‘Critical thinking’, though it might be applied in different ways across the Arts & Humanities’ disciplines, is in fact the concept that unites them, and is an important academic skill that is highly valued by those both in and out of the academy.

In a nutshell, critical thinking is the ability to analyse and assess information.

For a longer explanation, the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking defines it as:

the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.

This might sound like quite a broad definition, so let’s see how the term might be understood, using the standard, ‘who?’, ‘what?’, ‘when?’, ‘where?’, ‘why?’, and ‘how?’ questions.

The examples below are based around the idea of a ‘text’ - this might mean a primary text, like a novel or film, or might mean a critical source that you’ve been asked to analyse as part of your course. We can use these questions to think critically about any type of text. Philosophy students might want to substitute ‘idea’ for ‘text’ if that’s more familiar.

Who?

Who wrote this text? What ideas, thoughts, perspectives or opinions might we associate with the author? Who are they key figures, or actors, in the historical moment we’re studying?

What?

What are the main ideas this text is trying to convey? What is the main conversation, and what are the directions in which that conversation is going? What is the context of the text?

When?

How might the date of a text inform how we think about it? What else is/was happening when the text was published/created?
How?

How are the ideas of the text conveyed to us as readers? How does the author convey her/his argument? How does she/he incorporate other work into her/his own?

Where?

Are there any geographic issues we need to take into consideration in thinking about this text? Does the location in which the text was written inform it in any way? What are the different spaces considered by this text, and in what spaces is it considered?

Why?

Why does this text exist? Why has the author composed it as they have? Why does it contain what it does?

Answering these questions will help us think critically about a topic, allowing us to see its strengths as well as its weaknesses. However, thinking critically also relies upon seeing a text in context with others. Some further critical thinking questions might be:

- How is this text consistent with the ones around it?
- Is this part of the consensus, radically different, and/or an anomaly?
- How can we usefully cross-reference this text with others?
- How trustworthy is this text?  
  Some sense of this will hopefully emerge by using the WWWWH method above.
- How can I gather more information about this text, and how will this information change how I read it?

While the WWWWH method is useful, another Top Tip for critical thinking is the ‘One Good, One Bad’ game.

To play this, identify one good thing about the source: what does it bring to your knowledge that you didn’t know before?

How does it help you understand your field?

How does it solve a problem?

And then, one bad: what problems does this text pose?

What assumptions does it possess? What are its limitations?

Start with ‘one good, one bad’, and keep going....!