

READING

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AS A METHOD IN YOUR GROUP PROJECT

The following guide to the appropriate exercise of critique in a university context has been developed specifically for your project work in the Opening Week. It sets out four steps for a critical approach to material in work with your group. There are two ways you can apply these four steps:

- In a critical exploration of material such as texts, films, research and other projects that you are using for your project work.
- In a critical examination and contextualisation of your group’s topic. This critical examination will play a key role for your critical comment.

Whilst other, more complex procedures may be required in other contexts, the following four steps could still be said to offer a general, basic approach to critical examination in the sense of critical thinking:

1. Understanding an argument, an approach to a research project or an action

The first step is to seek to understand the author of a text, the people behind a project and their specific plan or goals. It is worth examining the text in detail to establish the line of argument. If we take the example of text work, this first step can be broken down into the following stages:

- Summarising a text and the discussion it presents: How are the content and the arguments structured? How would you frame the arguments in your own words?
- Finding out what theories the text supports and where these are to be found.

2. Checking the argument and sources

Once you have sought to understand and familiarise yourself with a text, concept or project, the next step is to examine the arguments. At this point, you can question (cf. „Questioning mind“) the approach or proposal. Questions can be posed on many different aspects: on assumptions, on the internal or external logic of the arguments, on the intention, on one’s own position, on the underlying knowledge used, on the sources of data, on the theories and methods and if applicable on the material used, and on the objectives.

- Examine the following points: Are the arguments coherent? Are there any inconsistencies?
- Are you convinced by the arguments? What might the counter-arguments be?
- Is the weighting of the various arguments understandable? Or has too much weight been given to potential trivialities?
- Some texts or projects are based on facts or empirical studies. Can these be checked and are they correct? What sources are named? Can those sources be found and are they reliable?

3. Making positionality and limits explicit

- Each text, each project is based on assumptions. Those assumptions are not always clear. Examining a text etc. for its underlying assumptions therefore requires particular care and thoroughness. What are the assumptions? Are the assumptions correct? Do I share them?

- Each person always speaks and acts from a specific position, which is called *positionality*. This affects both texts and projects. An oft-cited position is the privileged one of „old white men“, whose viewpoint, which is in fact specific, is regularly unquestioningly accepted as truth and point of reference. Your own viewpoint is also taken from a specific position. What characteristics does your position involve? Here are some questions that can help you to critically consider your own positionality: What determines my standpoint in the world and in a given context? What role does my position in time and in society play in my perspective and in the vision of my group? How might another social group – for example with a different educational background or from a different cohort in terms of time or location – address the topic, argue, or interpret a text?

- Each individual comes from a specific context and examines a given topic from that context. This places limits on the exploration of an issue or project. Recognising and making those limits on knowledge transparent is an important step in the critical examination of a phenomenon. Useful questions here include: What are the limits of the text, project, proposal? Which questions remain unanswered, and which have not been asked? The context from which a topic is explored can also reveal underlying power relations. Addressing them is also part of a critical analysis. Following questions can be helpful: Who is included, who is excluded? Who wins, who loses? Is this being obscured? If so, how? Which voices are not being heard?

- Conversely, this means the following above all for a critical approach to your topic:

> You have certain knowledge already. You will gain other knowledge during Opening Week. What do you know about the initial situation and the topic? Set out your knowledge base. If possible, justify your use of the knowledge to which you are referring. You should also explain what knowledge would also have been useful, and where there was even a lack of knowledge, data and facts or theories. What else could one know about the issue that I do not yet know? What knowledge am I unable to access? After the process of engaging with your group’s topic, developing a vision and contextualising it in a critical comment, your knowledge will have changed. What do you know afterwards? How does the perspective change? The awareness of limited knowledge is of fundamental importance (cf. „Questioning mind“).

4. Reaching a reasoned judgement

The final step is to reach a reasoned judgement. Strengthening your critical judgement also means being able to follow the steps detailed above and not to reach conclusions too hastily. Critique seldom starts with arguments that are already clear and nuanced in your head. Instead, intuition, irritation, vague puzzlement or uncertainties are generally the trigger. It is worth having the courage to follow that intuition, to translate it into a nuanced observation and evaluation of phenomena, on which basis you can then arrive at a reasoned action or judgement.

Even in this brief guide to critical thinking, we, the authors, are working from a specific position whose assumptions and arguments deserve critical examination...

CRITIQUE

In English, the German concept “Kritik” has different translations – criticism, critique and critical thinking all come with different meanings and connotations. Criticism is usually referred to as negative feedback on behaviour, a statement or a view. Critique rather connotes a thoughtful analysis that also implies constructive elements. The words „criticism“ and “critique” are derived from the Latin „criticus“, which in turn comes from the Greek „krino“, meaning both *to separate sth., position sth. separately* and *to choose*. It can therefore – and the term is also used to – mean *to differentiate, to judge* and *to assess* (cf. Bittner 2009). Criticism in today's usage means a judgement of the value of something. Often, the connotation is that the judgement is unfavourable whereas the term “critique” considers both positive and negative aspects that were carefully weighed in a line of reasoning. Critical thinking however is usually referred to as a competence. It describes a way of engaging with phenomena that is based on critical examination and judgement. In the context of the Opening Week, we mainly engage with the terms “critique” and “critical thinking.”

The type of value judgement that is commonly termed „criticism“ always refers to things done, made or thought by people. For example, we cannot *criticise* the weather, we can only find it bad (cf. *ibid.*). Rahel Jaeggi and Tilo Wesche sum up the use of the term like this:

“Wherever there is leeway; wherever there is scope for interpretation or decisions, human actions are subject to criticism. If a range of different actions are possible, incorrect or inappropriate action is possible.“
(Jaeggi/Wesche 2009: 7)

Criticism thus implies that the object of critique can be changed through human intervention (cf. Jaeggi/Wesche 2009). It implies that something could be different, and usually better. Neither criticism nor critique require us to know what the alternatives or better options are (cf. Hobuß 2015). Jaeggi and Wesche also point to a second aspect of criticism, which also counts for critique: we can only take a critical attitude to a phenomenon, for example a poem, if that poem inspires an impulse or emotion in us. The poem must affect us in some way for us to concern ourselves with it at all. Taking a critical position requires a distance to the object in question. Someone who is absolutely engrossed in their guitar playing, for example, cannot simultaneously criticise their playing (cf. Jaeggi/Wesche 2009).

_IN ACADEMIA

The term *critique* has been widely used in society and in intellectual circles since the Enlightenment in the late 18th century and has become a fundamental attitude to the examination of knowledge and the conditions in which that knowledge is reached. One great influence on this development was the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), whose major work the „Critique of Pure Reason“ explores people's cognitive, reasoning abilities. Prior to Kant, Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) had already described critique as the human ability to distinguish or action of distinguishing between revelation and reason.

Critique has thus come to mean probing, questioning perception, thought and interpretation. Science and research are understood by scientists and researchers as critical activities. Studying, and teaching and research at university, are inconceivable without critique. Critical science also provides arguments for social discourse, without being influenced by economic interests, for example. Is it the remit of science and research to criticise social developments though? We could answer ‚no‘ and limit their role to neutral research into and a mere description of the world.

However, we could also answer ‚yes‘, for a nuanced judgement and a critical and questioning attitude (cf. „Questioning Mind“), which distinguishes science, allow us to critically assess social and political questions. Just what form this critical standard takes differs both between and within disciplines.

Many disciplines have sought a critical approach to themselves. Take for example *critical economics* (a related and growing student initiative: *Netzwerk Plurale Ökonomik*), *critical psychology* and *critical medicine* and *health sciences*. What these different critical schools have in common is that they want to look at the subject matter in the context of societal conditions and, in particular, question the foundations of their own ways of knowledge production (cf. Plurale Ökonomik).

In the arts and social sciences, the critique of content has a clear and fundamental role. Much work in the humanities can be described as critical assessment, as the aim is to develop and justify a nuanced, reasoned judgement.

_IN SOCIETY

Democracies allow implicit and explicit critique from within society. They depend on citizens who critically engage with democratic processes and struggle for real participation. Social movements are one example of this. They launch debates on climate justice, on education, discrimination and gender issues, and can strengthen democracies through the public critique of existing social conditions and structures. Often, critical science and social movements influence each other. One example is a non-fiction book by the biologist Rachel Carson published in 1962 – „Silent Spring“ – which is considered to have had a key role in bringing forward the environmental movement. Another is the findings of *critical theory*, which developed in the 1930s and whose socio-political impact is still felt to this day (Bohman 2016). Critique of capitalism and of unfettered economic growth as well as feminist and postcolonial critique, are just some of the fields in which a critical voices from society and critical science meet. They share a common critical approach to existing power relations and structures that promote inequalities.

This constitutive interrelation between democracy and critique is nothing one can take for granted. Often times, criticising social conditions requires public struggles for gaining political relevance. Especially social movements and public protests and manifestations reveal this. As the Black-Lives-Matter movement, born in the USA, shows, this struggle for finding one's voice can even be about such fundamental rights as equality for each human being, regardless of their skin colour. Throughout the past year, the movement's powerful criticism of structural racism and systemic discrimination has gained international reach and thus, is reshaping the idea of democracy in the United States. How this important relationship between democracy and critique can be maintained is currently a fundamental question to which there is as yet no answer.

_AS A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

University gives students the opportunity to immerse themselves in an environment of trying out one's perception, one's thinking and one's interpretative competence. At the same time, as a student you learn to carefully examine the assumptions underlying your perceptions, your thoughts and your interpretations. Such assumptions, which can also relate to the way in which questions are asked (cf. „Questioning Mind“), include for example your worldview, your concept of humankind, your values and standards, and the academic discipline you are trained in. This ability to reach a critical judgement is one of the most important (meta) competencies that you can learn at university. In German we would summarise this as *Urteilsvermögen*. In the Anglo-American region it is referred to as *critical thinking*. By engaging in the practical activities of reading, testing and assessing, constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing, investigating using questionnaires or in the laboratory as well as writing, students learn that a critical examination of claims and scientific results of academic or other authorities is key to developing own judgments and conclusions.

One way to adopt a critical perspective is to distance oneself from an action: taking a step back allows you to consider and reflect on the action, and to apply your conclusions in practice. This process, in which you are constantly changing perspectives, enables you to consciously shape your own life and life as the member of a society. The ability to criticise is fundamental and extremely valuable, irrespective of your later role or profession.