



General Certificate of Education

Critical Thinking 1771

CRIT1

Unit 1 Critical Thinking Foundation Unit

Report on the Examination

2010 examination - June series

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CRIT1 AS Critical Thinking Foundation Unit

General comments from the Chief Examiner

Introduction: The examination as a whole

June 2010 was the first anniversary of the AQA AS-Level in Critical Thinking. It was also the first examination of Units 3 and 4, and so of the first full A-Level. As with any new award there are lessons to be taken from the experience. Generally speaking the question-papers discriminated well. There was a very wide range of ability evident in the scripts, and the papers allowed the most able candidates to demonstrate their more advanced thinking-skills and understanding of the concepts, whilst giving the less-accomplished opportunities to gain a basic level of marks. However, there were also areas of the syllabus and corresponding questions in the exam where too many candidates were missing the point and failing to earn marks that should have been within their grasp.

There is no doubt Critical Thinking is a difficult subject, if judged on the basis of the awards. High grades are not easily gained. This has proved so since CT's inception, not only for AQA but for other boards and other related awards, both in the UK and internationally. There are some obvious reasons for this. Firstly CT is taught in the main by non-specialists whose own academic backgrounds vary widely. Many teachers feel that it takes them out of their comfort zone, not because they lack the requisite knowledge, but because of the general, cross-curricular nature of the subject. Those whose territory is maths or science are sometimes daunted by the discursive elements; arts and humanities specialists by activities involving maths and statistics. Some, it has to be acknowledged, teach it reluctantly. No subject is well taught if not taught with enthusiasm, and Critical Thinking is no exception. Indeed it is probably more dependent on the enthusiasm of the teacher than most subjects. Having said that, there was also clear evidence of some excellent teaching and thorough preparation in many centres, not just of the most able candidates but of many who were, at best, of average ability.

A second reason for sometimes lower-than-expected attainment in CT is insufficient time to prepare candidates for the examination. Whilst many centres do make adequate time-table provision, which for the AQA award is a recommended *minimum* of 2 hours per week, a proportion do not, and enter candidates who are not sufficiently immersed in the discipline or confident in the skills. Coupled with this is a perception that because Critical Thinking has less 'content' than other AS-/A-Levels, the syllabus can be covered in significantly fewer hours. This is a misconception: there is a body of knowledge and understanding that is essential to success, and this is laid out and explained in the Specification. If the concepts and related terminology are not well-understood even the most naturally able candidates will struggle to gain the highest marks in the exam. The concepts are not difficult and the terminology is neither technical nor extensive; but much of it will be new to candidates at the start of the course, and also quite abstract. Moreover it is not just knowledge *of* the concepts or of what terms mean that are tested in CT but their *application*, and it is this which takes time and repetition to bring to the required level.

By its cross-curricular nature much of the conceptual content is not unique to CT, but is drawn from other disciplines. To give one example: in Unit 2 a question may arise that involves data in the form of *averages*. The concepts of mean and median are taught from Key Stage 2 onwards in maths and statistics, and Unit 2 assumes that candidates are familiar with them.

Candidates taking CT are not tested on their ability to explain or calculate an average, though in the process of answering the question they may need to make simple calculations of that kind, and again it is assumed that they can, given their general education up to GCSE. What a CT question will typically test is the candidate's ability to assess reasoning based on such data: What can and/or cannot be reliably *inferred from* it? What might *explain* it (if, for instance, it is surprising, counter-intuitive or anomalous in some way)? What *implicit assumptions* are made in drawing a particular *conclusion* from it? And so on. The true content of Critical Thinking is the conceptual apparatus required for these tasks: inference, explanation, claim, conclusion, assumption, etc. And these too are notions that have their place in other curriculum subjects. (Applying them is, in the jargon, a *transferable* skill.)

The point to take from this is that no teacher or candidate need be intimidated by the difficulty or complexity of the content of CT, nor of the quantity of what has to be learned. But it must be recognised that there *is* a content (albeit a slender one) and that candidates need to be thoroughly familiar with it, and practised in applying it in all sorts of contexts, for success in the subject. CT is a set of high-order thinking skills, common to all disciplines and drawing on all.

To end on an encouraging note, a number of this year's candidates consistently demonstrated these skills to a very impressive level, and many others did so to a commendable level. It is hoped that the individual examiners' reports on specific units will assist centres to build on this success and raise performance in future years.

General Comment from the Principal Examiner

The paper was of appropriate length as most candidates completed all questions set. The theme of 'The News, and whether it should be freely available' was accessible to candidates and generated some interesting essays in answer to the last question. What will be of more interest and help to teachers and candidates alike, are my remarks on specific questions.

Remarks on Specific Questions

Question 1(a)

The instruction was to identify Patrick's reasons in document A. There is no need to paraphrase or interpret. Candidates risk losing marks because they think they have to put a gloss on what is said. They then risk leaving something out or getting the meaning wrong. To identify a reason or a conclusion, a candidate simply needs to identify and transfer the wording to their answer.

Question 1(b)

The difference between this 'identify' instruction and the one in 1(a) is that it refers to an *implicit* assumption which means the assumption is not explicitly or blatantly in the text, which in turn means that simply lifting text and claiming it's the implicit assumption cannot be credited. Here, the candidate is required to realise what has been left unsaid – a fact or value that underlies the explicit words of the argument, but which is essential for the argument to work – and to express it in the candidate's own words.

Question 2

Not many candidates scored all four marks. A minority of candidates didn't know the term analogy. Some candidates didn't know how to assess an analogy in detail, and confined themselves to discussing it being a weak or convincing analogy without saying why. These got no marks. Most candidates gained 2 marks by pointing out one or two similarities or differences. In general, the more things in common the stronger the analogy, and the more differences the weaker. Candidates need more practice at assessing analogies used in arguments.

Question 3(a)

This is an 'identify' question without using the word 'identify'. A candidate simply has to lift Sam's words verbatim and transfer to the answer to gain the mark. No need for paraphrasing. A number of candidates missed this altogether, which was surprising given the trigger word 'should' in the conclusion.

Question 3(b)

Another 'identify' question. The same rules apply.

Question 3(c)

Another 'identify' question, but because it's looking for that which *underlies* the reasoning, this means it's not explicit and therefore simply lifting Sam's actual words into the answer, will not gain marks. Some candidates were caught by this because they didn't realise they had to look *behind* what Sam said to find the values or principles that he was assuming as background to what he actually said. Other candidates didn't know what a value judgement or general principle was. This is a recurring weakness of candidates across all four units. Teachers are advised to give this area more focus.

Candidates were not sure what 'persuasive language' meant. It is taken to refer to language which has an emotive or rhetorical content intrinsic to the words themselves, not necessarily in the extrinsic persuasive effects they might have on the hearer. Some candidates thought that Sam was using persuasive language by saying that, 'there won't be any news at all!' which might scare his listeners into buying a paper. However, the words, 'there won't be any news at all!' are straightforwardly factual, and although perhaps a worrying fact, they are not *in themselves* persuasive. The same goes for Sam's use of 'should'. He clearly wants to influence his audience, but 'should' has no emotive or persuasive content, unlike 'freebie rubbish' or 'celebrity gossip'.

Question 4

Not all extremes are the result of slippery slopes. 'If there was no carbon there'd be no human beings at all, ever!' is an extreme consequence of there being no such thing as carbon but it's no slippery slope as carbon is a necessary condition of humanity since we're made of the stuff.

Jack's first accusation of slippery slope is dubious and probably unfair because it looks very like Sam is putting forward a necessary condition. If news is what we read in the papers and see on the TV then how on earth is there going to be any reporting of this stuff unless other people are finding out about it first of all? It needs to be discovered before it is told, and this seems perfectly logical.

Most Candidates correctly judged that the second accusation of slippery slope was fair and proceeded to give an example, e.g. 'we'd be totally powerless as to what to believe'. This is fine, but to gain another 1 – 2 marks they should mentioned more examples to develop further their contention, e.g. 'Politicians could say anything and we'd have to believe them' and 'Without the news our democracy would fall apart' and briefly explained why these are gross exaggerations of the dangers of not having genuine investigative reporters.

Question 5(a)

A difficult question, which differentiates the stronger candidates. Intermediate conclusions aren't easy to spot, but *implied* intermediate conclusions are even harder to identify.

Question 5(b)

Many candidates lost marks on this question because they automatically assumed that if there is an insult or personal remark it must be an ad hominem flaw; but this is not necessarily the case. For if the insult, (in this case, being called naïve), is based on reasoning about someone's argument being poor, and results from that, then it's not unfairly ad hominem. It's only if it's the other way round, i.e. you attack someone's reasoning on the basis of an insulting personal reference to their character, background, or vested interest, that you get an ad hominem flaw.

Question 5(c)

This question was generally answered rather well, though some candidates forgot that it, being part of the Question 5 set, still referred back to the quote given immediately prior to Question (5a), and proceeded to challenge parts of Jack's argument which did not appear in the quote. No marks could be given for these answers despite some good critical thinking, because they simply didn't answer the question. Candidates should be alerted to this as a matter of exam technique in critical thinking papers. That is to say, any passages cited at the start of a question sequence, e.g. 5(a) to 5(c) or 3(a) to (3d) in this paper, mean that candidates must confine their answers to the information contained in the relevant passage, and must not go outside it.

Question 6 Ok.

Question 7

An 'identify' question. It's simply a matter of spotting the conclusion in the document and repeating it verbatim in the answer.

Question 8(a) Ok.

Question 8(b) Ok.

Question 9

Many answers to this question raised concern regarding candidates' understanding of the phrase 'limiting/restricting the options'. This is the same as 'false dichotomy', which means limiting the options to just two, but in such a way that not only do you illegitimately ignore third and fourth options, but also make sure that one of the options you limit things to is so repellent that people are clearly going to go for the only remaining feasible one – the one which you are arguing.

Question 10 Ok.

Question 11

A small minority of candidates interpreted this question as asking whether news *on* health care and education should be freely available to all. They were given credit for any good arguments they made, but lost marks because their conclusions were not addressed to the question, and because there was little in the source documents about health care and education news, so they couldn't refer to these to support their argument. Candidates are advised to read the questions carefully.

Others didn't refer to health care and education at all, and thus lost the chance to address the whole question and to be able to gain marks by discussing/debating the suitability of this analogy with free news.

Very few appealed explicitly to moral principles of equality, fairness, and the value of the truth, but merely assumed these as background to their argument. There were very few who realised that it was relevant and useful to be clear on what was meant by the key terms of the issue – terms such as 'free' and 'news'.

Bullet points in a question are guides to the marks. It is assumed that reasoning should ordinarily include counterarguments because anyone single-mindedly arguing for a position to the exclusion of all other considerations and arguments to the contrary is not displaying a high level of critical thinking skill.

New Numbering System and New Style Answer Book

Centres are thanked for preparing so thoroughly their candidates to work with the new numbering system and the new style answer book. The majority of candidates responded well to the changes to the June 2010 exams, but where difficulties were experienced, centres are asked to draw candidates' attention to the comprehensive range of guidance material that is available on this subject in order that they are confident about what is required of them in future examinations. Support available on this issue includes Guides for teachers and candidates, and specimen question papers and mark schemes showing the changes in action. All documents published in support of the changes to exams can be accessed via notices published on all qualification homepages, all subject notice boards, and on the parent and candidate area of the web.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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