Tips for Better Thinking

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Go to the library and you'll find whole bookcases full of books on how to write better. But look for a book on how to *think* better and you'll be busy for a while. (The only major book I could find — *Crimes Against Logic* — was a dreadful little series of basic logical fallacies dressed up in political polemic.)

It can't be that writing is more important than thinking. While I've met many people who can't exactly write, it seems that just about everyone has to think — even writers. Nor do I think it's that the task is really harder. We know very little about the internal process of writing, so writing guides consist mostly of good and bad examples, along with some general rules. Surely one could do the same for thought.

Perhaps the answer is that there isn't such a thing as good thinking. But the case for it seems even stronger than the case for good writing. Good thinking is that which better helps us approximate reality — avoiding fallacies, missteps of judgment, faulty assumptions, misunderstandings, and needless fillips and loops.

And yet the subject's plain importance, I can find scarcely an article that takes up the topic. Where is the piece that savages bad thinking the way Mark Twain savaged Fenimore Cooper's aimless writing or the way Orwell went after political abuses of English or, for more modern readers, Matt Taibbi's dissection of Thomas Friedman's latest book? It seems like it would be just as fun — if not more — to watch a gifted writer slice and dice up a convoluted thought until it becomes apparent that it's actually meaningless.

The closest I can think of is Chomsky's review of B.F. Skinner (an unfair match-up if there ever was one — a bit like using a blow torch to clear off a dust mite). But Chomsky's attacking Skinner's ideas rather specifically (and, more generally, exposing the political implications behind bogus science); the essay is certainly not one in a series of examples of how to think better.

As one gets more skilled, the opportunities for improvement become less available — apparently because fewer people are interested in improving. The library gives free courses in how to read better, but these are for people who have trouble reading long books, not for those who already can but want to continue to improve. And there are courses in improving your writing, but they generally only get you from awful to serviceable, and not from serviceable to great. The same seems true of thinking — there are many books on fairly blatant logical fallacies to avoid, but few on more subtle improvements to thought.

And yet, at least with writing, people try. There are English courses in schools, taught by some of the greatest writers of the generation. And journalists can semi-apprentice themselves by freelancing before great editors, who slice and dice their prose until it shines. Yet I've never seen a class or an apprenticeship in thinking, except perhaps incidentally.

The reason, I think, is because no one is thinking bigger. But that means there's plenty of opportunity. The field's wide open, folks.