

Fine-tune your critical thinking skills

This column considers what is meant by critical thinking skills and how you can develop them to fulfil your A-level potential

A-level history textbooks and study guides rarely focus on teaching you how to think independently and critically. Yet this is what is likely to enable achievement of the highest grades and prepare you for success in higher education.

What are critical thinking skills?

Critical thinking refers to the process whereby a person questions the usefulness and accuracy of information they access, avoiding the trap of accepting it at face value. Such information can take different forms (e.g. facts, opinions and judgements) and be obtained from different sources (e.g. textbooks, monographs, articles, blogs and teachers). However, regardless of the characteristics and provenance of information, the same approach to critical thinking can be applied.

A critical thinking model

The skill of questioning with a critical mind can be developed with the help of Table 1. This table incorporates levels of critical thinking (in order of importance and challenge) and cross-references these levels to generic question headings. Note that the lists of questions are not exhaustive.

Key points from the model

The model presented in Table 1 raises some general issues about how to use critical thinking.

- Recognition is a task that involves description and is fairly basic. However it provides the base for more sophisticated critical thinking.
- Although the accurate recognition of information is relatively easy it can still lead to critical thinking. There may be occasions when you do not need to go beyond recognition-based questioning to start thinking critically.
- Some types of questioning, especially those stated in the first three columns, might be considered to be fairly low-level whereas the questions posed in the fourth column are more probing and trickier to answer.
- If the model is followed it should lead you to come up with your own ideas and views about a given topic. You should be able to weigh up different perspectives and arrive at an informed judgement. Be aware though that if you find one view more convincing than another this does not mean that those rejected are wrong.

- The model purposely builds to enable you to reason or work things out for yourself. You may need some guidance on how to use it but its strength lies in prompting you to develop your own way of thinking.
- The model centres on you being sceptical or doubtful about any information you are presented with. Generally, it is 'healthy' to think in this way but there may be times when accepting what you read and hear, without questioning, is necessary (for example, with some aspects of law and order).
- From the model you will realise that the levels of skill and questions can be applied to writing and speaking as well as reading.
- Finally, it should be clear that thinking critically is an active, not passive, pursuit. Like all skills, those of critical thinking need to be practised if they are to bear fruit.

An exercise in critical thinking

Now use the model outlined to critically analyse and evaluate one of the articles in this issue of MODERN HISTORY REVIEW.

- 1 Read the article on Alexander II by Shane O'Rourke.
- 2 Go over the article again and write a summary of the article using the questions linked to the 'Recognition' level of the model.
- 3 Reflect on your summary and, using the questions linked to the 'Analysis' and 'Evaluation' levels of the critical thinking model, answer the following question:

How valid is Shane O'Rourke's view that Alexander II was a 'tsar-liberator'?

When completing the third part of the task, be aware that although the article appears to be balanced there are signs that a sympathetic view towards the tsar is being presented. Think carefully about the nature and extent of evidence presented concerning Alexander II's reforms, especially the emancipation of the serfs. Russian peasants (making up 80–90% of the population) continued to protest about their living conditions, the quality of farmland and its distribution well into the twentieth century. What does this tell you about Alexander II as a 'tsar-liberator'?

Conclusion

The pace and degree to which your critical thinking skills develop will depend on how methodical you are in applying patterns of questioning like those outlined in this article. How you apply critical thinking will vary according to the learning context you are faced with but, in general, critical thinking skills will be needed whenever you prepare a piece of work linked to the examination requirements of the specification you are following.

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Table 1 A model to help develop critical thinking

	Who, what, where and when?	How?	Why?	To what extent?
Recognition				
Type of information	What type or classification of information is being considered? (e.g. written verbal, official or not, when and where produced)	How do you know who produced the information (and why), and from when and where it originated? How was it produced?	Why was the information produced? What were the motives of the authors or producers?	Not applicable for the 'Recognition' stage
Main ideas and arguments	What are the main arguments and who is presenting them? What is the author's or producer's background?	How convincing are the main ideas and arguments? How can you reach a judgement about how convincing they are?		
Controversies	What are the controversies being presented?	How did controversies over the topic arise? How can the controversies best be explained?	Why is the topic controversial?	
Findings and conclusions	What findings and conclusions are drawn? who has produced them?	How convincing are the findings and conclusions?		
Nature and extent of the evidence utilised	What kind of evidence is used to support the findings and conclusions?	How was the evidence obtained	Why is there more information and evidence for some topics than others?	
Analysis				
Deconstructing what is presented	Not applicable for the 'Analysis' stage	Not applicable for the 'Analysis' stage	Not applicable for the 'Analysis' stage	To what extent are parts of the body of information connected?
Being clear about the component parts and how they fit together				What parts are most/least important? How can judgements about importance be justified?
Evaluation				
Thinking about how convincing arguments and supporting evidence are	Not applicable for the 'Evaluation' stage			How far are the arguments believable, even though you might not agree with them?
Reflecting on assumptions made and inferences drawn by the providers of information	What assumptions have been made and inferences drawn (list them)?			How far do you agree with the assumptions?
Deciding how recent the research material is		How recent is the research?		To what extent does outdated research lose its usefulness?
Judging whether appropriate methods of research have been adopted		How can the research best be judged as to what methods are appropriate?		
Considering how consistent the reasoning is behind the material being viewed and the extent to which it makes sense				How far do you feel that you have read or heard a detective story (that is, an account that has kept you guessing and ended in an unpredictable way)?
Assessing how far you agree with what you have heard or read				To what extent does the information fit with what you already know from other sources?
Being aware of the nature of language used (how accessible it is and how it might be used to persuade)				How far has emotive or other types of persuasive language been used?