

# 2015 VCE Extended Investigation: Critical Thinking Test examination report

## General comments

The Critical Thinking Test assesses students' ability to analyse and assess the strength and substance of statements, and generate arguments for and against debateable propositions.

Most students understood what was expected and performed quite well on the 2015 test.

Questions 3, 10 and 11 required analysis and evaluation. Questions 10 and 11 invited comments on specific arguments, and Question 3 invited an overall evaluation of a case. Some students made no distinction in the way they responded to these questions. They either dealt with a range of issues for each, or dealt with specific comments for each. Question 3 involved an on-balance judgment about the strength of a case as distinct from the specific comments that should have been made in response to Questions 10 and 11.

Most students seemed aware of possible considerations in argument assessment, but there was a tendency to make general comments that were not related to the specific terms of a particular argument. In this type of response it was not clear, or not made clear, how the student's comments related to the particular matter at issue. Students should explain clearly how the particular meaning of their evaluative comments relates to the argument that they are assessing. Students should use the language of argument assessment in a way that is directly related to the specifics of an issue.

Explaining how an argument works is one of the most difficult aspects of this test, and students should be careful in using formulaic comments when considering such issues. There were a number of routine analyses seen in student responses. Students should recognise that the routines have to be appropriate to a particular argument to be of value. For instance, there was a tendency to reduce argument assessment to an account of how a claim appeals to one or other demographic when this was rarely a characteristic of the way the arguments were presented.

It is not expected that persuasive language should constitute a large part of the argument analysis of this test. Students should aim to avoid rhetoric and overstatement, and attempt to be careful and measured in their own statements. They should attempt to reason carefully rather than try to persuade the reader. Some students used metalanguage or jargon instead of thought related to the issue posed. The exploration of the language of argument assessment is a useful way of developing critical thinking skills, but it has to be undertaken with care because such language can be used in a simplistic and reductive way. In such cases metalanguage and jargon seem to take the place of real thought.

A central issue in this study is the nature and status of data and facts. Some students seemed to think that the only basis for assessing an argument was as a matter of fact. This overlooks the complexity of argument and reduces analysis and evaluation of argument to little more than a distinction between opinion and fact. Much research is concerned with perceptions and subjective experience and some students seemed to imply that such qualitative considerations are intrinsically dubious. Most students avoided using fictionalised facts or references to fabricated research.

It is important to note that this is not a literacy test, and it is always the quality of thought and explanation that is assessed in responses. It is also important to note that making ideas readily

accessible to readers will shape assessors' views about the clarity and precision of a student's thoughts.

Some students struggled to allocate the correct amount of time to different questions. Students should be careful to give an amount of effort commensurate with the mark value of different questions.

Students should also try to write succinct responses, and avoid repeating the information from the question or stimulus material.

## Specific information

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

### Questions 1 and 2

Questions 1 and 2 were drag-and-drop items that assessed students' ability to see dialectical relationships between different statements, and to see how such statements might be turned into arguments.

#### Question 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	6	11	42	9	33	3

Students needed to drag the italicised statements to the appropriate cell.

For	Against
Junk food needs to be actively discouraged because it is tempting.	<i>We need positive campaigns rather than negative measures to convince people to eat healthily if we are to change behaviour.</i>
<i>Some foods are nutritious and others are empty calories with dangerous additives such as salt and sugar.</i>	There is no junk food. All foods should be consumed in moderation.
Junk food is cheap and it will be less attractive if it is expensive.	<i>Junk food is designed to be tempting rather than nutritious and cost is not the issue.</i>
<i>The community as a whole has to deal with the consequences of poor diet. The government should encourage healthy eating.</i>	Individuals have a right to choose what they eat without interference.
	Taxing junk food will have the most impact on those who can least afford it.

**Question 2**

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	22	19	35	9	14	2

Students needed to drag the italicised statements to the appropriate cell.

For	Against
<i>Politicians often take actions that most citizens disagree with but cannot control or prevent.</i>	Our current system is democratic in that we each have one vote and we can remove a government we disagree with.
Our system would be really democratic if the people could vote on particular pieces of legislation.	<i>A general election is the fundamental democratic process that forms the government that makes the laws.</i>
If the people determined the laws, we would have better laws and more social justice.	<i>Direct democracy is impractical and ineffective. There is no more efficient system of democracy than representative democracy.</i>
<i>Most members of parliament are put there and controlled by political parties.</i>	Democratic politics is more than voting for politicians and voting in parliament. It is also a peaceful struggle for influence between different interest groups.
	Democracy is an ideal or an aspiration. In reality it is always imperfect.

**Question 3**

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	4	13	27	27	22	7	1	3

Question 3 on competitive sport in schools asked for an assessment of the different sides of the issue.

Some students commented only on specific arguments, despite being requested to deal with a case as a whole, and were limited by such a response. Some argued for a pro or con case because one or other of the arguments for them was the most substantial and decisive. Students might decide to support one side of debate on the basis of a particular argument, or they might make an on-balance conclusion. The question asked for an evaluation of the case, not just a particular argument.

The following comments offer an analysis of the arguments in Question 3 about competitive sport in schools to show how analysis might develop into an overall evaluation. Not all arguments are considered in detail, and the conclusion is based on a view about the decisiveness, and strength, of one major argument.

## An analysis of the competitive sport arguments

Identifying and naming the major arguments was a good place to start such a task. This could have been done by underlining the key terms in each statement. The arguments in the table could have been summarised and prioritised according to substance or importance as follows.

<b>Pro case against competitive sport</b>	<b>Con case for competitive sport</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• development of a minority only</li><li>• unhealthy pressure</li><li>• time from learning</li><li>• teachers drawn away</li><li>• interferes with community sport</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• relationships in sport</li><li>• pride in the school</li><li>• school reputation</li><li>• extracurricular activity consistent with good grades</li><li>• appealing to employers</li></ul>

## Making an argument assessment

Individual arguments could have been prioritised by assessing which arguments were most plausible and weigh most. An assessment of the cases might be based on the following questions.

Which of the claims are:

- most weighty and significant?
- insignificant?
- most plausible?
- least plausible or implausible?

## Drawing a conclusion

As an example, the following are taken to be the most substantial and significant points in each case.

- pro – development of a minority only
- con – relationships in sport and pride in the school

It could have been readily argued that the key pro argument is the most plausible and significant, and it would be argued that competitive sport privileges a small minority while doing nothing for the majority. On the other hand it could have been argued that the benefits of relationships formed in sport and school pride developed through sport are dependent on resources, and only privileged schools can have an intense sporting culture. Along these lines it can be concluded that schools in general need not and should not look to competitive sport as a key or necessary part of the school program.

The following is an example of a high-scoring argument. Note that another argument worth full marks could also be made on the basis that sport involves relationships and personal development, and that it can be a crucial part of a school culture. In this response the key argument about a minority is related to the issue of intense competition, and the way sport can crowd out other things, but these comments are offered as possibilities rather than certainties. The final comment about effectiveness is quite simply drawing attention to the focus in the response on the way competitive sport will be a minority interest.

*The Pro case is more convincing on the basis of the first argument in particular. Some people love sport some people don't like it. Some people like competition and some people don't like it. Intense competitive sport is for the minority.*

*Sport can be too competitive and it can be given too much prominence. Sport can crowd out other things such as music and art. It can be the case that only the champions are important in sport and the rest of the students are not.*

*This argument is effective because it shows the meaning of the idea that competitive sport is only for a minority.*

### Assessing cases

In assessing the arguments about cases offered by students, assessors considered the:

- understanding of the nature of the issue
- soundness and plausibility of the claims
- reasons stated or implied for a judgment
- support and explanation offered in terms of argument, evidence and examples for the judgment.

In assessing the quality of students' arguments and points of view, assessors did not focus on rhetoric and persuasive devices. In some cases, rhetorical emphasis by students was a potentially negative characteristic.

In assessing student responses significant attention was paid to the explanation about why a judgment is made by the student, but it is recognised that such explanations are difficult. The reasoning and explanations of students were often implicit, but when such implied reasoning can be inferred it is rewarded.

### Questions 4–7

#### Presenting an argument for and against

Questions 4–7 were each worth three marks. In general terms the marks were awarded as follows.

Marks	
3	strong, well-elaborated argument
2	strong argument with limited elaboration
1	weak or unsupported argument

Some strong arguments are listed below for each question. These are presented in summary only and student responses would have needed further elaboration in order to be awarded full marks.

Students found it easier to argue for a gap year than to argue against it, and found it easier to argue for hate speech legislation than against it. Question 7, which involved arguing against hate speech legislation, was particularly challenging for students because it required them to suspend both personal and societal points of view in order to consider both sides of the issue.

The highest-scoring answers to these questions tended to focus on a decisive argument and deal with it in detail rather than writing a mini essay covering a range of issues. Some of the highest-scoring students could explain why they thought an argument was strong or weak, but the explanation was also implicit in some strong answers.

#### Question 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	1	9	47	42	2

The following arguments were made in favour of a gap year.

A gap year is a valuable opportunity for:

- gaining knowledge of the world
- reflection and maturation
- refreshing and re-energising
- increasing motivation
- gathering resources for further study.

#### Question 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	3	26	52	19	2

The following arguments were made against a gap year.

A gap year is not a good idea because it would:

- reduce momentum and motivation
- waste time and distract from important things
- diminish knowledge and skills
- delay development or progress.

#### Question 6

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	9	26	42	23	2

The following arguments were made in favour of hate speech legislation.

- Freedom of speech is not absolute.
- Respect for difference is the basis of civil society and multiculturalism.
- Hate speech can cause conflict and crime.
- Hate speech disrupts harmony and tolerance.
- Hate speech is unfair and unjust.
- Hatred is negative and destructive.

#### Question 7

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	14	29	38	19	2

The following comments were made against hate speech legislation.

Hate speech legislation:

- is a kind of censorship

- limits freedom of speech, which is the basis of democracy
- takes tolerance too far and can lead to acceptance of the unacceptable
- suppresses community values
- makes thoughts and words rather than actions illegal.

## Questions 8 and 9

### Analysing research questions about social media

These questions assessed the skills used in designing a research question and were related to the issues and criteria considered in the development of research questions for the Extended Investigation.

These judgments could involve consideration of the:

- clarity and focus of the question(s)
- substance and significance of the question(s)
- impartiality and objectivity of question(s) and the research method
- opportunities for gathering useful data
- likelihood of an answer from the research
- practicality and manageability of the research.

The marks for these questions were awarded on the following basis.

Marks	
3	clear, substantial, comprehensive
2	clear, substantial
1	not clear or precise

### Question 8

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	21	33	27	18	1

This question asked students to identify an assumption made by a research question and explain what was assumed. The concept of an assumption was generally understood, although there were some tenuous claims about what was assumed.

This question asked students to identify an assumption made by a research question and explain what was assumed. The concept of an assumption was generally understood. Research question A. (How does the use of social media empower people in times of crisis?) had at its core an assumption about empowerment. There were some reasonable claims made by students about what is assumed by research question C. about whether a digital footprint is permanent.

### Question 9

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	9	32	41	18	2

Question 9 contained a range of reasonable claims about which question would be most difficult to answer and research questions C. and D. were identified by the majority of students. However, other students were able to identify ways in which research questions A. and B. would be the most difficult research questions to answer by presenting critiques of the methodology that would be required in order to gather useful data.

## Questions 10 and 11

### Assessment of arguments about community work for unemployment benefits

#### Question 10

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	16	38	34	10	2	1

#### Question 11

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	17	33	35	14	1	2

Questions 10 and 11 asked students which arguments (A. to J.) they found least and most convincing. In assessing the arguments offered by students, the reasons and explanation (either stated or implied) for a judgment were considered. Those who considered more than one argument (contrary to instructions) were not advantaged, and depth of analysis of an argument was taken to be more important than comprehensiveness or coverage.