Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a complex set of skills that allows us to take information given to us, whether spoken or written, and process it beyond the surface value. Critical thinking involves an understanding of information that moves beyond the “human” elements, the need to be right, the need to be heard, the need to be recognized. Moving beyond these needs takes time, practice, and patience, but once you’ve mastered the basic elements of critical thinking the rest will fall into place.

Basic Elements of Critical Thinking

Active vs. Passive
It is easy to read or hear something and take it at its face value, but critical thinking involves active participation with the text, reading against the grain, questioning what has been stated as fact. This allows for a greater understanding of the text rather than a simple start to finish reading.

Open-Mindedness
Being open to new ideas and new ways of seeing things allows you to get beyond your own limited scope of the world around you. Seeing new things will expand your understanding of your world and will help you make better judgments.

Self-Awareness
Knowing your own underlying assumptions, values, and judgments as well as those of the author when reading a text can help you weed out those elements and lead to a better, clearer, more honest understanding of the information being presented.

Discipline
Being a disciplined reader means that you work on the text at hand instead of letting the text work on you. Reading against the grain of the text, asking questions, doing further research, all of these techniques and more make for a more critical reading of a text, leading to a deeper understanding.

Rationality
Being rational is another way of saying that you never let your emotions cloud your reading and understanding of a text. That is not to say that you should go into a text completely emotionless, but keeping track of your emotions can help you harness them when making decisions regarding a text.

While these elements might seem abstract and arbitrary, they will help you become not only a better reader, but a better writer as well. Being able to question your own work will give you the opportunity to predict what your readers will ask and to provide an answer before the question is even formed. This, in turn, will strengthen your own writing and lend it a greater credibility.
Analytical Writing

As a counterpart of critical thinking, analytical writing affords you the opportunity as a writer to not only show what you know, but to prove it. Using some of the same techniques as critical thinking listed on the opposite side of this handout, this style of writing shows your reader that you have taken the time to construct a well thought out argument and that you cared enough about your argument to do so.

Basic Elements of Analytical Writing

Know Your Readers and Their Needs
Writing in a way that both says what you want to say and also makes sure that your readers get what you want them to get isn’t always the easiest thing to do, but knowing what your readers will need when reading your work will make it easier to do. What types of questions to do expect your readers to ask? Is there a way you can answer them before their questions become a problem? Who is your audience? Is it a group of your peers, your professor, a potential employer? Knowing these things will allow you to write specifically for your audience, giving them the necessary information before they ask for it.

Organization
Present your information in the most logical way possible. Make it easy for your reader to grasp and understand what you are saying. Instead of working towards a conclusion, perhaps stating your conclusion first and building up the evidence for your statement is the best way to go.

Precision
In order to make sure your readers take away from your writing exactly what you want them to take away, you need to use the most precise language possible to present your ideas. Instead of circling around your main topic, state it outright. Plain and clear language is easier to understand than language that can be interpreted many different ways. Including specific examples and supporting evidence and using concrete, specific language help drive home the point you are trying to make.

Active vs. Passive
Your discipline will determine which voice to use in your writing. Active voice lends your writing more immediacy and makes you seem confident about what you are saying. Passive voice, on the other hand, is a staple in the more objective disciplines and shows a calculated, rational argument.

Edit Your Work
Take care of any problems that might take focus away from your argument. Strive for clarity of thought and clarity of language and try to say what you need to say without saying too much or too little. Nothing distracts more from your words than basic grammatical errors and misspellings.