CRITICAL THINKING

There are two way to approach learning about a topic or completing a task: acquiring information and critical thinking.

Acquiring information

"Re-searching" answers by locating information in textbooks and other resources; identifying and listing facts

Memorizing information and retrieving data

Critical thinking

Interpreting, summarizing and assessing information in textbooks and other resources; reaching individual conclusions, judgments, evaluations or critiques using available information

Inquiring into data and information and using it to build, construct, plan or invent a new product or idea

Critical thinking is deciding what to believe or how to act based on applying criteria and carefully considering evidence, not merely by jumping to conclusions, relying on gut feelings or personal opinions. A critical thinker engages intellectual tools like background knowledge, criteria, vocabulary, thinking strategies and habits of mind. Each of these are explored below.

Collect background knowledge

A critical thinker acknowledges gaps in understanding, questions assumptions, and knows where and how to find more information. Knowledge can be collected from a wide range of sources including consulting peers, professors and librarians; reading journal articles, books and online sources; reflecting on personal experience; and conducting independent research.

Collected knowledge must be evaluated to ensure the information is credible and only the most relevant and compelling details should be used as a basis for making a decision.

Ask yourself: Do I draw upon accurate and relevant information? Do I know what gaps there are in my knowledge?

Check criteria for judgment

A critical thinker bases decisions on specific criteria. The thinker must consider what factors are important in order to draw conclusions. Among the factors, priorities must be ranked.

Ask yourself: Do I know what factors to consider in order to make a decision?

Develop critical thinking vocabulary

A critical thinker understands what's being asked and clarifies what is meant by the vocabulary used to describe certain thinking processes (e.g. assess, evaluate, synthesize, summarize, paraphrase) or academic tasks (e.g. annotated bibliography, article critique, book review, comparative essay, report).

Ask yourself: Do I understand what's being asked? Am I using terms accurately?

Use thinking strategies

A critical thinker uses procedures, frameworks or models to sort through and organize evidence. These help to arrange information for comparison and to highlight connections among ideas or best practices. Thinking strategies could be personal, like talking to a friend, mentor or professor; graphic, like pro/con lists, charts, concept maps, flow charts or timelines; or conceptual, like the scientific method or a theoretical framework.

Ask yourself: Could I organize this information in a graphic way? Are there steps I should take before making a decision?

Cultivate thinking habits

A critical thinker is curious and patient, considering various factors before drawing conclusions. Open-mindedness, a willingness to consult while maintaining independence, and attention to detail are also qualities of a critical thinker. Tolerating ambiguity is essential for critical thinkers because there may be multiple "right" answers depending on the criteria used. It's important to regularly reflect on habits of mind that may regularly help or hinder thinking.

Ask yourself: Have I considered multiple points of view? What habits of mind can I cultivate?

Many intellectual tools are used without awareness, but thinking about how to think can help put intellectual tools to use more deliberately and effectively. Everyone can develop, fortify and extend critical thinking abilities.

For more information, please visit: Critical Thinking ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/sites/default/files/CriticalThinking.pdf

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