

6 CRUCIAL CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND HOW YOU CAN IMPROVE THEM

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While there's no universal standard for what skills are included in the critical thinking process, we've boiled it down to the following six.

1. Identification

The first step in the critical thinking process is to identify the situation or problem as well as the factors that may influence it. Once you have a clear picture of the situation and the people, groups or factors that may be influenced, you can then begin to dive deeper into an issue and its potential solutions.

How to improve: When facing any new situation, question or scenario, stop to take a mental inventory of the state of affairs and ask the following questions:

- Who is doing what?
- What seems to be the reason for this happening?
- What are the end results, and how could they change?

2. Research

When comparing arguments about an issue, independent research ability is key. Arguments are meant to be persuasive—that means the facts and figures presented in their favour might be lacking in context or come from questionable sources. The best way to combat this is independent verification; find the source of the information and evaluate.

How to improve: It can be helpful to develop an eye for unsourced claims. Does the person posing the argument offer where they got this information from? If you ask or try to find it yourself and there's no clear answer, that should be considered a red flag. It's also important to know that not all sources are equally valid—take the time to learn the difference between popular and scholarly articles.

3. Identifying biases

This skill can be exceedingly difficult, as even the smartest among us can fail to recognise biases. Strong critical thinkers do their best to evaluate information objectively. Think of yourself as a judge in that you want to evaluate the claims of both sides of an argument, but you'll also need to keep in mind the biases each side may possess.

It is equally important—and arguably more difficult—to learn how to set aside your own personal biases that may cloud your judgement. “Have the courage to debate and argue with your own thoughts and assumptions,” Potrafka encourages. “This is essential for learning to see things from different viewpoints.”

How to improve: “Challenge yourself to identify the evidence that forms your beliefs, and assess whether or not your sources are credible,” offers Ruth Wilson, director of development at Brightmont Academy.

First and foremost, you must be aware that bias exists. When evaluating information or an argument, ask yourself the following:

- Who does this benefit?
- Does the source of this information appear to have an agenda?
- Is the source overlooking, ignoring or leaving out information that doesn't support its beliefs or claims?
- Is this source using unnecessary language to sway an audience's perception of a fact?

4. Inference

The ability to infer and draw conclusions based on the information presented to you is another important skill for mastering critical thinking. Information doesn't always come with a summary that spells out what it means. You'll often need to assess the information given and draw conclusions based upon raw data.

The ability to infer allows you to extrapolate and discover potential outcomes when assessing a scenario. It is also important to note that not all inferences will be correct. For example, if you read that someone weighs 260 pounds, you might infer they are overweight or unhealthy. Other data points like height and body composition, however, may alter that conclusion.

How to improve: An inference is an educated guess, and your ability to infer correctly can be polished by making a conscious effort to gather as much information as possible before jumping to conclusions. When faced with a new scenario or situation to evaluate, first try skimming for clues—things like headlines, images and prominently featured statistics—and then make a point to ask yourself what you think is going on.

5. Determining relevance

One of the most challenging parts of any critical thinking scenario is figuring out what information is the most important for your consideration. In many scenarios, you'll be presented with information that may seem important, but it may pan out to be only a minor data point to consider.

How to improve: The best way to get better at determining relevance is by establishing a clear direction in what you're trying to figure out. Are you tasked with finding a solution? Should you be identifying a trend? If you figure out your end goal, you can use this to inform your judgement of what is relevant.

Even with a clear objective, however, it can still be difficult to determine what information is truly relevant. One strategy for combating this is to make a physical list of data points ranked in order of relevance. When you parse it out this way, you'll likely end up with a list that includes a couple of obviously relevant pieces of information at the top of your list, in addition to some points at the bottom that you can likely disregard. From there, you can narrow your focus on the less clear-cut topics that reside in the middle of your list for further evaluation.

6. Curiosity

It's incredibly easy to sit back and take everything presented to you at face value, but that can also be also a recipe for disaster when faced with a scenario that requires critical thinking. It's true that we're all naturally curious—just ask any parent who has faced an onslaught of "Why?" questions from their child. As we get older, it can be easier to get in the habit of keeping that impulse to ask questions at bay. But that's not a winning approach for critical thinking.

How to improve: While it might seem like a curious mind is just something you're born with, you can still train yourself to foster that curiosity productively. All it takes is a conscious effort to ask open-ended questions about the things you see in your everyday life, and you can then invest the time to follow up on these questions.

“Being able to ask open-ended questions is an important skill to develop—and bonus points for being able to probe,”