



Narrator

Coffee is better than tea.

That's an opinion. It's not an argument in academic terms, although you might want to argue with the opinion.

Now this is an academic argument:

Statement one: Caffeine stimulates the brain and nervous system.

Statement two: Coffee contains more caffeine than tea.

And statement three is the conclusion: Therefore coffee is more stimulating than tea.

An argument is a collection of statements which, when you consider them together, allows you to make another statement or a conclusion. Making and evaluating arguments is one of the key functions of critical thinking. We'll come back to this.

You've probably heard this term 'critical thinking' before. But what exactly does it mean? It's what you do when you evaluate information and make decisions. And it's crucial if you want to become an independent thinker: if you want to think for yourself. And if you want to get good grades. You can defend your opinions and evaluate theories, finding their weaknesses and strengths.

So, it sounds like a good thing, doesn't it? But how do you do it? Back to our argument. If you're a critical thinker and someone tells you coffee is more stimulating than tea, what do you do?

First, examine their argument. Is there a logical connection between the statements? I think so.

Then you'd examine their sources. Ask questions like these: whose work is it? When was it written? How was the research funded? What methods were used to find the evidence? Is it objective – what's fact and what's opinion? What has been left out? What other perspectives or points of view could there be? Ask questions to analyse these sources, compare them with other sources, and synthesise your findings.

And it's important to try to put your own biases to one side. We all have them: "I have to say I prefer coffee, so I'll look for evidence that supports my view." And look out for any assumptions. "Well, coffee's good for you, isn't it?"

And critical thinking can be applied to more than just reading, you can write critically too. Phrases like these are a great way to introduce sources and evidence: 'It can be argued that...' 'There is evidence to suggest that...' 'This supports the conclusion that...'

So, go out, find out more about this huge topic and try it out for yourself. Critical thinking is like a muscle: it gets stronger the more you work at it.

Of course, you'll need a fully alert and stimulated mind in order to get down to work. Which leaves one question: which is better, coffee or tea?

Vocabulary

to synthesise

to combine elements (ideas, arguments, viewpoints, theories etc.) into a single idea

bias

preference or opinion which unfairly influences your actions

assumption

a belief or expectation that something is true, although you don't have evidence