

# What is Critical Thinking?

(source – internet)

## Establishing Emotional & Intellectual Distance Between You & Your Ideas

The term "critical thinking" is used, in one form or another, in many subjects — but what does it mean? Some may get the impression that it simply involves finding fault with others and others' ideas, but that isn't really the case. **As a general rule, critical thinking involves developing some emotional and intellectual distance between yourself and ideas** — whether your own or others' — in order to better evaluate their truth, validity, and reasonableness.

Critical thinking is an effort to develop reliable, rational evaluations about what is reasonable for us to believe and disbelieve. Critical thinking makes use of the tools of logic and science because it values skepticism over gullibility or dogmatism, reason over faith, science of pseudoscience, and rationality over wishful thinking.

Critical thinking does not guarantee that we will arrive at truth, but it does make it much more likely than any of the alternatives do.

Explaining the concept of critical thinking might be easier if we go through some of the key characteristics which are necessary for thinking critically about something:

### 1. Open-Mindedness

A person who wishes to think critically about something like politics, ethics or religion must be open-minded. This requires being open to the possibility that not only are others right, but also that you are wrong. Too often people launch into a frenzy of arguments apparently without taking any time to consider that they may be mistaken in something.

Of course, it is also possible to be too "open-minded" because not every idea is equally valid or has an equal chance of being true. Although we should technically allow for the possibility that someone is correct, we must still require that they offer support for their claims — if they cannot or do not, we may be justified in dismissing those claims and acting as if they weren't true.

### 2. Differentiate Emotion and Reason

Even if we have clear logical and empirical reasons for accepting an idea, we also probably have emotional and psychological reasons for accepting it — reasons which we may not be fully aware of. It is important to critical thinking, however, that we learn to separate the two because the latter can easily interfere with the former.

Our emotional reasons for believing something might be quite understandable, but if the logic behind the belief is wrong, then ultimately we should not consider our belief rational. If we really are going to approach our beliefs in a skeptical, fair manner, then we must be willing to set aside our emotions and evaluate the logic and reasoning on their own terms — possibly even rejecting our beliefs if they fail to live up to logical criteria (see Open-Mindedness).

### 3. Argue from Knowledge, not Ignorance

Because we often have an emotional or other psychological investment in our beliefs, it isn't unusual for people to step forward and try to defend those beliefs regardless of whether the logic or evidence for them are weak. Indeed, sometimes people will defend an idea even though they really don't know a great deal about it — they **think** they do, but they don't.

A person who tries to practice critical thinking, however, also tries to avoid assuming that they already know everything they need to know. Such a person is willing to allow that someone who disagrees can teach them something relevant and refrains from arguing a position if they are ignorant of important, relevant facts.

### 4. Probability is not Certainty

There are ideas that are probably true and ideas that are certainly true, but while it is nice to have an idea that belongs in the latter group, we must understand that the latter group is far, far smaller than the former. However preferable it might be otherwise, we can't be absolutely certain about quite a lot of matters — especially those matters that are the focus of many debates.

When a person exercises skepticism and critical thinking, they remember that just because they can show a conclusion is **probably** true, that doesn't mean they have shown or can show that it is **certainly** true. Certain truths require firm conviction, but probable truths require only tentative conviction — that is to say, we should believe them with the same strength as the evidence and reason allow.

## More Characteristics of Critical Thinking

### Avoid Linguistic Misunderstandings

Language is a complex and subtle tool. It allows us to communicate all sorts of ideas, including brand-new ideas, but the same subtlety and complexity leads to all kinds of misunderstandings, ambiguities, and vagueness. The fact of the matter is, what we think we are communicating might not be what others are receiving, and what we are receiving may not be what others are intending to communicate.

Critical thinking, then, must allow for the existence of ambiguities, vagueness, and misunderstandings in our communications. A person who tries to think critically must endeavour to eliminate those factors as much as possible — for example, by trying to get key terms clearly defined early on rather than allowing a debate to proceed with people using the same words to talk about completely different concepts.

### Avoid Common Fallacies

Most people can reason well enough to get by in their daily lives and no more.

If that is enough to survive, why invest the extra time and work to improve? People who wish to have high standards for their beliefs and reasoning, however, cannot make do with the bare minimum just to get by in life — more education and practice are needed.

To this end, good critical thinking requires that a person become familiar with common logical fallacies which most people commit at some time or other without ever realizing it. Fallacies are errors in reasoning which creep into arguments and debates all the time; the practice of critical thinking should help a person avoid committing them and aid in identifying their appearance in others' arguments. An argument that commits a fallacy cannot provide good reason to accept its conclusion; therefore, as long as fallacies are being committed, the arguments aren't being very productive.

### Don't Jump to Conclusions

It's easy and common for people to quickly go to the first and most obvious conclusion in any sort of dilemma, but the fact of the matter is the obvious conclusion isn't always the correct one. Unfortunately, once a person adopts a conclusion it can be difficult to get them to give it up in favour of something else — after all, no one wants to be wrong, do they?

Because it is better to avoid trouble than to try to get out of trouble once in it, critical thinking emphasizes careful thinking as well — and this means not jumping to conclusions if you can avoid it. Go ahead and acknowledge the existence of an obvious conclusion because it might be right after all, but don't actually adopt it until other options have been considered.

All of this is just a quick summary of some key attributes which people must cultivate in order to really think critically and skeptically about things. Although it may not seem immediately obvious, you really don't need a degree in philosophy or science in order to become a better critical thinker. Some education about basic issues is required, but nothing that the average person can't handle.

Some facets of basic logic may come across as difficult, but in the end there is only one way to become comfortable with it: practice. You will not, for example, become good at recognizing fallacies just by memorizing a list of names. Instead, you need to take the time to read arguments carefully and learn to identify fallacies that way. The more time you spend on that, the more natural it will become — and you will remember the names of the fallacies as a matter of course.

The same is true of other concepts in basic logic. If you think about them and use them, then you'll feel comfortable with them and recognize certain argumentative strategies and techniques in anything you read without really trying. The precise terminology will follow along on its own. If you are interested in practice, one good place to find help is this site's forum. There you will have a chance to read lots of arguments and see many of the techniques described on this site actually put into practice. You can also ask questions about the validity or soundness of particular arguments — there are plenty of people who can help you to better understand where an argument goes wrong or gets things right.