



REVIEW

Embedding critical thinking in contemporary academic practice

Beesley, P., Cooke, B., Morris, L., & Warwick-Booth, L. (2025). *The critical thinking toolkit: Your guide to success in learning, thinking and writing at university*. SAGE. ISBN 9781529683189

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The Critical Thinking Toolkit: Your Guide to Success in Learning, Thinking and Writing at University by Paula Beesley, Belinda Cooke, Laurence Morris, and Louise Warwick-Booth is written to help university students develop their critical thinking skills in academic contexts. The book aims to translate the abstract concept of critical thinking into practical strategies that students can apply in their work, addressing a common challenge for university students: understanding what 'being critical' means. Students frequently receive feedback encouraging them to demonstrate greater critical analysis, yet many struggle to act on this expectation. The authors aim to bridge this gap through clear explanations and structured exercises that support academic practice.

The book is organised into three sections. The first introduces critical thinking and outlines its importance for academic success, encouraging students to develop a mindset grounded in questioning, evaluation, and reflection. The second explores how critical thinking can be applied in different contexts, such as lectures and seminars. Students are encouraged to prepare for sessions, engage with ideas presented in class, and reflect on their learning. The final section focuses on assessment, demonstrating how critical thinking underpins writing,

presentations, examinations, and engagement with feedback. Across these sections, the central argument is that critical thinking is not purely an intellectual skill, but a practical process embedded in everyday academic and professional activity.

The authors use scenarios drawn from typical university experiences, such as interpreting lecture content, analysing academic sources, and structuring essays, to show how critical thinking can be applied in university study. This practical approach is a strength, making the concept accessible and relevant to undergraduate students. However, it also presents a limitation, as the book relies primarily on reflective activities and exercises rather than sustained engagement with established theoretical frameworks or empirical evidence. For example, greater reference to Facione's (1990) Delphi framework, Ennis's (2011) model of critical thinking dispositions and abilities, and Paul and Elder's (2019) intellectual standards and elements of reasoning would strengthen the book's academic grounding. This relative absence of explicit theoretical framing may limit the book's utility for students progressing beyond introductory levels, where greater engagement with disciplinary epistemologies and critical debates is often required. While the emphasis on accessibility is clearly intentional, it risks presenting critical thinking as a set of techniques rather than a contested and situated practice.

This emphasis on accessibility and the attendant tendency to frame critical thinking as a set of transferable techniques sits in tension with Learning Development (LD) perspectives that position academic literacies within disciplinary contexts rather than as separate study skills (Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2006). Within this framing, the authors present critical thinking as a broadly applicable 'toolkit'. While this format delivers on its promise as a flexible resource, it risks underplaying how disciplinary conventions shape reasoning, evidence, and argument. For instance, nursing students may need to prioritise clinical evidence and professional judgement, whereas history students may focus on interpreting competing accounts of the past. Such differences reflect wider debates about whether critical thinking is a generic skill or a discipline-specific practice (Davies, 2013; Hyland, 2002; McPeck, 1981). For learning developers, the book will be most effectively used when the activities are adapted to subject-specific contexts. This highlights an important role for learning developers in mediating such resources, ensuring that ostensibly generic strategies are meaningfully aligned with disciplinary expectations and ways of knowing.



Despite these limitations, a key strength is the book's immediate applicability. For example, the suggested questioning techniques can be used when reading academic texts, identifying assumptions in lectures, and applying evaluative frameworks when constructing essays. These approaches encourage active engagement with course materials. The step-by-step guidance also makes it a useful resource for developing reasoning skills. Exercises for analysing arguments, comparing sources, or reflecting on feedback could be used by learning developers to support small-group teaching or one-to-one tutorials, while reflective components help students identify gaps in their analytical approaches and support improvement.

Overall, the book's practical approach and focus on authentic academic contexts make it particularly useful for students transitioning into higher education, including Foundation Year and Level 4 undergraduate students, who are still developing confidence with academic reading, writing, seminars, and assessment expectations. More experienced students, such as those undertaking dissertations, may find elements somewhat introductory, but could still use it as a concise refresher or quick-reference resource. By demonstrating how critical thinking can be embedded across academic practices, *The Critical Thinking Toolkit* provides an accessible framework for developing analytical engagement in higher education. Its strength lies not in offering a comprehensive theoretical account, but in supporting students to begin enacting criticality within their academic work.

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