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## **UNIT 1: DEVELOPING CRITICAL, ANALYTICAL AND INTERPRETIVE THINKING SKILLS**

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### **1.0 OBJECTIVES**

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This Unit is about giving you some thinking tools which will make you a better writer, reader and thinker. All these tools will help you become a more reflective person who has the capacity to self-question and dispassionately analyse, synthesize and interpret different kinds of material that you come across and which you can use in your writing.

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### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Two of your friends are arguing about flattening the curve of the spread of Covid 19 in your region. Each friend has many suggestions to offer – each is presenting statistics, words of experts and hypothetical situations that may arise. The thoughts and interpretation on one side of the argument seem to directly contradict the figures and arguments of other experts.

So which side would you take? Why? What other points would you consider? How would you know which side offers more cogent arguments?

Every day we are faced with such situations and have to take considered decisions. We have to think intelligently about what we hear and read before we feel confident about any issue. We need to practise analysing our beliefs and those of others and evaluate them by looking at the reasons. So thinking critically does not mean that we have to contradict others always – all we need to do is to examine opinions closely and in-depth before we accept them.

So thinking critically means the ability to analyse, interpret and evaluate our own ideas and those of others. Since we are constantly bombarded with ideas, data and other bits of information we need to examine these carefully before we accept or reject them. In other word, we need to become reflective thinkers.

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## 1.2 THINKING CRITICALLY AS A WRITER, READER AND TROUBLESHOOTER

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When you begin to write, you need to think critically in two important ways:

- 1) You need to think critically about all the information that you have collated from different sources, i.e. books, journals, internet, etc.
- 2) You need to be a critical listener as you hear about other people's experiences, beliefs and ideas.

### 1.2.1 Strategies for Reading Critically

Before you write, you need to read and listen. So let us begin with strategies for reading critically. How do you become a thoughtful reader? Well, a thoughtful reader is one who must patiently **read** information concerned not only with simple comprehension of facts but also be mindful of inferring, interpreting, analysing and evaluating the ideas in a text. S/he must be aware that one must adopt different strategies for reading different types of texts. On the one hand, you are trying to understand a text on its own terms, and on the other hand, you are critically questioning the ideas and language in it.

We will discuss some of the critical reading strategies which will enrich your thinking as a reader and will also be helpful when you play the role of a critical writer. The ideas given below are an adaptation from Axelrod and Cooper (2012)

- **Annotating:** This entails recording your reactions to a text, your interpretation and questions as you read along. These are notes you write as you read along.
- **Taking inventory:** Listing and grouping your annotations so that you find meaningful patterns. This would require looking for repetitions such as recurring images, stylistic features such as repeated words or phrases, repeated examples or illustration. These patterns may reveal something about the reading text.
- **Outlining:** Listing the text's main ideas or the gist of the text as well as important supporting details.
- **Summarizing:** Distilling the main ideas or gist of a text.
- **Synthesizing:** Integrating your own ideas with the information learned from other sources.
- **Contextualizing:** Placing the reading text in its historical and cultural context and asking whether it would be useful for your context.
- **Explaining the significance of figurative language:** This is when you examine how metaphors, similes, personification and other such literary devices are used in a text to convey meaning and evoke feelings.
- **Reflecting on challenges to our beliefs and value:** This refers to texts which may contradict some of your core ideas and beliefs. Instead of dismissing these, it would be a good idea to think again about your ideas and belief system.
- **Evaluating the topic of an argument:** This entails understanding whether the arguments presented by the writer is well reasoned and adequately supported.
- **Recognizing emotional manipulation:** This is being aware whether the text is unfairly manipulating you, based on false or exaggerated claims.

- **Judging the writer’s credibility:** This means identifying whether the writer represents different points of view and has satisfactory information about what s/he is writing about.  
(Adapted from Alexrod and Cooper,2012)

These strategies of critically reading texts, would aid you immensely in the writing process and make you a reflective writer with a vision and with considered and rational opinions. Similar strategies would be applicable when you are listening to a lecture.

**Check your progress 1**

What are the strategies that you use to be a critical reader?

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**1.2.2 Thinking Critically as a Writer**

When you being drafting your essay or assignment or story, you must be a critical thinker in another way. You have to become your toughest reader-critic. You must develop the skill of objectively reviewing what you have written at every stage. The questions you could ask yourself are:

- 1) Do my ideas appear clear and logical not only to me but also to my readers?
- 2) Will my readers find my opinions well developed and well supported?
- 3) Does my writing reflect my core beliefs in a considered, well-thought of way?

In order to be a reflective person, one needs to be aware of the following issues:

- i) Learn to differentiate fact from opinion:** Remember a fact remains true, no matter who presents it. Some statements are considered facts because they have been verified by research and generally accepted by everyone. We accept as a fact that dogs are domestic animals and tigers are wild animals. We also know as factual information that Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by Sri Lankan terrorists. However, John F Kennedy’s murder is speculative and a matter of opinion. Some people say Lee Harvey Oswald killed him, others say there were two shooters, and some even blame the CIA for this.
- ii) Support your opinions with evidence:** These could be examples and illustrations, statistics, opinions of experts or even experiences of family and friends. The more convincing the evidence, the more likely readers are able to accept your views as true.
- iii) Evaluate the strength of your evidence:** As you choose your evidence, you should ask yourself the question, “Are these points supporting my topic sentence?” If you

are using statistics or any other material, be sure it is from a reliable source. You must be certain that your experts are unbiased and their research is careful and professional. Always acknowledge your sources (It amounts to plagiarism if you do not do so). In other words, you must develop a critical eye for choosing the best evidence to support your topic.

As you go through your writing – even parts of it – look at it from the point of view of the reader. Readers need to see relevance and clarity as they read along. Keep asking yourself questions such as “Do I need more material here to buttress my arguments?” “Am I vague here?” “Am I being too general here?” “Can I improve my sentence structure here?” “Should I consult a thesaurus for more enriched vocabulary?” and so on.

- iv) **Avoid biases and strong emotions:** As you think critically about the evidence you are using, be sure to monitor any prejudices and strong emotional attitudes that may distort the information that you are presenting – especially in argumentative and persuasive essays. Please be sure that you are sensitive to gender, caste, racial or religious issues. At the same time, you need to be aware of stereotypes such as “All girls like pink colour.” “Or Japanese/German cars are best in the world.” (Some ideas adapted from Wyrick, 2005)

Critical thinking involves much more than the points mentioned here. To be a reflective person is a lifelong endeavour. To be a critical writer, you have to develop into a person of reflection and reason.

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### 1.3 ANALYSING AS A STRATEGY

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While writing we need to develop the skill of analysing as well as synthesizing. Analysing is more a reading strategy while synthesizing is a writing strategy. Both go hand-in-hand.

What is it that happens when we analyse something? Analysing involves pulling things apart. When we analyse an argument for instance, we need to read it closely and critically. Let us first look at the criteria for analysing arguments. According to Axelrod and Cooper (2012), analysing arguments involve two categories: **basic features and motivating factors**.

Let us now give you an example of analysing arguments. Before that let us discuss the criteria of analysing **arguments**. First, look at the **basic features**:

- **Issues:** What does the writer wish to address? – What problems or issues.
- How does the writer define or frame the issues?
- **Position:** What are the writer’s own views on the issue? This would normally be the ‘thesis statement’ of the essay.
- **Arguments:** What evidence does the writer provide to support his/her position? These could be facts, examples, expert opinions, statistics and so on.
- **Counterargument:** How does the writer refute the opposite point of view? Does s/he concede to some of the opposing arguments? How strong are the writer’s own views versus the opponent?

Then there are certain factors which could be explicitly stated or even implied in the writer's arguments. These are known as **motivating factors**.

- **Values:** These include moral, ethical or ideological considerations of the writer, which would inevitably creep into any piece of writing.
- **Needs and interests:** This would include the need of the writer to press for any burning issues in his/her life.
- **Priorities / Concerns:** What are the fears and concerns of the writer? These would inevitably become the writer's priority.  
(Some of the ideas adapted from Alexrod and Cooper,2012)

Read these two paragraphs and answer some of the questions which will show you how arguments are built up.

### Passage 1

This book, Animal Liberation, is about the tyranny of human over non-human animals. This tyranny has caused and today is still causing an amount of pain and suffering that can only be compared with that which resulted from the centuries of tyranny by white humans over black humans. The struggle against this tyranny is a struggle as important as any of the moral and social issues that have been fought over in recent years.

### Passage2

This book is an attempt to think through, carefully and consistently, the question of how we ought to treat non-human animals. In the process it exposes the prejudices that lie behind our present attitudes and behaviour. In the chapters that describe what these attitudes mean in practical terms – how animals suffer from the tyranny of human beings – there are passages that will arouse some emotions. These will, I hope, be emotions of anger and outrage, coupled with a determination to do something about the practices described. Nowhere in this book, however, do I appeal to the reader's emotions where they cannot be supported by reason. When there are unpleasant things to be described it would be dishonest to try to describe them in some neutral way that hid their real unpleasantness. You cannot write objectively about the experiments of the Nazi concentration camp "doctors" on those they considered "subhuman" without stirring emotions; and the same is true of a description of some of the experiments performed today on non-humans in laboratories in America, Britain, and elsewhere. The ultimate justification for opposition to both these kinds of experiments, though, not emotional. It is an appeal to basic moral principles which we all accept, and the application of these principles to the victims of both kinds of experiment is demanded by reason, not emotion.

(Both passages from Singer, P. 2001 - Writings on an Ethical Life)

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1 What is the main idea of the two passages?

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2 Does the author appeal to people’s emotions?

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These two paragraphs are excellent examples of how arguments are made. Let us look at both the **basic issues** and the **motivating factors** which the writer has marshalled to put across his point of view.

**Issue:** Rights of non-human species living on planet earth.

**Position:** Non-human animals have equal rights as humans.

**Arguments:** Gives examples of treatment of white humans on black humans (para 1)

- Nazi camp doctors’ experiments on Jews (para 2)
- This is as cruel as the laboratory experiments on innocent animals.

Counter arguments:

- Appeals to morality, ethics and speaking out against cruelty to animals.
- Powerful species cannot exploit the vulnerable and powerless.
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**Motivating factors:**

**Values:** Equality of all species.

**Needs and Interests:** An interest in leading an ethical life.

**Priorities:** Equality and the Rights of all life on this planet is the writer’s utmost priority.

### 1.3.1 Synthesizing as a Writing Strategy

Synthesizing involves presenting facts, ideas and information taken from various sources and suggesting ways in which these sources have a relationship. For example, facts taken from a particular article could be extended in another book; or you may find arguments in one research paper which are contradicted in another source. In fact, as Alexrod and Cooper (2012) very succinctly say “When you synthesize material from different sources, you construct a conversation among your sources, a conversation in which you also participate.”

So synthesizing is an important step in the process of writing on any topic, especially if you are using multiple resources. In order to create an effective synthesis, you must read the all material you have collected, albeit superficially; and then focus on the source you have chosen as most appropriate for your topic. If you are basing your assignment on multiple source synthesis, you need to pick up relevant arguments/facts from these different articles/books and perhaps a quotation or two as well to illustrate your points.

### Check your progress 3

1. Select a passage which has an argumentative focus and follows the basic issues and motivating factors which are outlined.

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2. Write an essay on any topic of your choice which follows an argumentative framework.

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#### 1.4 INTERPRETIVE THINKING SKILLS

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Writers often tell you more than they say directly. They imply emotions and attitudes, and suggest points of view. They give you hints or clues that help you "read between the lines". When you infer, you go beyond the surface details to see other meanings that are not directly stated. For instance, an author may not state directly that a particular character is bad, but the words used to describe that person and the situation may convey the writer's attitude towards the character.

Read the following passage and jot down all the facts the author gives you about baths in the Roman society.

##### **Passage**

For the ancient Romans, taking a bath was a very special occasion. Because they considered bathing a social opportunity, they constructed huge public baths that put our modern-day indoor pools and spas to shame. Not only were the baths themselves lavishly decorated, they were also surrounded by shops, libraries, and lounges so that a person could shop, read or chat after bathing. The famed Baths of Caracalla, for example, offered Roman citizens massages and saunas in addition to a gymnasium and gardens for after-bath walks in lovely surroundings. Art lovers that they were, the Romans also frequently built art galleries into their bathing facilities. There were also kitchens, where food was prepared to serve hungry bathers.

Although initially men and women bathed separately, mixed baths became the fashion until 500 A.D., when the coming of Christianity brought the public baths to an end.

Now let us analyse the passage:

What does this passage tell you about baths in Roman society? The text tells you that taking a bath was a very special occasion, and was a social opportunity. What can we infer from the text? Which of these is true?

- i. The ancient Romans were the first to lead a life of pure luxury.
- ii. If the Romans had spent more time governing and less time bathing, the Roman Empire would still exist today.
- iii. The ancient Romans made luxury and socializing a part of bathing.

The answer is (iii). We can infer that the Roman bath was full of luxuries and was a place where people could socialize. There is nothing in the text that can suggest that the Romans spent a large part of their time in baths, nor that they were the first to lead a life of pure luxury. When we summarize from the above text, we need to state the inference in clear terms. In drawing such conclusions (making inferences), we are really getting at the main idea of the text – what the author actually wishes to convey through the details and facts. Merely getting the fact right is not enough – we must think about what these facts mean in the context of the passage.

#### **Check your progress 4**

Here are two passages. Note down the main facts and details that have been provided and state the inference you would make from these facts/details.

##### **Passage 1**

In one study, 93 percent of people who suffered from chronic muscle or bone pain - lacked vitamin D. Another study done by Harvard University showed that vitamin D, which we get mainly from sunlight, fatty fish, orange juice, and breakfast cereals prevents bone fractures better than calcium does. Vitamin D also reduces the risk of getting arthritis by one-third. Getting the proper amount of vitamin D lowers blood pressure and seems to slow the growth of cancer cells. Furthermore, adequate Vitamin D reduces the risk of getting multiple sclerosis by 50 percent and schizophrenia by 90 percent.

##### **Passage 2**

Not surprisingly, the crime victims are often called upon to identify the person who robbed or attacked them. For a jury, the victim's testimony is often proof positive that the accused is guilty. After all, who can better identify the wrongdoer than the person harmed? This is just common sense. Yet as is so often the case, that common sense can be misleading. As it turns out, crime victims don't necessarily make reliable witnesses. Overcome with fear, they close their eyes or focus fixedly on the weapon being used to threaten them. As a result, they don't get a good look at the thief or attacker. While it's not true that crime victim's testimony is not always inaccurate, it's also true that one can't assume a victim's identification is automatic proof of guilt.

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## **1.5 LET US SUM UP**

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In this Unit we introduced you to some strategies which will help you become a more reflective reader and writer. Remember, the skills of reading and writing are inextricably interrelated. A thoughtful reader / writer is not only able to comprehend, but research

meaningfully by asking the right questions. S/he is also able to analyse skillfully and interpret the texts by reading ‘between the lines’, and to recognize ideas and information not directly stated. Writers have the creative license of not stating ‘directly’ but implying information. In this Unit, you looked at some of the topics which will enable you become a better reader and writer.

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## 1.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Axelrod, Rise B. and Cooper R. Charles, (2012) *Concise Guide to Writing*. New York, Bedford/St Martin’s.

Wyrick, Jean (2005) *Steps to Writing Well - with Additional Readings*. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth

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## 1.7 ANSWERS

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### Check your progress 1

Write the answer in your own words.

### Check Your Progress 2

1 The main ideas of the two passages:

- Cruelty to animals is as “wrong” as cruelty to humans.
- Experiments on humans are as cruel as experiments on another species.

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- No, he appeals to peoples’ reason.
- He appeals to moral principles of ‘equality’ where all species on the planet are equal and deserve equal respect and kindness.
- The powerful species, ie. humans should not exploit others.

### Check your progress 3

Write the answer in your own words.

### Check your progress 4

#### Passage 1

People who suffered from chronic muscle or bone pain - lacked vitamin D – study at Harvard University showed – vitamin D – from sunlight, fatty fish, orange juice, and breakfast cereals – prevents bone fractures – reduces risk of arthritis.

– proper amount of vitamin D lowers blood pressure – slows down growth of cancer cells – reduces risk of multiple sclerosis and schizophrenia.

**Inference:** Vitamin D is essential for the prevention of many serious diseases.

#### Passage 2

## **Crime**

Victims called upon to identify the person who robbed or attacked them – for injury, victim's testimony – proof of the accused being guilty. However, crime victims are not necessarily reliable witnesses – overcome with fear, close their eyes or look only at the weapon – as a result, don't get a good look at the attacker – victim testimony is not always inaccurate – cannot be treated as automatic proof of guilt.

**Inference:** Victim's testimony is not reliable and should not be taken as the automatic proof of guilt.



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