-reflection.

Warm-up activity

The following are some warm-up exercises to set your thought processes in motion before you embark on the journey to become a serious critical thinker (each question is a simplified version of a real critical reasoning question). Read the following statements and then answer the questions about them:

- (1) The best movie showing right now is “There is a Zulu on my stoep” by Leon Schuster: it has been in the number one position for three weeks.
 - (a) How can we weaken this argument?
 - (b) How can we strengthen this argument?
 - (2) All dogs have hair. Therefore, pets have hair.
 - (a) If so, what are the hidden assumptions?
 - (3) The President is of the opinion that all citizens should have the opportunity to go to university. However, this argument is clearly wrong because he did not go to university.
 - (a) How can we weaken this argument?
 - (b) How can we strengthen this argument?
 - (4) Two hours ago Sipho had a splitting headache, so he took two headache tablets. Sipho still has a headache. Therefore, headache tablets are useless.
 - (a) How can we weaken this argument?
 - (b) How can we strengthen this argument?
-

Feedback

- (1) The best movie showing right now is “There is a Zulu on my stoep” by Leon Schuster: it has been in the number one position for three weeks.
- (a) How can we weaken this argument?
We could show that a popular movie is not necessarily a good movie. In other words, just because it is popular doesn't mean it is good.
- (b) How can we strengthen this argument?
We could show that a popular movie is always a good movie. In other words, there is a direct relationship between popularity and quality.
- (2) All dogs have hair. Therefore, pets have hair.
- (a) *The hidden assumption is that all pets are dogs.*
- (3) The President is of the opinion that all citizens should have the opportunity to go to university. However, this argument is clearly wrong because he did not go to university.
- (a) How could we weaken this argument?
We could say that the President's personal background is not related to his suggestion.
- (b) How could we strengthen this argument?
We could say that the President's personal background is related to his suggestion.
- (4) Two hours ago Sipho had a splitting headache, so he took two headache tablets. Sipho still has a headache. Therefore, headache tablets are useless.
- (a) How could we weaken this argument?
We could say that Sipho's results will not necessarily be the same as the results of other people.
- (b) How could we strengthen this argument?
We could say that Sipho's results will be the same as the results of other people.
-

1.1 What is critical reasoning?

Critical reasoning involves the ability to actively and skilfully conceptualise, analyse, question and evaluate ideas and beliefs. Critical reasoning is the opposite of dogma. Dogma is unquestioned information — information that is embraced without the intervention of active thought or criticism. To reason critically is to question the ideas and beliefs of others and oneself and to challenge dogma and authority.

When we start to question the ideas and beliefs we live by, we start to think for ourselves. To think for ourselves involves a critical attitude of reflecting upon how we think and act. To think critically is to question the world and thus to engage critically with the possibilities and alternatives which the world offers.

Please note that the terms “critical reasoning”, “critical thinking” and “clear thinking” are used interchangeably in this discussion. In other words, critical reasoning implies critical thinking or clear thinking.

We think critical reasoning involves three important components of reasoning. These components are as follows:

- Critical reasoning is thinking for yourself.
- Critical reasoning is informed reasoning.
- Critical reasoning is critical self-reflection.

1.2 Becoming a critical thinker

Critical reasoning or critical thinking is a basic skill that all humans are born with, but which can be sharpened with practice. The better your ability to think critically, the better you will be at making good decisions in your life. The skills involved in critical reasoning will assist you in every area of life and study, whether it is deciding which political candidate to vote for or which job to take.

Keep in mind that the foundation for this course is already embedded in you. You can assess yourself to determine to what extent you have already acquired critical reasoning skills by doing the following exercises:

Activity 1

As was mentioned in the Orientation section to this course, you need to keep a hard copy or a digital journal. This journal will serve as proof of your progress towards becoming a critical thinker.

For this activity use your journal and write down what the difference in meaning is between the following statements (it is important to write your opinion down; often we think we have an opinion, but once we have to write it down, we discover that it might be flawed):

- (1) Everybody is innocent till proven guilty.
Nobody is guilty until proven not to be innocent.
- (2) Anything you say may be used against you in a court of law.
Everything you say may be used against you in a court of law.
- (3) If you are not religious you are bad.
If you are religious, you are good.
- (4) If you do not vote, you may not complain about the outcome.
People who do not vote have no say.
- (5) As the economy is on a downslide, we need to save money.
We need to save money when the economy is on a downslide.

Reflection

Which of the following skills were required to figure out the meaning of the above statements?
(Indicate by means of a tick.)

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE
You need to be able to determine how the several parts of an argument relate to each other.		
You need to have good language skills (understand the language properly).		
You need the ability to locate and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the argument.		
The entire process of argumentation must be viewed within a certain context.		

Activity 2

The following is an experiment in psychology. Read the experiment carefully and then, in your journal, capture your answer to the questions that follow:

In the 1970s Stanley Milgram set up an experiment at Yale University in which participants were asked to administer electrical shocks to others. The participants were led to believe that those who were being shocked were taking part in a scientific study to determine the relationship between memory and punishment. The participants had control over how severe the shocks would be, from slight shock to severe shock, and when instructed to do so they were to deliver the appropriate voltage. The participants (the “teachers”) are told that they are to administer the learning test to the “learners” in the other room. When the “learner” responds correctly, the “teacher” continues with the next item. When the “learner” makes a mistake, the “teacher” is instructed to give an electric shock. They must start at the lowest shock level (15 volts) and increase the level each time the “learner” makes a mistake; going up to 30 volts, 50 volts, 150 volts and so on.

The participants could not see the people who were being shocked, although when the shocks were severe they could hear that their “victims” were suffering greatly. The “teacher” is a naïve subject who has come to the psychology laboratory to participate in the experiment. The “learner”, or “victim”, is an actor who actually receives no electric shock at all. Milgram designed the experiment

to establish how far a person will proceed in a concrete situation in which he or she is instructed to inflict increasing pain on others just because a legitimate authority asked them to do so. The point of the experiment was thus to find out at what point the subject will refuse to obey the instructions of the experimenter.

The results showed that more than half the participants were prepared to, and actually gave, the most severe shocks and nearly 90 per cent increased the voltage when they were asked to, in spite of clearly hearing that their “victims” were in pain.

Milgram (1974:5–6) observes the following with regard to his experiment:

“Many subjects will obey the experimenter no matter how vehement the pleading of the person being shocked, no matter how painful the shocks seem to be, and no matter how much the victim pleads to be let out. ... It is the extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority that constitutes the chief finding of the study ... ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority”.

- (1) What do you think this experiment illustrates?
 - (2) What lessons have you learnt from the experiment? Do you think that those participants who increased the voltage when they were asked to, despite the fact that their “victims” were obviously in pain, thought critically about their decisions?
-

Feedback

We think Milgram’s experiment illustrates how readily we are prepared to relinquish reason for the comfort of obedience. It is an example of how easily we take things for granted and assume that the claims of authority figures are true.

The lesson to be learnt from the experiment is that we should be suspicious of the claims of authorities, rather than following their instructions blindly. As critical reasoners we should learn how to think independently, and critically question information and knowledge claims.

1.3 Critical reasoning competence

Critical reasoning involves the following:

- thinking for yourself
- informed reasoning
- critical self-reflection.

1.3.1 Thinking for yourself

If you think for yourself, you question the world and offer alternative viewpoints about the way the world is perceived by other people.

When we say think for yourself, we don't mean 'think selfishly for yourself'. We mean 'think independently'. A person who thinks for herself or himself has to have a sense of humility, and of modesty, and of relativity because you have to realise that other people are also thinking for themselves and you're bound to come out with something a little different from what they are thinking. In order to become a critical thinker, you have to have the ability to listen and the modesty to adjust your point of view as you gather more insights.

By doing the following activity, you can determine if you have the ability to think for yourself. For this activity you will need a newspaper and a pair of scissors. The date of the newspaper is not important, therefore you are welcome to use either an old or a new newspaper.

Activity 3

Task 1: Cut out at least seven pictures of your choice of men and group these pictures together on your desk.

Task 2: From the same newspaper cut out at least seven pictures of your own choice of women and group them together next to those of the men.

Task 3: Compare the pictures of the men and women and ask yourself the following questions:

- Why did you choose the particular pictures of the men?
- Why did you choose the particular pictures of the women?
- What does it tell you about yourself?
- Who is portrayed as being more professional, the men or women? Why do you say so?
- Who is portrayed as being more powerful? Why do you say so?
- What is the message conveyed by the difference in dress between the men and women?
- What are the men in the pictures doing?
- What are the women in the pictures doing?
- What is the message conveyed by what the gender groups are doing?
- Where do you get your ideas about the difference between men and women from?
- What have you learnt from this exercise?

Activity 4

If I asked you for tips on how to learn to think for myself, which of the following tips would you give me? What would you add?

- (1) If in doubt, ask a question.
Don't be afraid to question things. Don't be afraid to offer a question even though other people in your peer group have not questioned before.
- (2) Place experience over authority.
If one reflects upon what the authority figure is conveying to you, does it fit in with your real-life experience? For example, if someone with authority tells you that taxis drive very safely, ask yourself if this fact is confirmed by your experience.

- (3) Understand people.
Does the person communicating with you have an agenda that might be influencing what they are telling you? What is motivating this person? Why do you think they think this way?
 - (4) Don't feel you have to follow the crowd.
Remember the old saying, "If Johnny puts his hand in the fire, it does not mean that you have to do that too."
 - (5) Trust your feelings.
Trusting your "gut instinct" about something is often an overlooked trait. If something does not feel right to you there is probably something wrong (or at least something seriously flawed) with what you are being told.
 - (6) Remain calm.
Remaining calm and collected will help you remain objective and help you to think clearly. If you get caught up in a heated debate and lose your cool, your capacity for rational thinking is diminished.
 - (7) Gather the facts.
Like any good thinker would do, gather all the facts before making a judgment. Ask yourself whether you have all the facts? Are there gaps in your knowledge that are keeping you from the truth or from the solution to a problem?
 - (8) Look at things from different perspectives.
If you are trying to solve a problem, try approaching it in different ways. If one way hasn't worked for you, try a different one! Try and see ideas or concepts from different perspectives. For example, would someone growing up in Japan think the same way about a subject as someone from South Africa? To think for yourself also means being creative in the sense that you often have to be very imaginative and creative about other possibilities, imagine alternative scenarios and consider different options.
 - (9) Cultivate empathy.
It is easier to understand why people think the way they do if you understand their situation. Empathising with people helps you understand that you may have a different opinion about something but that's OK!
 - (10) Be brave.
It takes courage to stand up and say, "I don't agree with you." Be kind to yourself, be patient and don't give up.
-

1.3.2 Thinking in an informed way

As you would have seen from your review of the recommended resources, informed reasoning is based on claims that can be substantiated. In other words, your opinion is based on fact and not on personal opinion. In today's world where we become ever more involved in using technology as a resource for information, it is crucial that we have the ability to think in an informed way in order to be able to decipher the barrage of information available to us.

The ability to form and articulate opinions is extremely important in all facets of life. As citizens, people need to form opinions about political issues and leaders in order to vote responsibly. We must form opinions about social issues, and we form opinions about the people we work and

interact with on a daily basis. However, simply having an opinion about a given topic is not enough. In this age of information, if we want to effectively share our opinions with others, we must be educated about the topics we are discussing. Whether writing a letter to the editor about a local issue or trying to convince your boss that you've developed a great business strategy or convincing your parents that you should have a specific privilege, presenting an informed, educated opinion is much more effective than sharing one based on emotion or personal experience alone.

To develop the necessary competence to make informed decisions, do the following activity.

Activity 5

- (1) Select a topic that is of interest to you. The topic should inspire at least two points of view. For example: "Prostitution should be legalised."
 - (a) Learn as much as you can about your topic through research.
 - (b) Utilise a wide variety of resources and make sure that you read information that expresses a number of different points of view relating to your topic.
 - (c) Ask pertinent questions as you learn about the topic and look for the answers in your research.
 - (d) Assess the content: Are statements and arguments supported with facts, specific examples and clearly defined reasons?
 - (e) Form your opinion based on the facts you have learnt. Combine those facts with your own emotions and personal experiences. Be able to utilise these facts as your key arguments when you try to convince others to see your point of view.
 - (2) Ask yourself the following questions: When you first selected your topic for the project, did you have a preconceived opinion about the subject? If so, how was your opinion altered by doing research and looking for facts about the subject?
 - (3) Do you believe your opinion would have been different if it had not been based on facts? If so, why and how?
 - (4) Based on your experience with researching, do you think most people base their opinions about important issues on facts or do they use emotions, personal experience, preconceived ideas and media to shape their ideas?
 - (5) In the future, do you think you will be more inclined to support your opinions with facts? Why?
 - (6) In future conversations with people of differing opinions, do you think you will press them to substantiate their opinions with facts and clearly defined reasons as a means of convincing you to change your thoughts? Why?
-

1.3.3 Critical self-reflection

Please consult your suggested resources for ideas about critical self-reflection.

Activity 6

Based on what you have read, please indicate whether the following questions are TRUE or FALSE (tick one):

Statement	TRUE	FALSE
(1) Critical self-reflection is a purposive process relying on thinking.		
(2) Critical self-reflection is an act of examining one's own thoughts.		
(3) Critical self-reflection is the capacity of humans to exercise introspection		
(4) Critical self-reflection is related to self-knowledge and self-awareness.		

Self-reflection activity

As a starting point for developing your competence at critical self-reflection, it would be useful to express your views on the following issues. Use your journal to write down a paragraph or two on each of the following controversial topics. In each case, ask yourself why you hold this particular view. Keep a record of your responses because you will revisit them when you do the critical self-reflection activity in Topic 2, paragraph 2.1, Preconceived ideas.

- (1) Marriage
 - (2) Single parenting
 - (3) Racial differences
 - (4) Gender differences
 - (5) Homosexuality
 - (6) Heterosexuality
 - (7) HIV Aids
 - (8) What am I?
 - (9) Who am I?
 - (10) How do other people see me?
-

In summary

Do you agree that many of the problems we face in our lives result from a lack of clarity in our thinking about what is real, true and essential? In our opinion, it is rare to find a person who takes the time to think clearly about things. In our fast-paced, overstimulated, I-want-it-quickly society, our response to something is often based on preconceived ideas.

What is most important in this course is that you learn how to think for yourself, as opposed to replicating some preconceived ideas. As we have seen, issues in the Human and Social Sciences rarely yield single clear right/wrong answers: usually only less or more convincing arguments. One of the main benefits of critical thinking is that it allows you to reach independent conclusions about the world and about yourself. The next topic we will be exploring in this course, deals with obstacles that prevent us from thinking clearly.