

How To Develop Your Critical Thinking Skills

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Tuesday, 17 March 2009

So you want to be a better thinker? Use these simple techniques to develop your critical thinking skills.
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What are critical thinking skills? They are the habits of thought that you cultivate for better decisions on what to believe and what to do. Critical thought is not about being able to argue well. That kind of thinking can be a trap. Unfortunately, some very intelligent people think that way, seeking only to justify the beliefs they already have. That is very limited thinking.

{bot_wrgoogle}Ask psychologists, philosophers, and brain scientists what critical thinking is, and you'll get many definitions. However, all of them seem to agree that it includes challenging and analyzing our own motivations, thought processes and conclusions. Here is a basic definition:

"Reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe and/or how to act."

Reasonable shouldn't be confused with logical, since many of the most unreasonable ideas result logically from a chosen set of premises and assumptions. A set of premises which include a flat Earth, for example, can lead to the perfectly logical conclusion that a boat will fall off the edge of the planet if it goes too close. Logic is a systematic way to derive conclusions from premises, but the premises themselves may be right or wrong.

Being reasonable then, means allowing for the possibility that reality may not match our premises. being reasonable means observing, gathering evidence, and using inductive reasoning (all dogs I see have four legs, so dogs must normally have four legs). On the other hand, logic is limited to deductive reasoning, and one bad premise can taint all deductions that come from it. It is reasonable, therefore, to challenge not just our logic, but the premises it is based on.

To be reflective, is to ask questions like, "How could I be wrong here? What assumptions am I making and are they correct? Are there other explanations that may be better?"

Suppose on a hot humid day, you think, "Humidity makes the air feel warmer, and it is normally more humid in Montana than in Arizona, so if the temperature is the same in both places, it will normally feel warmer in Montana." Unassailable logic, but a wrong conclusion, as I and anyone who has lived in both places in winter can tell you. Humid air actually feels warmer when it's hot and cooler when it's cold.

To avoid errors like this, you ask if it's true that humidity makes air feel warmer. A hot day's experience says yes, but when you look for possible errors you note the hidden assumption that "it's true at any temperature." You challenge that assumption, and remember that the hot feeling is partly because your sweat can't evaporate as fast in humid air, so your body can't cool itself as well. Reflecting on that, you realize it wouldn't matter as much when it's cold, because you sweat less.

Cultivate Your Critical Thinking Skills

You may already have enough knowledge to correct the error, but if not, a bit of critical thought would at least point out the need to gather more information. You can see in this example the kind of mind set you need as a critical thinker. What else can you do to develop critical thinking skills? There are specific exercises and practices for that. Here are three of them.

Evidence

Make it a habit to ask for evidence. That might mean simply asking "where did you read that?" or "Was that speculation, or did they actually do a test?" Be prepared to provide evidence for your own claims as well. We don't carry our sources with us, of course, but you should be able to get a sense whether there really is some basis for a claim or belief.

Source

Because we don't carry evidence around with us, we all accept many things said at face value, at least for the sake of discussion. Otherwise our conversations would be more like interrogations, and probably very short. However, we can consider the sources of information and evidence. We can ask if this person usually remembers the facts correctly. We can consider if the source they refer to is reliable.

Motivations

What we believe, what others believe, and what evidence is considered by anyone, is in part a function of motivations. Because of this, a magazine might be entirely biased in its reporting, yet have all of their facts perfectly verified. Of course, you should ask yourself if there is enough of a motivation for outright lying, but this isn't as common as many people think. A more important part of your critical thinking skills is to ask why these certain facts may have been reported (what bias is likely), and what facts are being ignored or passed over.

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