Critical thinking and contexts
Higher education guide

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About this guide

This guide has been produced by Dr Abigail Harrison Moore, Head of School, School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, at the University of Leeds.

Russell Group universities are committed to the highest levels of academic excellence in both teaching and research. Leeds University is one of the UK’s top ten research institutions and is well recognised internationally as a centre of excellence.

The guide is packed with useful insight, hints and tips for students and exemplifies what a leading university regards as important to learn for A-level Art and Design students considering degree courses in creative subjects.

We hope the guide will be helpful to you.

Please be aware:

- the particular requirements of each university, and each course, are different.
- the guide is relevant to both AS and A-level Art and Design, but does not contain mandatory teaching content. This is featured in the AQA qualification specification.

What is critical thinking and why is it important to understand the context in which we are working?

You should have already noticed from reading the requirements for an AS or A-level in Art and Design that the exam board states that you need to develop your ideas ‘demonstrating analytical and critical understanding’. They also state that the best work shows that you have developed your ideas through ‘sustained investigations informed by contextual…sources’. All of this should draw your attention to the fact that an excellent art practice needs to be informed by critical thinking developed through careful research. You will also notice that good university courses demand that you can demonstrate critical thinking through research, both as a student and during the application process, through interviews and portfolio selection.

This guide aims to help you understand what critical thinking requires, and how you develop and demonstrate these skills, both at school or college and when you go to university. There are many really helpful activities and courses offered by universities to help you with this, such as the ‘Skills at Library’ web resources that we encourage you to use.

(library.leeds.ac.uk/skills)
The best way to access such resources is to go to the university web pages and follow the links, and they are often located on the university library pages. There are also some short films available, made by the University of Leeds with AQA, on different research and thinking skills that you can find on You Tube and at www.leeds.ac.uk/info/125097/activities_for_schoools_and_colleges/1939/teachers_resources

Think about a piece of work you have produced recently.

How was its development informed by your thinking critically about another artists’ work?

At university we demand that you are really aware of this process, and embrace and demonstrate how your work has been informed by your study of other peoples’ work and the context in which they produced this work. This is critical thinking informed by research.

What does it mean to be critical as a researcher/practitioner?

As artists and art historians we need to constantly develop and be inspired by thinking critically about art and artists working both today and in the past. A good practice will demonstrate how we have learned from, been inspired by or even looked at and rejected other peoples’ ideas and work through careful and sustained research. No art has ever been made in a vacuum, and whether we are consciously aware of it or not, we will be influenced by the art we see, the texts we read, the films we view etc.

Why is criticality important and how does it help us become a better artist and thinker?

We increasingly want you to consciously develop critical research skills before you come to university, and demonstrate these in your personal statements, interviews and portfolio inspections.

You have been developing these skills since primary and even nursery school every time you have been asked to try something new, to test it, to ask questions, to look for evidence. By the time you reach year 12 and 13 your examinations and assessments increasingly demand that you are aware of your research process and demonstrate criticality in your writing and making.
Universities were founded on the idea that to produce new and innovative ideas that have the potential to change the world, we need to be positively critical of other researchers’ thinking and work. In order to do this we must be aware of the context in which other writers/artists produced their work.

Every academic starts a new project by reviewing the literature on our theme (not just texts but also images and objects) and by setting themselves a research question that challenges or extends the questions previously asked. Starting with a question that is drawn from our review of the work that has been done already helps us be critical, test boundaries, and find new answers or new methods/techniques.

**What is the difference between criticality and polemic?**

If you look up ‘criticality’ in the dictionary you will find definitions that include ‘skilful judgement’ and ‘thoughtful analysis’. ‘Polemic’ is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a strong verbal or written attack on someone or something’. Think about the difference between these definitions. To be critical is not to ‘attack’ but to carefully review the resources you are using, comparing them with each other to identify their positive and negative attributes and the things one might learn from and use in your work, obviously carefully referencing the source. In order to help us understand why a certain text or image was produced at a certain time and to critically analyse it we need to understand its specific context of production; when it was made and for whom?

We also must be aware of the moment of reception; the context in which we are reading/viewing it and how this might affect the way we respond. A really useful text for artists and art historians is John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972), both the BBC series and the book. But you should also read this critically, as it too was a product of its time and context.

**Criticality demands that we assess the context, and it is only by being aware of this context that we avoid falling into the trap of empty polemic in our work.**
What is the role of art history/contextual studies in art practice?

Every art and design course at university will demand that you consider, as part of your studies, the history of art/contextual studies to some extent. This is because, just as the AS and A-level curriculum insists that you are aware of how other artists have influenced your work, at university we are keen that you are well informed and critical about art and art theory from many different times and places, when you are thinking about your own practice.

The amount of art history and contextual studies included in each course differs widely and you need to think carefully about what will suit you most. It is important to think about where you want your degree to take you? Are you sure you want a career as a professional artist or do you want to keep your options open and demonstrate to potential employers writing and research skills as well as your abilities as a professional artist? Are you suited to a degree with greater academic or practical and technical development or a balance between the two? You will know this as a result of your experience at school and college but you should also consult teachers and advisors before making your final decision as to where to apply. We can also advise you during portfolio inspections and interviews.

If you have enjoyed your practice but found the personal investigation more satisfying, perhaps you should consider a degree in the History of Art? Again, it is important to consider carefully which course is most suited to you as the way we teach history of art varies greatly across universities. When I was at school I did not have the opportunity to study art history as an A-level, and not all schools and colleges offer it today, but lots of students each year decide that they want to continue their interest in art but not their practice and find art history a very stimulating degree that leads into a whole range of careers, including working in museums and galleries, teaching, advertising, journalism etc.

Which is the right degree for me?

If you decide to follow a practice route, there are a multitude of types of degree on offer and you need to do your research to find the right one for you. Do you want to focus on a particular type of practice? Or do you want the freedom of a fine art degree to choose the practice that suits the project? Does the university have the facilities you require? Remember your practice will most likely change and develop over the three/four years of your degree and so it is important to explore whether the programme will allow this?

In the end, just as we want to see you being critical in your thinking about your practice, you should also use these skills when assessing the right university course for you. Think about what best suits you and where you want your degree to take you, and ask questions. We are looking for you to show us your potential as a critical thinker and so will always be pleased to answer thoughtful questions about our degrees.

Compare and contrast different degree courses.
Think about the balance between contextual studies/art history and studio practice.
Why is criticality and an awareness of context important for practice?

A case study

Elizabeth Price won the 2012 Turner Prize with a video installation called *The Woolworths Choir of 1979* and has exhibited at many of the major art galleries in the UK and internationally, including Tate Britain, the BALTIC, the Serpentine and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Washington DC. She was born in Bradford and completed her practice based PhD at Leeds University in 1999. Both commentators on her work, and the artist herself, have spoken at length about the importance of context and criticality for producing thought provoking and impactful art. Elizabeth has said that ‘like many artists, I am preoccupied with the histories and debates that shape 20th-century and contemporary art. But I do try not to make art that only addresses a small professional world; instead, I embed such concerns in other social histories, and different kinds of knowledge’. She wants to make art that asks questions of the society she sees around herself and often does this by reflecting critically on society and art in the past, whether this is traumatic events in the 1970s or English Gothic churches. In the *Guardian* newspaper in November 2013 she said ‘I have always held a pretty broad definition of art: when I say "art" I mean music, literature and cinema, as well as visual art. Whatever its form or medium I think art is, or should be, a way to understand our time – the time in which we live. It is a way to apprehend and influence it. Everything that tries to do this, counts as art for me. By the same token, I'm curious about things that would never declare themselves as art, but still tell us about life: utilitarian objects, product design, clothing, technological apparatus. They all address us with a powerful insistence about how we could or should live, act, be’. For Price, art has the potential to make a real difference to society by asking important questions and reflecting critically on lessons from the past. Her success as an artist has often been linked to her ability to do her research and ask critical questions of it.
Conclusion

Critical thinking is vital in order to open up new questions and ideas in both our practice and writing that have the potential to change and influence the art and design of the future. More and more of the major businesses in the world, such as Apple, Google, Facebook etc are seeing the value of working with critical, creative thinkers. How does/will your practice demonstrate your ability as a critical thinker and your potential?

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Research practice in Fine Art The benefits of the Extended Project Qualification

This guide has been produced by the University of Leeds in association with AQA.