

# Critical Thinking in Decision Making

by Winston Sieck - January 08, 2013

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Critical thinking is often talked about as a stand-alone activity. Like some other individual activities, thinking critically may just feel good. Yet, [critical thinking](#) seems most useful when it aids other cognitive processes, such as applying critical thinking in decision making.

Anne Helsdingen from the Open University of the Netherlands and her colleagues studied an interesting issue about critical thinking in decision making. They wanted to know whether teaching critical thinking skills can improve judgment and decision making in general.

Helsdingen and her team define critical thinking as reasoned thinking with a purpose. They also describe some core critical thinking skills and abilities, such as being able to:

- Appreciate that your own opinions may be wrong
- Accept statements as true even when they conflict with your own views
- Temporarily adopt an initial position with which you disagree, and then reason from that starting point

A challenge, according to these researchers, is how to teach skills for critical thinking in decision making so that they transfer to new decision making problems. Transfer means being able to apply what you have learned to new tasks or new situations.

To tackle this problem, they start with a useful cognitive model of how decisions are made. Numerous researchers have worked with similar versions of the model of the years. One version is called “explanation-based decision making,” or the “story model.”

The idea is that people encounter situations. When they do, they recognize important parts of the situation from past experience. They then create a story (or explanation) about what’s going on and what will happen. They make decisions based on their story, and how things have turned out in similar stories past.

A problem with making decisions this way is that [our stories tend to be less complete than we think - a failure of metacognition](#). We also overlook inconsistent details because we’re sucked in by the good story. According to Helsdingen, we might improve our intuitive approach by bringing critical thinking in the decision making process.

The researchers tested a method for including critical thinking in decision making. First, they explained the story model of decision making. Then, they prompted the learners to reflect on their story and thinking critically about it. Some of the questions they included to prompt critical thinking were:

- Do you have all the necessary information?
- Is there any conflict in the evidence?

- The devil's advocate tells you that your story is wrong. Make up an alternative story. Is it more plausible than the original?

The students in the study read through cases about crimes that had been committed. Their job was to decide on the priority of each case for the police. They got feedback, so they could learn what makes cases more important in police work.

Some of the students received the critical thinking skills training while making these decisions. Others did not.

How well they made these crime decisions was not the most important thing, though. The main thing was how well they would do in a different situation after learning about critical thinking in decision making. That is, would their new skills transfer?

The researchers tested for transfer by having the students make different decisions about traffic offenses. The overall results suggested that the training on how to include critical thinking in decision making was effective. The benefits did transfer to the new decision making task.

As you come across decisions that you need to make, pay some attention to the stories you are telling yourself in the process. Use some of the ideas above and other critical thinking skills to improve your story and decision. Writing is also an excellent strategy for [making good decisions](#). It may seem like a bit of extra work at first, but with practice will become more natural for your future decisions.

Image Credit: [Critical thinking asylum](#)

Helsdingen, A., van Gog, T., & van Merriënboer, J. (2011). The effects of practice schedule and critical thinking prompts on learning and transfer of a complex judgment task. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 103 (2), 383-398 DOI: [10.1037/a0022370](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022370)

Retrieved: 09-30-2018  
Updated: 09-28-2018  
Published: 01-08-2013  
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