

Critical Thinking Skills: What are They and How Do I Get Them?

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Critical thinking is often touted as a superior way to confront the issues one faces.

But what is critical thinking, really? How is it done?

Can anyone do it, or are Spock-like mental abilities required?

Critical thinking is sometimes talked about as a near-mystical skill that exercises untapped parts of your brain. The supposed benefits of critical thinking can sound equally fantastic. Unfortunately, the reality is a bit more mundane.

Critical thinking is simply a deliberative thought process. During the process, you use a set of critical thinking skills to consider an issue. At conclusion, you make a judgment about what to believe, or a decision about what to do.

There are a number of critical thinking skills. A core set includes the following:

- Suspending judgment to check the validity of a proposition or action
- Taking into consideration multiple perspectives
- Examining implications and consequences of a belief or action
- Using reason and evidence to resolve disagreements
- Re-evaluating a point of view in light of new information

Critical thinking is neither magical nor foolproof. Beyond these general critical-thinking skills, knowledge of the specific topic at hand plays an important role in the quality of thoughts you produce.

You won't easily resolve issues about climate change, for example, without knowing the methods and procedures used by climatologists, as well as their wealth of past findings and theories. Critical thinking skills are no substitute for that specialized knowledge. But, they may well help you to [develop a stronger understanding](#) of the area.

How can you get critical thinking skills?

Charoula Angeli and Nicos Valanides from the University of Cyprus tested the idea that critical thinking skills are most readily learned when they are embedded in a specific subject. They called this approach the "infusion method," and compared it to several other methods for teaching critical thinking skills. Their paper, "Instructional effects on critical thinking," was published in *Learning and Instruction*.

The researchers used two authentic, ill-defined issues for their study of the infusion method:

1. Are American values shaped by the mass media?
2. Should drugs be legalized?

Students were given the issues, along with arguments by experts about each. An equal number of arguments were listed that supported or refuted each issue. The students' primary task was to work in pairs to generate an outline of their own position on the issue.

Students in the "infusion method" training group were explicitly taught critical thinking skills. They also received direct support to think critically through the "American values" issue.

Some questions used to stimulate critical thinking included:

- What is your point of view?
- What are your reasons for supporting this point of view?
- Why do you think that?'
- Are there different perspectives on the issue?

You can ask yourself these questions to help promote your own critical thinking process. There are other [questions](#) you might ask, such as [questions to help with evaluating sources](#).

After training, Angeli and Valanides had the students think through the second issue, and scored their performance. The researchers also measured how well the students understood critical thinking skills using a standardized test.

A key finding was that students trained with the infusion method outperformed students in the control group in handling the second issue. In addition, students who received the critical thinking skills training came away understanding the importance of evaluating different perspectives. Students in the control group did not.

The students also relayed several difficulties they experienced in applying critical thinking skills to the issues. One was that the found it hard to suspend their judgment. It's just hard to set one's own beliefs aside to fully consider another side of an issue.

The findings suggest that an effective way to hone your critical thinking skills includes having another person to confront your beliefs and challenge your thought process. Our parents, friends, and teachers are often more than willing to oblige us with this kind of help.

You can also look back at the lists of critical thinking skills and supporting questions above. Reference them when facing your next thorny problem. Can't say it will guarantee your survival. But it may help you be a bit more deliberate with your thinking.

Angeli, C., & Valanides, N. (2009). Instructional effects on critical thinking: Performance on ill-defined issues *Learning and Instruction*, 19 (4), 322-334 DOI: [10.1016/j.learninstruc.2008.06.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2008.06.010)

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