Skills Team Top Tips

Critical Thinking

Critical Reading

1. Evaluate your sources:
   Is the source reliable? Is the author biased in any way? All sources are usable but you must show how you are approaching them critically.

2. Identify and analyse arguments:
   Arguments are made up of a claim (a point the writer is trying to make), premises (their reasons for or evidence to support the claim) and an attempt to persuade (an explanation of the relationship between the two and why it is relevant). Do the premises lead to the claim? Is the argument persuasive? Are there any assumptions in the premises that invalidate or weaken them?

3. Evaluate arguments:
   How does the argument fit in with other reading you have done? Is it still as persuasive when these are taken into account?

4. Deal with alternative viewpoints:
   If the arguments are contradictory, what does this mean? Does one reverse the other? Does it just moderate it? Do you need to look for a third alternative? You do not have to accept one or the other; life is messy, sometimes they are both right. Accepting the complicated nature of knowledge that is inconsistent is one of the true signs of critical thought.

Critical Writing

1. Take a position:
   For writing to be critical you need to decide what position you are taking within your essay/assignment. There is no point providing different points of view on a subject if you never actually tell the reader to what extent you agree with them.

2. Persuade don't inform:
   When you read one of your own essays/paragraphs, can you genuinely say it is not simply informing the reader of stuff you have read? For it to be critical you need to make clear your position (see above) and persuade the reader of why you think that position is the right one.

3. Analyse and explain every main point you make:
   Each main point you make should be the subject of a paragraph of its own. This gives you the chance to explain to the reader why it is relevant to your overall argument. Just how is the point helping you answer the question/reach your conclusion/justify your position?

4. Show that you are open-minded/balanced/sceptical:
   At university a lot of what you are studying is contested knowledge – not fact. When you read a book or a journal article you are reading someone’s opinion on the subject at hand not ‘God’s Own Truth’. Show in your writing that you are not just considering one side of an argument; that other opinions also exist and explain why, on balance, you have decided to take the position you have.