



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2011**

Critical Thinking

CRIT1

(Specification 2770)

Unit 1: Foundation Unit

Report on the Examination

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CRIT1 AS Critical Thinking Foundation Unit

General comments from the Chief Examiner

Introduction: the examination as a whole

Generally speaking both the AS question-papers discriminated well. As in previous sessions, there was a very wide range of ability evident in the scripts, with only the most able candidates gaining A and good-B grades. It is evident from the performance that Critical Thinking remains a difficult subject, and the AQA specification is no exception. That is as it should be, since its purpose is to assess candidates' ability to think and reason independently, using skills that go beyond the recalling of facts and demonstrating of understanding.

There was once again 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. However, there were also continuing signs of insufficient time having been spent exercising critical skill to the level needed for grades above the basic level. I therefore feel justified in repeating some of the comments made after the 2010 award.

The recommended timetable provision for the AQA award is a *minimum* of 2 hours per week. Any less and students are insufficiently immersed in the discipline and all but the most naturally gifted will lack confidence in the skills, and fluency in the associated language. 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 themselves 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 some of it quite abstract. Moreover it is not just knowledge of the concepts or of what terms mean that is tested in Critical Thinking but their *application*, and it is this which takes time and practice to bring to the required level.

Finally, there is one vital ingredient that is needed for success in the subject, and that is to enjoy it. Students who have time to debate and discuss issues of interest and importance will exercise their critical skills in ways that cannot be achieved on a limited time allocation and speed-teaching of the bare bones of the syllabus. A more generous allocation of time for Critical Thinking has benefits for other subjects as well, since many of the traditional specifications now require students to demonstrate critical skills in their responses. It has been shown¹ that on average students who take critical thinking perform better – by a small but measurable margin – than others across the 16+ curriculum. But given that Critical Thinking is an exercise in higher-order reasoning, that is not a surprising statistic.

¹ See presentation by Beth Black to the British Academy, February 2010

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 and how they were handled.

Question 1(a)

The instruction here was to identify Patrick's reasons in document A. All a candidate needs to do to get full marks is to pick out what Patrick says and copy them word for word. There is no need to paraphrase or interpret. A lot of students risk losing marks because they think they have to put a gloss on what is said. But then they risk leaving something out or getting the meaning wrong. To identify a reason or a conclusion, all you have to do is spot it and transfer the wording to your answer. It's simpler than candidates seem to think.

Question 1(b)

The difference between this 'identify' instruction and the one in 1a) is that it refers to an *implicit* assumption, and as candidates ought to know, this means the assumption is not explicitly or blatantly in the text, which in turn means that simply lifting a chunk of text and claiming it's the implicit assumption is bound to be the wrong move in answering this question. Here, the candidate is required to realize 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 on this one. A minority didn't appear to know what an analogy was. Another group didn't know how to assess an analogy in detail, and confined themselves to talking blandly about it being a weak or convincing analogy without saying why. These got no marks. Quite a few chalked up a couple of marks by pointing out one or two similarities or differences. In general, the more things in common – in the relevant sense – the stronger the analogy, and the more differences the weaker. Candidates need more practice at assessing analogies used in arguments, as questions on these come up quite often in exams.

Question 3(a)

This is an 'identify' question without using the word 'identify'. All a candidate has to do to get the mark is simply lift Sam's words just as he says them and transfer them to the answer. No need for paraphrasing. A fair few missed this altogether, which was a little surprising given the obvious trigger word 'should' in the conclusion.

Question 3(b)

Another 'identify' question. The same rule applies; simply copy Sam's reasons as he words them into your answer and you get full marks.

Question 3(c)

Yet another 'identify' question, but because it's looking for something that *underlies* the reasoning, this means it's not explicit and therefore simply lifting Sam's actual words into the answer, will not score 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 seem to know what a value judgement or general principle was. This is a recurring weakness of candidates across all four units, this year and last year too. Teachers need to give this area more focus and the students more practice.

Question 3(d)

This question was a bit hit and miss due to candidates not being 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 meant literally, and although perhaps worryingly, 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

Two things for candidates to learn from this question.

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. The second thing is that if a question carries more points than most others, (there were 6 marks for Question 4), then you’ll need to say a bit more to get them all. For example, most candidates correctly judged that the second accusation of slippery slope was fair and proceeded to give an example, eg. ‘we’d be totally powerless as to what to believe’. This is fine, but to get another mark or two they should have mentioned more examples to beef up their contention that it was fair, eg. ‘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 hard question. Intermediate conclusions aren’t easy to spot, but *implied* intermediate conclusions are even tougher. Not too many got this one.

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, ie. 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.

So, not all personal remarks/insults are ad hominem flaws. Candidates would do better with a more nuanced approach to flaws.

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 5(a), 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, eg. Questions 5(a) to 5(c) or Questions 3(a) to 3(d) 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. Yet again, it's simply a matter of spotting the conclusion in the document and repeating it word for word in the answer. Paraphrasing is permissible, but takes more time and has to be accurate.

Question 8(a) OK

Question 8(b) OK

Question 9

Many answers to this question raised some concern about many candidates' understanding of the phrase 'limiting/restricting the options'. This is the same thing as 'false dichotomy'. Some answered as if they had never heard of such a thing, and quite a few others thought it meant limiting the options to just one. In fact, it 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 you are arguing for. More class practice in this and other flaws is recommended.

However, this question was complicated in addition by the realisation that there seemed to be more than one plausible set of restricted options, so the mark scheme was amended to account for this so that candidates got the credit they deserved.

Question 10 OK

Question 11

A small minority of candidates misread this question as asking about whether news *on* health care and education should be freely available to all. They were given credit for any good arguments they made, but obviously lost marks because their conclusions were not addressed to the question, and because there was precious little in the source documents about health care and education news, so they couldn't refer to these to support their argument. Candidates must 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 extra marks by discussing/debating the suitability of this analogy with free news.

Again, 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. And again, there were very few who realised that it was relevant and useful to get clear on what was meant by some of the key terms of the issue – terms such as 'free' and 'news'.

The bullet points in the question are guides to the marks, so candidates should make sure they do all that the bullet points suggest. It is taken as read that reasoning should ordinarily include counterarguments because anyone who single-mindedly argues for a position to the exclusion of all other considerations and arguments to the contrary is not displaying a sufficiently high level of critical thinking skill, whether at A2 or AS level.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.