

Becoming more critical: using questions

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are *What & Why & When*
And *How & Where & Who*.

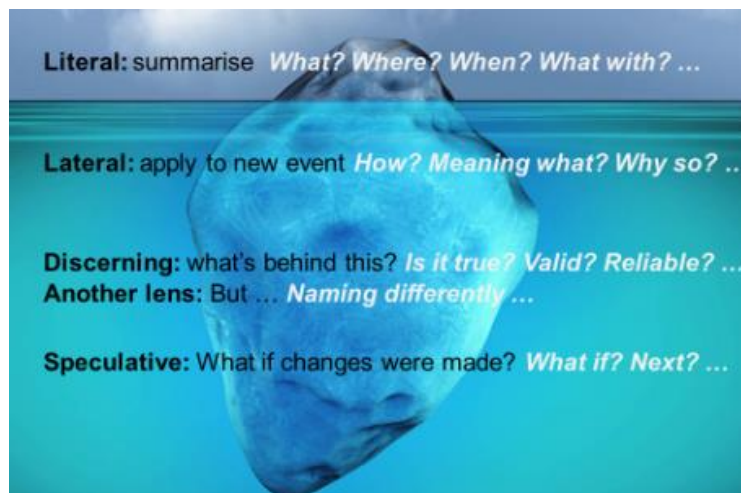
Rudyard Kipling

1. Reading log

Use these questions to help you become more 'critical'

- What is the main argument/position/finding?
- What methods were used?
- What perspective was presented (esp. for interdisciplinary research)?
- Quotes: (include '...' and page numbers)
- How does this reading link with other readings (similarities/differences)?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the reading/argument(s)/methodology? Why?
- OR What are the advantages/disadvantages of the research? Why?
- Do I agree/disagree with the ideas? Why?
- How do the ideas related to my life experiences/practical knowledge?
- What questions do the arguments/ideas raise for me? Why?
- What is the relevance for my research? Why?
- Add questions that your supervisors tend to ask frequently. Ask them.
- ...
- ...

2. **Levels of understanding** – move from literal and lateral levels of understanding your reading to more critical and speculative levels (i.e. think beyond what is written in the reading)



Levels of understanding ¹

Depth of Analysis	Answering the Question ...	Making the Statement ...
Literal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facts • Known information • Description of factors involved 	What? Where? Who? When? Who with? What with?	<i>A description ...</i> <i>A definition ...</i> <i>This ... actually happened</i> <i>This ... is the case</i> <i>This ... is what we have here</i>
Lateral <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context (historical, political, geographical etc) • Factual comparison with other events of its type • Effects of this event • Involvement of other parties • Relationships between elements and forces involved 	How? What for? Meaning what? What response? What then? Who says? Why so? What else was going on? Who saw it differently? How else?	<i>An interpretation</i> <i>The context</i> <i>A construction</i> <i>With reference to ...</i> <i>For this reason ...</i> <i>In this way ...</i> <i>With this result ...</i> <i>Response to it was ...</i> <i>It can be compared with ...</i>
Critical <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's really happening? • What's behind all this? • Can we believe what we're told? Why/why not? • What are the implications? • Where does the power reside? • Who has the authority to act? • Whose description of events do we believe? Why? Why not? • Whose opinions do we agree with? Why? 	Was it good? Why/why not? How good? How bad? Was it original? How useful is it? Did it work? Why/why not? Where does it come from? On what authority? Is it true? Valid? Reliable? (on what basis?) What impact does it have? In whose best interests is it? Who is it for? So what?	<i>An evaluation</i> <i>These aspects are good ...</i> <i>These aspects are bad ...</i> <i>This is its ideology</i> <i>This is its assumptions ...</i> <i>These stakeholders are affected by it</i> <i>It did/did not reach its own objectives because ...</i> <i>It is/is not worthwhile because ...</i>
Speculative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What will happen next? • What if certain changes were made? • What changes might exacerbate the situation? • What changes might improve the situation? • What is required to resolve the matter? 	Could it happen differently? What's needed? What next? What leads on from here? Will it advance or regress? What if? I wonder ...	<i>A creative leap</i> <i>This ... could be changed</i> <i>These ... other approaches could be tried</i> <i>This ... must be investigated</i> <i>This ... can be predicted</i> <i>This ... will improve matters</i> <i>This ... direction is interesting</i> <i>This ... inquiry will be fruitful</i> <i>We will be able to ...</i>

¹ Adapted from McLaine, T. *Postgraduate Writing and Research*, UniSA

The Ultimate Cheatsheet for Critical Thinking



Want to exercise critical thinking skills? Ask these questions whenever you discover or discuss new information. These are broad and versatile questions that have limitless applications!

Who	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... benefits from this? ... is this harmful to? ... makes decisions about this? ... is most directly affected? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... have you also heard discuss this? ... would be the best person to consult? ... will be the key people in this? ... deserves recognition for this?
What	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... are the strengths/weaknesses? ... is another perspective? ... is another alternative? ... would be a counter-argument? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... is the best/worst case scenario? ... is most/least important? ... can we do to make a positive change? ... is getting in the way of our action?
Where	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... would we see this in the real world? ... are there similar concepts/situations? ... is there the most need for this? ... in the world would this be a problem? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... can we get more information? ... do we go for help with this? ... will this idea take us? ... are the areas for improvement?
When	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... is this acceptable/unacceptable? ... would this benefit our society? ... would this cause a problem? ... is the best time to take action? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... will we know we've succeeded? ... has this played a part in our history? ... can we expect this to change? ... should we ask for help with this?
Why	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... is this a problem/challenge? ... is it relevant to me/others? ... is this the best/worst scenario? ... are people influenced by this? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... should people know about this? ... has it been this way for so long? ... have we allowed this to happen? ... is there a need for this today?
How	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... is this similar to _____? ... does this disrupt things? ... do we know the truth about this? ... will we approach this safely? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... does this benefit us/others? ... does this harm us/others? ... do we see this in the future? ... can we change this for our good?