

Critical Thinking: A Student's Introduction

Chapter 1 Introduction to Critical Thinking

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Critical Thinking, 1

“Critical” here does not mean “negative”

- Critical means involving or exercising skilled judgment or observation

A good critical thinker has cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions needed to:

- Effectively identify, analyze, and evaluate arguments and truth claims
- Discover and overcome personal preconceptions and biases

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Critical Thinking, 2

- Formulate and present convincing reasons in support of conclusions
- Make reasonable, intelligent decisions about what to believe and what to do

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Critical Thinking Standards, 1

Clarity

- Critical thinkers strive for clarity of language and thought

Precision

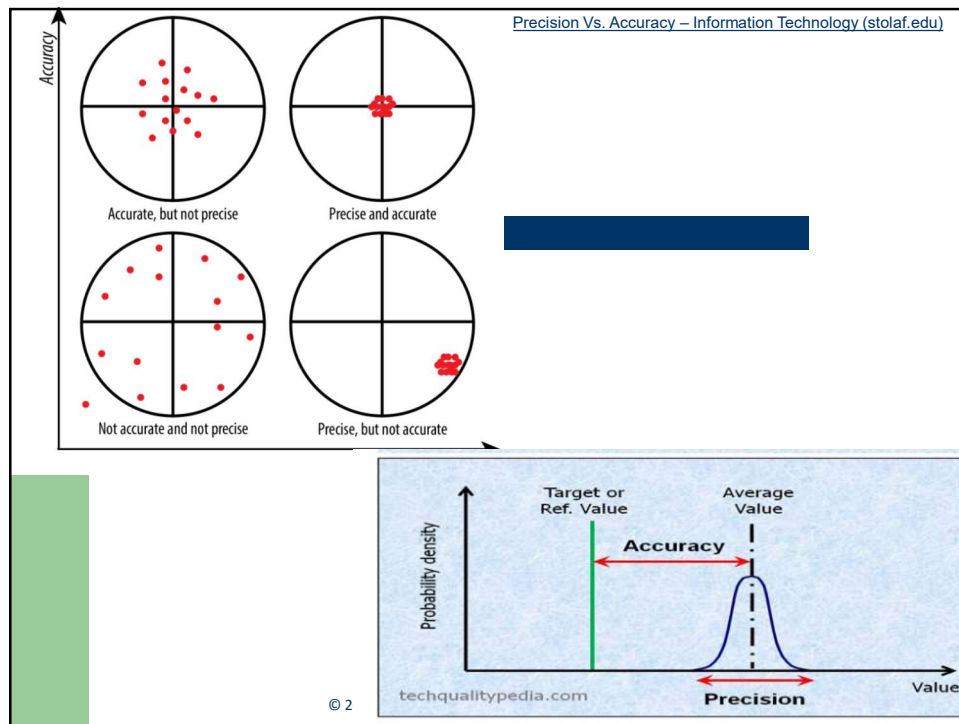
- Critical thinkers understand that it is necessary to insist on precise answers to precise questions by cutting through the confusions and uncertainties
 - Example: "Is abortion wrong?" is vague. "Should abortion be legal?" and "Is having an abortion ever moral?" are more specific questions.

Accuracy

- Critical thinkers have a passion for accurate, timely information
- One can't reason correctly with false information

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Critical Thinking Standards, 2

Relevance

- Irrelevance can distract people from the point but never helps to truly prove the point
- See Lincoln's example on page 4

Critical Thinking Standards, 3

Consistency

- Critical thinking avoids:
 - Practical inconsistency: Saying one thing and doing another
 - Logical inconsistency: Believing two things that can't be simultaneously true

Logical correctness

- Sound reasoning or making valid inferences
- Deriving that, and only that, which can be justifiably derived from statements or premises

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Critical Thinking Standards, 4

Completeness

- Thinking is better when it is deep rather than shallow, thorough rather than superficial

Fairness

- Critical thinking demands that our thinking be open-minded, impartial, and free of distorting biases and preconceptions
- One must not dismiss something just because it's new or it's contrary to something one already believes

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EXERCISE

I. Break into groups of four or five. Choose one member of your group to take notes and be the group reporter. Discuss your education up to this point. **To what extent has your education prepared you to think clearly, precisely, accurately, logically, and so forth?** Have you ever known a person (e.g., a teacher or a parent) **who strongly modeled the critical thinking standards** discussed in this section? If so, how did he or she do that?

II. Have you ever been guilty of either **practical inconsistency** (saying one thing and doing another) or **logical inconsistency** (believing inconsistent things about a particular topic or issue)? In small groups think of examples either from your own experience or from that of someone you know. Be prepared to share your examples with the class as a whole.

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Benefits of Critical Thinking: In the Classroom, 1

Focus in college is less on memorization and more on active, intelligent evaluation of ideas and information

Students learn to:

- Understand the arguments and beliefs of others
- Critically evaluate arguments and beliefs
- Develop and defend one's own well-supported arguments and beliefs

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Benefits of Critical Thinking: In the Classroom, 2

In college, professors will have you evaluate beliefs/arguments of others and develop your own

- Critical thinking is the skill you need to accomplish this effectively

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Benefits of Critical Thinking: In the Workplace

Critical thinking will allow people to better perform in their jobs.

- Since most job skills can be—and will be—taught “on-site,” employers are more concerned with hiring someone who can:
 - Solve problems
 - Think creatively
 - Gather and analyze information
 - Draw appropriate conclusions from data
 - Communicate his/her ideas clearly and effectively

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Benefits of Critical Thinking: In Life

Critical thinking can help us:

- Avoid making bad personal decisions
- Make informed political decisions
- Attain personal enrichment
 - As Socrates said, the unexamined life is not worth living
 - Critical thinking, honestly and courageously pursued, can help free us from the unexamined assumptions and biases of our upbringing and our society
- Lead self-directed, “examined” lives

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Barriers to Critical Thinking: Egocentrism, 1

The tendency to see reality as centered on oneself

Forms of egocentrism

- **Self-interested thinking:** Tendency to accept and defend beliefs that harmonize with one’s self-interest
 - Your wants and needs are not objectively more important than anyone else's; they certainly don’t determine truth
 - Critical thinking is objective

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Barriers to Critical Thinking: Egocentrism, 2

- **Superiority bias:** The tendency to overrate oneself
 - Most people think they are above average; most people are thus wrong
 - Critical thinking requires one to be honest about his/her abilities

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Barriers to Critical Thinking: Sociocentrism, 1

Group-centered thinking

Ways in which sociocentrism distorts critical thinking

- **Group bias:** The tendency to see one's own group (example, nation) as being inherently better than all others
- **Tribalism:** Strong feelings of loyalty to, and identification with, one's tribe or social group

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Barriers to Critical Thinking: Sociocentrism, 2

- **Conformism:** Allowing beliefs to be shaped by outside forces such as:

- Groups (See Solomon Asch's experiment)

In the first experiment, conducted in the 1950s by Solomon Asch, groups of eight college students were asked to match a standard line like the following

_____ with three comparison lines such as these:

A _____
B _____
C _____

- Authority (See Stanley Milgram's experiment)

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Barriers to Critical Thinking: Unwarranted Assumptions and Stereotypes, 1

Assumption: Something one takes for granted or believes to be true without any proof or conclusive evidence

Unwarranted assumption: Taking something for granted without "good reason"

- **Stereotype:** Assuming that all people within a group (for example, sex or race) share all the same qualities
 - Assuming that a particular individual that belongs to a group has certain qualities simply because he/she belongs to that group

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Barriers to Critical Thinking: Unwarranted Assumptions and Stereotypes, 2

- Stereotypes are arrived at through hasty generalization, in which one draws a conclusion about a large class of things from a small sample

Being aware of an unwarranted assumption does not justify it; but it is the first step in eliminating it

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Relativistic Thinking, 1

Relativism is the view that there is no objective or factual truth, but that truth varies from individual to individual, or from culture to culture

Forms of relativism

- **Subjectivism:** The view that truth is a matter of individual opinion; what one thinks is true is true for that person
- **Moral subjectivism:** The view that what is morally right and good for an individual, A, is what A thinks is morally right and good

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Relativistic Thinking, 2

- **Cultural relativism:** The view that what is true for person A is what person A's culture or society believes to be true
- **Cultural moral relativism:** The view that what is morally right and good for an individual, A, is whatever A's society or culture believes is morally right and good

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Exercise 1.4 (Shows why Relativism Is False), 1

Discuss the following cases assuming that you are a cultural relativist:

- Case 1: You are a member of culture C studying cultures A and B. B loves war, A is pacifistic. Culture B invades Culture A.
 - Notice that you can't morally criticize B as a cultural relativist

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Exercise 1.4 (Shows why Relativism Is False), 2

- Case 2: You are a member of culture B, and B thinks that pacifism is immoral and embraces enslaving other cultures and enslaves A
 - Notice that—since you belong to B—you can't criticize B's moral values (their accepting it makes it right). Also, you must think it immoral to be a pacifist and yet must also think that the pacifism of those in A is moral (since they approve of it). That is a contradiction.

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Exercise 1.4 (Shows why Relativism Is False), 3

- Case 3: Culture B consists of two subcultures: the Alphas and the Betas. The majority group, the Alphas, deems child sacrifice as morally right; you belong to a minority in B that disagrees. B invades A and forces them to participate in their practices.
 - Notice that you must both accept and reject infant sacrifice (you belong to two groups/cultures that have contradictory positions)

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Problems with Cultural Moral Relativism

Makes it impossible for one to:

- Criticize other cultures' moral beliefs and values, even those that intuitively seem to be terribly wrong
- Criticize one's own societies' prevailing moral beliefs and values

Rules out the idea of moral progress

Can lead to conflicting moral duties

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More on Cultural Moral Relativism

The main reasons people are attracted to cultural moral relativism are not good reasons at all

- The fact that it is hard to discover what is true—even if it is impossible to discover what is true—does not mean that there is no truth or that truth is determined by opinion/consensus
 - We probably won't be able to discover whether or not God exists; but whether he does or not is not a matter of opinion
- Cultural moral relativism does not promote tolerance
 - Suggests that if you live in an intolerant society, you are morally obligated to be intolerant

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Wishful Thinking

Believing what you want to be true (without evidence or despite evidence to the contrary)

For example, people fear the unknown and invent comforting myths to render the universe less hostile and more predictable

- Belief in tabloid headlines
- Healing crystals and quack cures
- Communication with the dead
- “It won’t happen to me” beliefs

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Qualities of a Critical Thinker, 1

- Strives for clarity, precision, accuracy, and other intellectual standards that characterize careful, disciplined thinking
- Sensitive to the ways in which critical thinking can be skewed by egocentrism, wishful thinking, and other psychological obstacles to rational belief
- Intellectually honest (admits ignorance and limits)
- Listens with an open mind

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Qualities of a Critical Thinker, 2

- Bases beliefs on facts and evidence
- Is aware of the biases and preconceptions that shape the way he/she perceives the world
- Thinks independently
- Is able to get to the heart of an issue, without being distracted by details
- Possesses intellectual courage to face and assess fairly ideas that challenge his/her beliefs
- Pursues truth and has intellectual perseverance

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