



**UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON**

**CENTRE FOR ONLINE &
DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Engaging critically when studying online – a guide for students

Are you studying an online university or Higher Education course? Have you been asked to engage critically with online material or when in an online tutorial? Do you know what this means and how to do it?

This is a handy introduction to engaging critically online, something especially important in a world of fake news and Generative AI. Find out how to better assess ideas and evidence and create your own arguments, skills useful for both your studies and future careers.

Read on to get the top tips of the Centre for Online and Distance Education (CODE), including a practical introduction to using Generative AI for developing critical thinking online.

The 'whats' and 'whys'

What do we mean by 'critical'?

- To think critically is to examine ideas, evaluate them, and assess their merit
- Critical thinking involves looking at evidence and assessing its strengths and weaknesses

What do we mean by 'student engagement'?

- Student engagement is about investing in learning. This can include completing work or a set task, involvement in learning activities, and interactions with fellow students, teachers, and the wider university

- The term 'active' engagement is sometimes used, but you don't necessarily need to be 'seen' to be engaging in order to be participating.

Why is 'critical engagement' important for students?

- Through it, you can better assess evidence, literature and theory, synthesise your own thoughts, and create your own arguments
- The critical thinking skills you learn can be applied more generally, including outside of your studies (e.g., when assessing the validity of a news item) as well as in your future careers (it is an employability skill).

When engaging critically online

You should...

- Make sure you engage with the online task/ assessment information, to understand why you have been asked to engage critically. What are the learning outcomes? What are you being asked to do? What are the different elements of the task?
- Engage with the concept of 'information evaluation'. A big part of being critical is understanding the information at hand, and whether or not it is reliable. Check out the reliability of your online sources.
- Be curious! Ask questions (of yourself, the tutor, your fellow students) and question the material. This can lead to active participation in critical thinking tasks and build confidence. For instance, an online activity could pose an open-ended question with no clear right/wrong answer, and you could debate your response with other students in real-time (whether during an online activity, or on a text based platform)
- Take part in online discussions between students and between the tutor and students. You not only need the confidence to speak out, you need the ability to listen to others and handle constructive criticism (as both the recipient and the giver). Engage with any discussion points built into online activity – this could be text or speech based, and synchronous or asynchronous. This will help build your critical thinking skills
- Be reflective. You not only need to learn how to critically reflect, you need engage with the space and opportunity to do so. Asynchronous text-based activities or spaces can be good for this, as an immediate response is not required. In a live tutorial you could respond anonymously to a poll or write on the online whiteboard
- Participate in project based learning. One way of 'solving problems' is to use project based learning, where you think about 'real-world issues.' These issues can ask you to analyse, propose alternative solutions, and make decisions. In doing so you can critically assess evidence. You can do this individually or in a group, synchronously or asynchronously
- Work together to critically assess. Working with other students to solve a problem or assess evidence will not only help you to develop critical thinking skills, it can also help you to engage with others and improve your confidence. If you are in different time zones or are not available at the same time, you can do this asynchronously
- Present and share your work. By presenting and sharing your work online, and receiving and giving comments and feedback, you can better understand how to critically reflect on your own work and others
- Use multi-media - images, videos, concept mapping, podcasts etc. Online activities are a great opportunity to critically engage via video or image formats, or to embed these formats into your critical responses.

Where does Generative AI come into this?

Generative AI (aka Gen AI) is artificial intelligence which can generate text and images, usually in response to prompts. You may have used ChatGPT or Gemini – this is Generative AI.

When using Gen AI tools as part of your studies, it is important that you critically engage with its content. This is because:

- Gen AI tools may work in a way that's different from what you expect – the tools are different to the generic search engines (such as Google or Bing) you may be more familiar with
- Gen AI responses may not be accurate or consistent, which may affect your studies
- Gen AI outputs are constrained by the data used to train the tool — which is constantly changing and is unknowable
- Gen AI tools scrape the internet for information with no regard to copyright or bias
- You may generate conflicting or different outputs from use of different prompts or different platforms.

Practical ways to engage critically when using Gen AI include:

- Utilise 'lightbulb moments': the speed of interaction with Gen AI can allow you to experiment with alternative prompts and sources. Through this you can understand the significance of different types of questions and prompts, and the variability in responses
- Don't be 'absolute' in response to Gen AI outputs: critically evaluate strengths and limitations of your Gen AI outputs, rather than automatically accepting the outputs as 'true' or 'the only answer'
- Explore belief in the credibility of certain sources: certain types of source – for example peer reviewed journals or tutors – may be perceived as valid and reliable, and other outputs unreliable: you can explore this
- Engage in shared critical discussion: discuss and evaluate your Gen AI outputs with others (students and tutors).

IMPORTANT When using Gen AI tools make sure you are aware of your institution's plagiarism policy. Using Gen AI tools to write essays and articles is considered a form of plagiarism, so this should be avoided in most circumstances. If you are unsure about your use of Gen AI – particularly for assessment purposes – ask your lecturer/tutor for advice.

Want to find out more?

To contact us, please email: code@london.ac.uk

© CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International.