

What we talk about when we talk about critical thinking: Definitions

Common definitions

[Reflective thinking] is active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends. (John Dewey, 1910).

[Critical thinking is] reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe and do (Norris & Ennis, 1989).

We understand critical thinking to be purposeful self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. CT is essential as a tool of inquiry. As such CT is a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one's personal and civic life. While not synonymous with good thinking, CT is a pervasive and self-rectifying human phenomenon. The idea critical thinking is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit. Thus, educating good critical thinkers means working toward this idea. It combines developing CT skills with nurturing those dispositions which consistently yield useful insights and which are the basis of a rational and democratic society. (Facione, American Philosophical Association, 1990).

Definitions that emphasize metacognitive aspect

Thinking about your thinking while you're thinking in order to make your thinking better (Paul, 1993)

Reflective thinking is thinking that is aware of its own assumptions and implications as well as being conscious of the reasons and evidence that support this or that conclusion. Reflective thinking takes into account its own methodology, its own procedures, its own perspective and point of view. Reflective thinking is prepared to recognize the factors that make for bias, prejudice, and self-deception. It involves *thinking about its procedures* at the same time as it involves *thinking about its subject matter* (Lipman, 2003).

Definitions emphasizing appropriate use of criteria for thinking

Critical thinking demands a rejection of relativism. If we think there is some point to helping students become critical thinkers, we must think there are criteria, binding upon all reasoners, in accordance with which the strength of reasons and arguments are appropriately determined, and we must think it is a good thing for students to master and use those criteria (Siegel, 1997).

A unique kind of purposeful thinking in which the thinker systematically and habitually imposes criteria and intellectual standards upon the thinking, taking charge of the construction of thinking, guiding the construction of the thinking according to the standards, and assessing the effectiveness of the thinking according to the purpose, the criteria, and standards (Paul, 1993)

Definitions emphasizing awareness of and adjustment to context

[Critical thinking] facilitates judgment because it is . . . sensitive to context (Lipman, 1991).

[The critical] thinker is using skills that are thoughtful and effective for the particular context and type of thinking task (Halpern, 1996).

Definitions emphasizing critical thinking as a habit or definition

Reflective thinking . . . involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value . . . [T]he most important factor in the training of good mental habits consists in acquiring the attitude of suspended conclusion. (Dewey, 1910).

[Critical thinking is] the skill or propensity to engage in an activity with reflective skepticism (McPeck, 1994).

Being a critical thinker requires basing one's beliefs and actions on reasons; it involves committing oneself to the dictates of rationality. . . Critical thinking has . . . a critical spirit component, which is understood as a complex of dispositions, attitudes, habits of mind, and character trait. (Siegel, 1997).