

Critical Thinking

The obvious place to start discussing critical thinking is to talk about thinking itself. What is it? Can we get better at it?

There are lots of ways of thinking about thinking!! Sometimes thinking is an unconscious act. Have you ever solved a problem in your sleep? Have you ever set a problem aside only to find that the solution presents itself to you in the middle of a meeting? Thinking isn't always verbal. Sometimes we think in images instead of words. What about your dreams? Is that a form of thinking?

Vincent Ruggiero has developed a more formal definition for thinking that we can use in the context of academics. In *The Art of Thinking*, he writes "Thinking is any mental activity that helps formulate or solve a problem, make a decision, or fulfill a desire to understand. It is a searching for answers, a reaching for meaning." He reminds us that the mind engages in all sorts of processes in support of thinking:

- careful observation
- memorizing
- remembering
- wondering
- imagining
- inquiring
- evaluating
- judging

Can you get better at it? Yes, indeed you can.

- **Be Aware.** The best place to start is by being aware, by being thoughtful. You'll want to examine your own ideas about knowledge, truth, and opinion.
- **Challenge Yourself.** You'll want to challenge yourself, to push yourself in problem solving, in investigating, in identifying and defining.
- **Be Critical.** Don't think of criticism as a negative term. To be critical of something is to assess it in terms of strengths and weaknesses-it's not about tearing something apart!
- **Communicate.** Finally, you'll want to be able to articulate what you discover in the process of thinking thoughtfully about something. Communicating what you've discovered is essential.

In *The Confident Student*, Carol Kanar reminds us that critical thinking is **not** passively taking in information. To be critical thinkers we must be actively engaged in the process of making meaning out of

something. Kanar says that we need to determine what our assumptions are and be willing to change them. She says we need to predict-that is, we need to anticipate what is in the reading, ask questions, and have a purpose when we take notes, read, or study. In addition, Ms. Kanar suggests that critical thinking involves interpretation. We must look for evidence, seek patterns and think about implications. Finally, she asks that we evaluate what we've been looking at. Is this material reliable, objective or useful?

What it all boils down to is NOT how smart you are and NOT what your IQ measures. Rather it is your willingness to be actively engaged in thinking about the world before you, rather than being asleep as you look out at the vast series of possibilities that lie before you. Be bold-go out and take it on!!

	Critical Thinking	Non-Critical Thinking
View of knowledge:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shades of gray - strives for depth • interdisciplinary • knowledge is open • intertwined with thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • black and white - superficial level • unidisciplinary • knowledge is closed • independent of thinking
View of thinking:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rational and consistent • strives to learn how to think • holistic/webbed • original/insightful • multiple frames of reference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • irrational and inconsistent • strives to learn what to think • unidisciplinary/linear • second hand think • one or limited frame of reference
Strategies for thinking:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • suspends closure • explorer/probing • questioning • fair-minded • active • collaborative/communal • precise language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strives for closure • dogmatic/avoiding • doubting • ego-/ethnocentric/emotional • passive • authoritative • vague language

Critical Thinking Website: <http://www.criticalthinking.org>

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