

Thinking Like Winners

Want to be empowered by learning one skill whose value goes way beyond even money? This skill offers you the wherewithal to brighten every aspect of your future from your personal life to your career prospects. It even enhances your important role as an informed citizen and respected school and community leader.

Critical thinking means thinking in a fair and open-minded manner, while carefully considering what to do and believe. It's a learnable skill that liberates you by opening new horizons, presenting novel solutions, providing fresh perspectives and creating new understandings. It's liberating because you learn how to access relevant knowledge, knowledge, how to think logically and independently plus how to be more collaborative with others. You control your destiny because you have confidence in your ability to reason, to make decisions and to clearly present your point of view.

People lacking this skill are easily exploited both economically and politically. They naively accept without question a politician's assertion that a vote for her means lower taxes and increased services. They believe ads touting wonder skin creams that miraculously transform one's appearance overnight. In other words, their unwitting foolishness constantly enables others to take social and financial advantage of them.

Critical thinkers use a structured intellectual approach to fairly, accurately and logically ascertain the truth. They can clearly articulate their reasons for and against doing something, and they can demonstrate how they arrived at their decision. They apply their critical thinking skills to strive toward the truth and the best actions, not to simply confirm their current beliefs.

The very definition of a well-educated person is someone who knows his or her limits in assessing facts and can readily recognize when more information is required.

Critical thinkers will say:

- I don't make decisions until I analyze every reasonable option.
- I strive towards the truth, not just winning arguments.
- I listen to and often see merit in others' opinions.
- I like jobs where I can think things out for myself.

Those lacking critical thinking skills will say:

- Researching problems is a big waste of time.
- There are always simple solutions to even the most complex problems.

- If I believe in something enough, contrary opinions and facts don't count.
- I like jobs where supervisors tell me exactly what to do, and then I just do it.

Let's look at some examples of everyday use of critical thinking skills:

A newspaper editorial makes the argument that "more prisons reduce crime." This may be nothing more than an easy way for newspaper management to appear like it advocates "getting tough on criminals." In the long term, though, such a strategy could lead to more crime when hardened inmates eventually get released to society without employable skills.

Critical thinkers would research this argument by asking, for instance, "Are there less costly and more effective alternatives like electronically monitored home detention or supervised probation instead of incarceration?"

Critical thinkers don't blindly accept the assertions of authority figures without first independently analyzing all the alternatives. For example:

Marilyn tells you that, "That new kid Jason is a complete loser." This says nothing about Jason because it's not specific. It simply expresses Marilyn's unsubstantiated emotional prejudice. Maybe Jason rejected Marilyn's flirting, for instance, and she just wants revenge.

Unsupported claims require sound analysis to unearth key facts and the accuser's real motives. Critical thinkers would respond with probing questions like, "How well do you know Jason?" or "What do you mean by 'complete loser?'" Before accepting Marilyn's interpretation, critical thinkers would want to meet Jason.

Critical thinking changes your life for the better. It teaches you that all ideas must survive systematic evaluation. Critical thinking interprets all the data to solve tough problems. Rather than being a competitive endeavor, critical thinking teaches you the value of collaboration. Best of all it affords you added respect and more control over your life.

Talk with your parents, your librarian, school counselors or your teachers about learning critical thinking skills. They'll gladly help.