

**Go the Distance**  
**Student life**  
**Episode 7: Critical thinking - Ruth EXTRA**

This is my fourth year with distance-learning studying. I really, really enjoy it.

I've had six tutors: I found all my tutors have been really, really helpful. You get to sometimes have a phone call with them before you meet them and things, and then you have a face-to-face tutorial. My tutor has been absolutely fantastic this year: as soon as I send a query, she gets back to me on the same day, so I feel really well supported.

I found the face-to-face tutorials really helpful, because then you could ask people around you - next to you - how they were feeling on different things and their different views as well. And we have forums, where we can ask each other questions and stuff like that, and that's really useful. So you don't feel that you're on your own.

We've all been working together online and stuff, so we always comment on things, or if we've got any questions we ask each other.

I had no idea what critical thinking was. Everything I read I just thought, "Oh, that must be right," you know. "He's a linguist. He's a theorist. They must know their stuff. I'm an undergrad. I don't know what I'm talking about." The distance learning really helps you overcome that. Now I know that I can challenge it and that as long as I've got evidence, or even my own opinions and things, they're not always right. So I can be critical.

One of our essays was writing about a theorist and whether we agree and to what extent we think his story is good. And really I didn't think it was very good at all. But - so you can go with that and you can go against him, which is great, and it does give you more confidence then, to think, "Maybe I could be one of those theorists one day."

Writing critically was difficult at the start. It's quite difficult to sometimes write in the first person. And sometimes that's what you want to do so you almost have to say that it's not your opinion: that you've got to find evidence to back up that it's someone else's as well, in a way.

So the first thing I'll do is look at the question I'm facing, and then look at the materials. So when I'm reading and scanning the materials, I can then see what I'm looking out for. Pick out key bits that I think could be relevant to the assignment. I'll then start organising those, and seeing links between them that will then put them into what paragraphs and what points I'm making. I'll then try

to make a sort-of cohesive structure working through of, "What goes where? Well, what links on to that? Where can that go? How does that build an argument?" Because a lot of it - all of it - is about building an argument and then justifying it in the conclusion at the end, and pulling it all together.

I would definitely say that my critical thinking skills are really useful within life generally. Now I feel critical about anything I read; anything I see, I think, "Is that right? Actually, I'm not sure."

I'm studying for a BA Honours in humanities. Half is English language and half is religious studies. This is my sixth out of seven modules now. And they're getting harder, but at the same time they're getting easier in a certain way, in that I'm getting used to writing, getting used to the reading, the critical side of things, and time management as well.

My top tips would be: read the guidance notes really, really carefully and plan. Take your time. Don't leave it till last minute; that would be my best thing. Get planning early. Take the stress off. Get reading early. That would definitely be my top tips.

I think I probably would do distance learning again, because it's so flexible, fitting in with your own life: you can still continue your life and still study. I would love to do a master's degree in the future. I think I'd really like to zoom in on something that I've enjoyed studying and take it deeper.