

## Critical Thinking Definitions

The art of being right. . . . Or, more prosaically critical thinking is the *skillful application of a repertoire of validated general techniques for deciding the level of confidence you should have in a proposition in the light of the available evidence.*

–Timothy Van Gelder

Critical thinking is that mode of thinking—about any subject, content or problem—in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards on them.

–Richard Paul, Alec Fisher and Gerald Nosich

The term critical thinking refers to the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome—in the long run, critical thinkers will have more desirable outcomes than “noncritical” thinkers (where “desirable” is defined by the individual, such as making good career choices or wise financial investments).

–Diane Halpern

[C]ritical thinking is . . . concerned with reason, intellectual honesty, and open-mindedness, as opposed to emotionalism, intellectual laziness, and closed-mindedness. Thus, critical thinking involves: following evidence where it leads; considering all possibilities; relying on reason rather than emotion; being precise; considering a variety of possible viewpoints and explanations; weighing the effects of motives and biases; being concerned more with finding the truth than with being right; not rejecting unpopular views out of hand; being aware of one’s own prejudices and biases, and not allowing them to sway one’s judgment.

–Daniel J. Kurland

Criticism is the examination and test of propositions of any kind which are offered for acceptance, in order to find out whether they correspond to reality or not. The critical faculty is a product of education and training. It is a mental habit and power. It is a prime condition of human welfare that men and women should be trained in it. It is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition, and misapprehension of ourselves and our earthly circumstances. Education is good just so far as it produces well-developed critical faculty. . . . A teacher of any subject who insists on accuracy and a rational control of all processes and methods, and who holds everything open to unlimited verification and revision is cultivating that method as a habit in the pupils. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded. . . . They are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence. . . . They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices. . . . Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens

–William Graham Sumner

## Defining Critical Thinking

A statement by Michael Scriven & Richard Paul for the  
National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking Instruction

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.

It entails the examination of those structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning: purpose, problem, or question-at-issue; assumptions; concepts; empirical grounding; reasoning leading to conclusions; implications and consequences; objections from alternative viewpoints; and frame of reference. Critical thinking—in being responsive to variable subject matter, issues, and purposes—is incorporated in a family of interwoven modes of thinking, among them: scientific thinking, mathematical thinking, historical thinking, anthropological thinking, economic thinking, moral thinking, and philosophical thinking.

Critical thinking can be seen as having two components: 1) a set of information and belief generating and processing skills, and 2) the habit, based on intellectual commitment, of using those skills to guide behavior. It is thus to be contrasted with: 1) the mere acquisition and retention of information alone, because it involves a particular way in which information is sought and treated; 2) the mere possession of a set of skills, because it involves the continual use of them; and 3) the mere use of those skills (“as an exercise”) without acceptance of their results.

Critical thinking varies according to the motivation underlying it. When grounded in selfish motives, it is often manifested in the skillful manipulation of ideas in service of one’s own, or one’s groups’, vested interest. As such it is typically intellectually flawed, however pragmatically successful it might be. When grounded in fairmindedness and intellectual integrity, it is typically of a higher order intellectually, though subject to the charge of “idealism” by those habituated to its selfish use.

Critical thinking of any kind is never universal in any individual; everyone is subject to episodes of undisciplined or irrational thought. Its quality is therefore typically a matter of degree and dependent on, among other things, the quality and depth of experience in a given domain of thinking or with respect to a particular class of questions. No one is a critical thinker through-and-through, but only to such-and-such a degree, with such-and-such insights and blind spots, subject to such-and-such tendencies towards self-delusion. For this reason, the development of critical thinking skills and dispositions is a life-long endeavor.

<http://www.criticalthinking.org/aboutCT/definingCT.cfm>

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Timothy Van Gelder. “Teaching Critical Thinking: Some Lessons From Cognitive Science.” *College Teaching* 53.1 (Winter 2005): 41-46. Full text available on EBSCO Host.

Charles Twardy. “Argument Maps Improve Critical Thinking.” *Teaching Philosophy* 27.2 (June 2004): 95-116.

Argument Mapping Website: [www.austhink.com](http://www.austhink.com)