

What Is Critical Thinking, Anyway?

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The longer I teach (I'm now in my 32nd year) the more I'm convinced that the best thing we can do for our students is help them learn to think for themselves.

That involves explaining what critical thinking actually means — a step I fear we often skip — as well as equipping them with the requisite skills. That's why I recommend talking to students on the first day of class about critical thinking. What is it? Why is it important? How can they learn to do it?

What follows is an example of my opening-day remarks. For graduate students and Ph.D.s new to teaching, if this talk resonates with you, feel free to adapt it for your own classrooms.

These days, the term “critical thinking” has been overused to the point where it has almost ceased to mean anything in particular. It has become more of a popular educational catchphrase, so that even the people who use it often don't know exactly what they mean by it.

Get any group of teachers in a room — kindergarten through college — and throw out the question, “What can we do to help our students learn better?” Within minutes, someone is bound to say, “I know, let's teach critical thinking!” Then another person in the group will say, “Oh, that's good. Write that down.” And so they dutifully put it on the list, and everyone nods sagely, including the people who eventually read the list, and no one ever takes any concrete steps and nothing ever changes. This process is known as “educational administration.”

None of that means, however, that critical thinking is not a real thing. It is — and it's vital for you to understand what critical thinking is and how to do it. The extent of your success in college — not to

mention life — ultimately depends on it.

Critical thinking, as the term suggests, has two components. The first is thinking — actually thinking about stuff, applying your brain to the issues at hand, disciplining yourself (and it does require discipline) to grapple with difficult concepts for as long as necessary in order to comprehend and internalize them.

This is important because we live in a society that increasingly makes it easy for people to get through the day without having to think very much. We have microwaveable food, entertainment at our fingertips, and GPS to get us where we need to go. I'm not saying those things are bad. Ideally, such time-saving devices free up our brains for other, more important pursuits. But the practical effect is that we've become accustomed to setting our brains on autopilot.

Actual thinking requires deep and protracted exposure to the subject matter — through close reading, for example, or observation. It entails collecting, examining, and evaluating evidence, and then questioning assumptions, making connections, formulating hypotheses, and testing them. It culminates in clear, concise, detailed, and well-reasoned arguments that go beyond theory to practical application.

All of this, as I mentioned, involves discipline. And what better place to develop that discipline than in college courses, especially the ones you don't want to take because they're "not in your major"? After all, we can increase our brainpower, just as we can increase our physical strength, and in much the same way — by pushing against resistance. The greater the resistance, and the more we persist in pushing against it, the greater the intellectual benefit. That's why it's in your best interests to apply yourself to the courses you dislike the most and find most difficult: Those courses actually constitute ["cross-training for the brain."](#)

The second component of critical thinking is the critical part. In common parlance, "critical" has come to mean simply negative — as in, "I don't like to be around him, he's always so critical." But of course that's not what it means in an academic context.

Think of movie critics. They cannot simply trash every film they see. Instead, their job is to combine their knowledge of films and filmmaking with their extensive experience (having no doubt seen hundreds, even thousands of films) and provide readers with the most objective analysis possible of a given movie's merits. In the end, what we're left with is just one critic's opinion, true. But it's an opinion based on substantial evidence.

To be "critical," then, means to be objective, or as objective as humanly possible. No one is capable of being completely objective — we're all human, with myriad thoughts, emotions, and subconscious biases we're not even aware of. Recognizing that fact is a vital first step. Understanding that we're not objective, by nature, and striving mightily to be objective, anyway, is about as good as most of us can do.

To be critical also means to be analytical, to be able to look at a problem or question and break it down into its component parts — the way a chemist analyzes a compound. What makes a film good, or bad, or mediocre? Is it the acting? The directing? The script? The cinematography? All of them combined?

Finally — and perhaps most important — to be critical means to be dispassionate, to be able to separate your emotions from the situation at hand. That's not to say emotions are bad. Perhaps there are some decisions that, as human beings, we should make based primarily on emotions (although I would recommend giving your head a vote, at least). And we should certainly take emotional factors into account in all our decision-making, as in the case of compassion, for instance.

But in professional life, and to some extent in our lives in general, we simply can't make most decisions based primarily on emotion. We can't trust our emotions because they aren't necessarily grounded in reality. They are inconsistent, changing with our moods, with the seasons, with the time of day, with that last song we just heard on the radio — or the last presidential election. Emotions are, by definition, not based on reason and, therefore, form a poor, shaky foundation for decision-making.

Like thinking, learning to recognize and set aside our emotions requires a great deal of discipline. As humans, we're emotional creatures. Being dispassionate doesn't come naturally to us; we have to train ourselves to do it. And again, what better place than in a college classroom, where you're exposed to all kinds of ideas and information, including some you don't like?

Share your thoughts in the comments below about how we can help our students understand the meaning and importance of critical thinking.

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