2012

Critical reasoning: Course Guide

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. The course guide provides an overview of the course.

Contents

Overview of the course

What can students expect to gain from this course?

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

The ability to think critically is of great value in helping to 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 students the opportunity to acquire critical thinking tools to critically analyse and evaluate knowledge claims. Students 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 students are faced with difficult situations in their professional or even private lives, they will be able to make appropriate reasoning choices.

A "hands-on" approach is used in the course. Students are expected to actively participate in the learning process by answering questions, participating in activities and even by contributing to the curriculum. In this way, they will develop the competencies needed by an initiate into the community of critical thinkers. Such competencies will help them not only to understand what critical reasoning is about, but also to apply their knowledge and skills to make and to justify choices in difficult situations they may encounter in their work environment, their home life and in interaction with their community. The skills and knowledge students obtain in the course, Critical Reasoning, can also assist them with their studies of other disciplines, such as Psychology, History, English, Political Science, Communication Science, Health Care, Development Studies, Sociology and Public Administration.

Course composition

The course is divided into six topics. These topics are designed in such a way as to provide the opportunity to focus on realistic approaches to solving real-world problems. The Readings, Resources and Activities that comprise the course act as coach or mentor and will stress the interrelatedness of the skills acquired 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.

Students of the course will often have to do self-analysis and self-evaluation.

Provided below is 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 it is possible to start with any topic.

Topic 1: Introduction to critical reasoning

Topic 1 provides the opportunity to explore what critical reasoning is and what it means to think for oneself. 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 provides the opportunity to gain insight into a number of common faults (fallacies) in reasoning; students will begin to understand what they are and why they should be avoided. The opportunity is provided to reflect on own thinking and 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 students can try out newly acquired skills in identifying and analysing arguments. The opportunity is provided to deconstruct the components of an argument, discuss the structure of an argument and analyse simple and complex arguments. Topic 3 should take about 25 hours to complete.

Topic 4: Evaluating arguments

Topic 4 looks at different types of arguments and provides ample opportunity to practise competence at evaluating different kinds of arguments. Topic 4 should take about 25 hours to complete.

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

Topic 5 considers how arguments are constructed. Students will construct their own arguments and will also explore key aspects of writing good critical essays. The competencies acquired here can be used across all studies. Topic 5 should take about 20 hours to complete.

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

Topic 6 is optional. Having worked through Topics 1 to 5 students will have acquired knowledge and skills that they 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 their 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?

This course is designed to enable course graduates to

- demonstrate independent thinking, that is, thinking for themself
- show the ability to make informed decisions that are based on facts and substantiated claims
- reflect on 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 own arguments and writing critical essays.

Learning outcomes / Graduate profile

- **Outcome 1:** Learners actively participate in the opportunities set out in the study material to explore what critical reasoning is and what it means to critically reflect on one's own thinking.
- **Outcome 2:** Recognize and understand various reasoning fallacies as obstacles to clear thinking.
- **Outcome 3:** Demonstrate the competence to identify arguments and to analyse different kinds of arguments.
- **Outcome 4:** Apply knowledge and skills in evaluating different types of arguments.
- **Outcome 5:** Apply knowledge and skills in constructing own arguments.

Assessment strategy

• Activities	Certificate of completion for students not pursuing integration into a larger qualification	Formal accreditation for integration into a Unisa programme
Quizzes x 2 (auto-assessed; random selection from databank)	Weighting 30%	Weighting 15%
Assignment in 2 parts (self- and peer-assessed against rubric in wiki process)	Weighting 40%	Weighting 20%
Reflection journal (self-assessed against rubric)	Weighting 30%	Weighting 15%

Successful students will receive a certificate of accomplishment for the course. Students will receive a copy of the assessment results including assessor comments. Successful students will receive 12 credits duly recorded on the student's academic transcript at the University of South Africa provided satisfactory evidence is provided of course completion (weighted at 50%) **AND provided applicants successfully complete a proctored challenge assessment weighted at 50%.**