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| Unit 4 explored the skills and strategies for reading critically. This unit focuses on engaging with outside sources and displaying critical thinking in your writing. |

**Reflection**

**Task 1:** What is critical thinking?

Which of these statements about critical reading do you think are reasonable? Share your ideas with one or more classmates. Be sure to discuss **why** you agree/partly agree/disagree with each statement.

For me, critical thinking means criticising what people have written. It means finding the mistakes in their logic and evidence.

Critical reading means reading carefully what experts say, so that I can completely understand their ideas and their arguments.

Critical thinking partly means not being afraid to question what someone has written, even if the author is a so-called “expert”. Experts can be wrong, and they often disagree with each other.

**Anna**

**Billy**

I think critical reading involves noticing if the writer shows any biases.

**Doris**

**Chris**

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| Being able to read critically is important at university. As one professor said in an interview:  “I don’t want students who just write down everything I say, then give it back to me in exams. I want them to look at things critically, to argue. I want them to develop other ways of looking at things.”  Brick, J. (2006). *Academic culture: A student’s guide to studying at university. Sydney: Macquarie University.* |

I would say that if you’re thinking critically, you have to keep an open mind and use the writer’s ideas to influence your thinking about a topic.

**Eddy**

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| **Comments on the five statements**  All of the statements on the previous page illustrate aspects of critical reading.  **Anna** – Finding problems in logic and evidence are an important part of critical reading. However, *being* *critical* is not equal to *criticizing*. It is important to recognize when a writer’s evidence and argument are strong and solid.  **Billy** - Reading carefully and understanding a text are important, of course, but this is just the beginning of the journey towards critical reading.  **Chris** – It’s important to look out for biases, although they are not always obvious or easy to locate.  **Doris** – Critical reading involves not just skills, but attitudes. Students sometimes believe that they shouldn’t question the texts that they read at university – but read the quote in the blue box on the previous page. This professor expresses a typical opinion.  **Eddy** - As well as being critical about a writer’s ideas, it’s important to challenge your own ideas. |

**Application**

**Task 2**

Read the two pieces of writing below. The first is purely descriptive (i.e., it only summarizes what other people have said), whereas the second is more analytical. Why is the second text a more appropriate piece of academic writing? Can you find any examples of critical thinking in the first text? What examples of critical thinking are in the second text?

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| **Descriptive writing** |  | **Analytical writing** |
| Fisher and Scriven describe critical thinking as “a skilled, active interpretation and evaluation of observations, communications, information, and argumentation” (1997: 20). Russell states that “the intelligent are full of doubt (1998: 28).” Facione, *et al*. (2000: 62) argue that without scrutiny, the following types of texts would be common: “intellectually *dishonest* (e.g., in the use of data), *intolerant* (e.g., of opposing ideas), *inattentive* (e.g., to implications of proposals), *haphazard* (e.g., procedurally), *mistrustful of reason* (e.g., hostile toward sound scientific inquiry), *indifferent* (e.g., towards new findings, and *simplistic* (e.g., naively dualistic). |  | Although critical thinking is a notoriously difficult term to define, Fisher and Scriven’s classification of it as “a skilled, active interpretation and evaluation of observations, communications, information, and argumentation” (1997: 20) captures many of its essential elements. However, this definition neglects the concept of healthy scepticism, or doubt, as an important component of critical thinking. It is crucial to question and challenge the validity of concepts and claims, even if these initial challenges later serve to validate the claims. Echoing Russell’s claim that “the intelligent are full of doubt” (1998: 28), Facione *et al.* (2000: 62) argue that without this doubt, academic study would allow biased, prejudiced and illogical texts to be published without being properly scrutinized. Thus, anyone pursuing an academic degree needs to ask questions to confirm or challenge the subject matter. |
| **References**  Facione, P. Facione, N, and Giancarlo, C. (2000). The disposition towards critical thinking: Character, measurement, and relationship to critical thinking. *Informal Logic*, 20, 1:61-84.  Fisher, A. and Scriven, M. (1997). *Critical Thinking: Its Definition and Assessment*. Norwich: Centre for Research in Critical Thinking.  Russell, B. (1998). *Mortals and Others: Bertrand Russell’s American Essays 1931-1935*. London: Rutledge. | | |

(Source: Sowton, C. (2012). 50 *steps to improving your academic writing*. Reading: Garnett Publishing)



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| **The “3 C’s” of Critical Thinking**  **Challenge**: Do not be afraid of questioning what “experts” and scholars have written about a particular topic They are not always right.  **Consider**: Reflect on what you have read, and identify what your position is. As the second text above illustrates, good academic writing is analytical rather than just descriptive. When you use a citation from an outside source in your writing, you should comment on the information by analysing, evaluating, and considering alternatives.  **Combine**: Having read a range of sources, you need to synthesize your ideas. Good academic writing analyses the issues from all angles and is based on a wide range of evidence and sources. |

**Developing your Critical Thinking Skills**

**Task 3**

A. The following text describes two lessons at a university in Hong Kong. Read the text and discuss it with a classmate.

* Is either lesson similar to your experience?
* Is there anything in the text that you find interesting or surprising?

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| At a tertiary institution in Hong Kong, a foreign teacher is lecturing to a class of students, who listen attentively, occasionally commenting to each other in Cantonese on what the teacher has said. The teacher, disturbed by the talking, stops and waits for the students to stop. The students, sensing the teacher’s discomfort, become silent, and the teacher resumes lecturing. Gradually, the students learn that the teacher expects them to be silent when she is lecturing. At the end of the lecture, the teacher asks whether there are questions. One student asks a question, and, as the teacher responds, the other students start talking among themselves. Soon it becomes noisy enough that the teacher either has to move towards the student in order to continue the discourse or ask other students to be quiet. In either case, it is not long before students begin to ask whether they are permitted to leave. The teacher must then decide whether the class is over and if so, either give nonverbal permission and continue talking, or cut off her conversation at least momentarily to announce that the class is dismissed. If not, she may hurriedly give instructions regarding the assignment for the next class. She cannot help feeling that the students are being rude or showing lack of interest in the class. She may feel that she is wasting her breath if one student has raised an important question and the others are not listening to her response.  In another classroom, a Cantonese teacher is lecturing in English. Students are commenting to each other on what he says. As they get more interested in the lecture, their talk becomes louder. The lecturer continues to speak, unconsciously becoming louder and louder in order to be heard over the students. Finally, he calls for their attention, and they quiet down. As the lecture continues, they again begin speaking to each other, now in subdued tones. He lectures until the end of the period, concluding by saying if they have any question they can ask him later.  Almost every Western teacher new to Hong Kong experiences classes that resemble the first one described. In contrast, most Chinese teachers are unaware of students talking to each other unless it becomes loud enough to interfere with their lessons. As a Chinese-American English teacher engaged in ethnographic research, I became interested in this difference in perception and began to pursue it in discussions with my collaborator Ron Scollon and other colleagues. We were puzzled both by this communicative pattern and by the fact that it was imperceptible to Chinese teachers.  Scollon, Suzanne (1999). "Not to waste words or students" in E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 13-27). Cambridge: CUP. |

B. An important element of critical reading is asking yourself questions as you read. Read the following extract from the text and some possible critical reading questions.

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| **Text** | **Critical reading questions** |
| At a tertiary institution in Hong Kong, a foreign teacher is lecturing to a class of students, who listen attentively, occasionally commenting to each other in Cantonese on what the teacher has said. The teacher, disturbed by the talking, stops and waits for the students to stop. The students, sensing the teacher’s discomfort, become silent, and the teacher resumes lecturing. Gradually, the students learn that the teacher expects them to be silent when she is lecturing. At the end of the lecture, the teacher asks whether there are questions. One student asks a question, and, as the teacher responds, the other students start talking among themselves. | * Why does the writer use the word “foreign” here? Is the writer suggesting that all non-Chinese teachers think the same way? * How does the writer know that the students are listening attentively? Is there a contradiction between “listening attentively” and the statement that the teacher is “disturbed by the talking”? * Why do the students start talking at the end of the lecture? Do we know what they are saying? Does the teacher make it clear that the student’s question and her answer are for the benefit of the whole class? * Is this a typical situation? If so, what evidence is provided? |

C. Read the rest of the text and write down your own questions.

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| **Text** | **Your critical reading questions** |
| Soon it becomes noisy enough that the teacher either has to move towards the student in order to continue the discourse or ask other students to be quiet. In either case, it is not long before students begin to ask whether they are permitted to leave. The teacher must then decide whether the class is over and if so, either give nonverbal permission and continue talking, or cut off her conversation at least momentarily to announce that the class is dismissed. If not, she may hurriedly give instructions regarding the assignment for the next class. She cannot help feeling that the students are being rude or showing lack of interest in the class. She may feel that she is wasting her breath if one student has raised an important question and the others are not listening to her response.  In another classroom, a Cantonese teacher is lecturing in English. Students are commenting to each other on what he says. As they get more interested in the lecture, their talk becomes louder. The lecturer continues to speak, unconsciously becoming louder and louder in order to be heard over the students. Finally, he calls for their attention, and they quiet down. As the lecture continues, they again begin speaking to each other, now in subdued tones. He lectures until the end of the period, concluding by saying if they have any question they can ask him later.  Almost every Western teacher new to Hong Kong experiences classes that resemble the first one described. In contrast, most Chinese teachers are unaware of students talking to each other unless it becomes loud enough to interfere with their lessons. As a Chinese-American English teacher engaged in ethnographic research, I became interested in this difference in perception and began to pursue it in discussions with my collaborator Ron Scollon and other colleagues. We were puzzled both by this communicative pattern and by the fact that it was imperceptible to Chinese teachers. |  |



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| **Possible Critical Reading Questions**   * What does the writer mean by this claim? Could it be…? * What evidence does the writer provide? * What do I think of this evidence?   + I agree, and I want to add…   + I disagree, because…   + On the one hand, I agree that…, but I’m still not sure about…   + How does this apply to contexts I know (e.g. HK education/society)?   + Is X ALWAYS true?   + If X is true, what else follows?   + If X is not true, what follows? |

**Using Critical Thinking in your Writing**

Academic writing usually moves between the writer expressing his or her own ideas on the topic (the “writer’s voice”) and the writer paraphrasing and summarizing ideas from outside sources (“other voices”). When you write, it is important to clearly signal this shift from the writer’s voice to the voice of your sources.

**Task 4: Analysing a paragraph**

Read the following paragraph from a student essay about the causes of divorce. Highlight the sentences that express the writer’s voice. How does the writer signal the movement from the writer’s voice to the voice of the source material?

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| One explanation for the rising divorce rate has focused on changes in laws relating to marriage. For example, Bilton, Bonnett and Jones (1987) argue that increased rates of divorce do not necessarily indicate that families are now more unstable. It is possible, they claim, that there has always been a degree of marital instability. They suggest that changes in the law have been significant because they have provided unhappy married couples with “access to a legal solution to pre-existing marital problems” (p. 301). Bilton et al. therefore believe that changes in divorce rates can be best explained in terms of changes in the legal system. The problem with this explanation, however, is that it does not consider why these laws have changed in the first place. It could be argued that reforms to family law, as well as the increased rate of divorce that has accompanied them, are the product of more fundamental changes in society. |

**Task 5: Analysing and revising your writing**

Choose one paragraph from the draft you have written for your writing assignment. Exchange paragraphs with a partner and:

1. Highlight any unsupported arguments or arguments that have weak supporting evidence. Make notes or write questions to show why you think these claims are weak.
2. Highlight any source material that does not include the writer’s analysis/evaluation or that includes weak commentary.
3. Highlight any information that might lead the reader to think “well, so what?”

With your partner, discuss how you can revise the paragraphs to strengthen the arguments, engage more critically with the sources, and avoid a “so what?” reaction from the reader.



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| **Useful Resources**  Sign up for a writing workshop on *Incorporating Sources*. Make an appointment at <https://booking.lc.cityu.edu.hk/Booking/>.  You can find more ideas about critical reading in the following websites:  <http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/critical-reading>  <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/reading-and-researching/critical-reading> |