

Tips for critical thinking, reading and writing

Follow these steps to help you with critical thinking:

1. Take time to **understand the question**: think critically about the requirements. Ask yourself why you are being required to write it, the tutor's expectations and what you need to cover. Note down in bullet-point form your thoughts and ideas in response to the question and its key terms. List all of the topics/issues that you think you will need to cover in the essay and record your initial ideas. See [key question words resource](#).
2. **Create a reading list composed of relevant material** that relates to your specific essay question. Begin by searching in the readings listed in your module guide. List material that is **definitely relevant** and **possibly relevant** in separate columns.
3. Then go to the library and collect the 'definitely relevant' material. While there, browse through and check the indexes of the 'possibly relevant' material, discarding any readings that do not look fully relevant and adding to the 'definitely relevant' those readings that will be useful to you in answering the question. Review the list and cut it down if it is too long and overwhelming. If it is a manageable list, and you feel that you could comfortably do a few additional readings, search QDiscover for a few of these. But keep the list relevant and manageable! See our website section on [reading skills](#).
4. Employ **critical reading skills**. Identify and evaluate current evidence. Why are certain arguments successful? What evidence do they use? What are the strengths/weaknesses? Why are other arguments less convincing? See our [critical reading and writing resource](#) below.
5. Make **focussed, relevant notes**. As you read through the items on your reading list, add relevant points, quotations and information under the headings you created while brainstorming. As you develop a firmer idea of the topic and how best to answer the question while reading, you may find it

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necessary to add in a couple of sections that you had not thought of during the initial stage, or, indeed, to remove some. You may find the [‘critical notes’ sheet](#) useful in encouraging critical reading and note-taking skills.

6. You should now have several quite full bullet-points that contain notes, ideas, quotations and references to your wider reading. These form the skeleton that will ultimately be fleshed out to form the paragraphs that will make up your essay.
7. Identify **your own perspective** on the topic; imagine that you are a lawyer arguing a case. As you read, you will be aware of multiple views on the issue and it is often difficult to decide the ‘best’ but your role is to weigh up the evidence and identify what is currently the most convincing. You need to have a clear sense of your own point of view and substantial reasons for it.
8. Consider the need to **persuade the reader** with a well-structured, logical argument. Think about the best way to present the argument to allow the reader to follow the various points. Clearly link each argument to the one before so that it builds towards the conclusion (see [signposting](#) resource). You want to show your active engagement with the topic and other writers’ work on it.
9. **Engage in debate.** Demonstrate that you have weighed up the various theories and are attentive to the strengths and weaknesses of different viewpoints. Your argument needs to move from simply description to analysis and evaluation. See resource on [critical writing](#).
10. Re-read the question and read back through your paragraphs to **check that you’ve fully answered the question and that all of your points are relevant.** Add in any information and analysis that you feel still needs to be included and cut any irrelevant material. If you’ve exceeded the word count, you may need to cut material that is not absolutely essential (see [word count resource](#)).