



## What is Critical Thinking?

No one always acts purely objectively and rationally. We connive for selfish interests. We gossip, boast, exaggerate, and equivocate. It is "only human" to wish to validate our prior knowledge, to vindicate our prior decisions, or to sustain our earlier beliefs. In the process of satisfying our ego, however, we can often deny ourselves intellectual growth and opportunity. We may not always want to apply critical thinking skills, but we should have those skills available to be employed when needed.

Critical thinking includes a complex combination of skills. Among the main characteristics are the following:

### Rationality

We are thinking critically when we

- rely on reason rather than emotion,
- require evidence, ignore no known evidence, and follow evidence where it leads, and
- are concerned more with finding the best explanation than being right analyzing apparent confusion and asking questions.

### Self-awareness

We are thinking critically when we

- weigh the influences of motives and bias, and
- recognize our own assumptions, prejudices, biases, or point of view.

### Honesty

We are thinking critically when we recognize emotional impulses, selfish motives, nefarious purposes, or other modes of self-deception.

## Open-mindedness

We are thinking critically when we

- evaluate all reasonable inferences
- consider a variety of possible viewpoints or perspectives,
- remain open to alternative interpretations
- accept a new explanation, model, or paradigm because it explains the evidence better, is simpler, or has fewer inconsistencies or covers more data
- accept new priorities in response to a reevaluation of the evidence or reassessment of our real interests, and
- do not reject unpopular views out of hand.

## Discipline

We are thinking critically when we

- are precise, meticulous, comprehensive, and exhaustive
- resist manipulation and irrational appeals, and
- avoid snap judgments.

## Judgment

We are thinking critically when we

- recognize the relevance and/or merit of alternative assumptions and perspectives
- recognize the extent and weight of evidence

In sum,

- Critical thinkers are by nature **skeptical**. They approach texts with the same skepticism and suspicion as they approach spoken remarks.
- Critical thinkers are **active**, not passive. They ask questions and analyze. They consciously apply tactics and strategies to uncover meaning or assure their understanding.
- Critical thinkers do not take an egotistical view of the world. They are **open** to new ideas and perspectives. They are willing to challenge their beliefs and investigate competing evidence.

Critical thinking enables us to recognize a wide range of subjective analyses of otherwise objective data, and to evaluate how well each analysis might meet our needs. Facts may be facts, but how we interpret them may vary.

By contrast, passive, non-critical thinkers take a simplistic view of the world.

- They see things in black and white, as either-or, rather than recognizing a variety of possible understanding.
- They see questions as yes or no with no subtleties.
- They fail to see linkages and complexities.
- They fail to recognize related elements.

Non-critical thinkers take an egotistical view of the world

- They take *their* facts as the only relevant ones.
- They take *their own* perspective as the only sensible one.
- They take *their goal* as the only valid one.