

"Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about."

—BENJAMIN LEE WHORF, American Linguist

A GLOSSARY OF CRITICAL THINKING
TERMS & CONCEPTS



The Critical Analytic Vocabulary
of the English Language

By DR. LINDA ELDER and DR. RICHARD PAUL

THINKER'S GUIDE LIBRARY



Introduction

This compendium of terms is testament to the fact that critical thinking entails a body of concepts and principles which, when internalized and practiced, enable people to raise their thinking to a higher level. Critical thinking, in one form or another, has been implicit in the thinking of some people from the earliest days of *homo sapiens* (the species that thinks). Once thinking was raised to the level of consciousness, it followed that at least some people would begin to think consciously about thinking (noticing its sometimes “flawed” nature). Yet we are still a considerable distance from the emergence of *homo “criticus” sapiens* (the species that thinks critically). Critical thinking has not yet become a dominant cultural value nor critical-mindedness (criticality) a common personal attribute.

Why Critical Thinking?

Humans live in a world of thoughts. We accept some thoughts as true. We reject others as false. But the thoughts we perceive as true are sometimes false, unsound, or misleading. And the thoughts we perceive as false and trivial are sometimes true and significant.

The mind doesn’t naturally grasp the truth. *We don’t naturally see things as they are.* We don’t automatically sense what is reasonable and what unreasonable. Our thought is often biased by our agendas, interests, and values. *We typically see things as we want to.* We twist reality to fit our preconceived ideas. Distorting reality is common in human life. It is a phenomenon to which we all, at times, unfortunately fall prey.

Each of us views the world through multiple lenses, often shifting them to fit our changing feelings. In addition, much of our perspective is unconscious and uncritical and has been influenced by many forces — including social, political, economic, biological, psychological, and religious influences. Social rules and taboos, religious and political ideologies, biological and psychological impulses, all play a role, often unconscious, in human thinking. Selfishness, vested interest and parochialism, are deeply influential in the intellectual and emotional lives of most people.

What is Critical Thinking?

To live successfully in this world of power, propaganda, manipulation, and exploitation, we need an orientation that enables us to exercise oversight on thinking (on our thinking and that of others). We need a systematic way to further *sound* thinking and limit *unsound* thinking. We need to take command of our cognitive processes in order to determine in a reasonable way what thinking to accept and what to reject. Critical thinking is that process, that orientation, and in the finest cases, that way of living. As William Graham Sumner put it, more than a hundred years ago:

[Critical thinking is]... “the examination and test of propositions of any kind which are offered for acceptance, in order to find out whether they correspond to reality or not. The critical faculty is a product of education and training. It is a mental habit and power. It is a prime condition of human welfare that men and women should be trained in it. It is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition and misapprehension of ourselves and our earthy circumstances.”

What are its Forms and Manifestations?

Critical thinking concepts encompass a large network of interrelated ideas. To understand one such idea often entails understanding other ideas. As such, critical thinking concepts are best understood in relationship to each other and in contrast to their opposites. We have focused on concepts which are non-technical (and are thus available in any well-researched dictionary of the English language). Furthermore, we have focused on concepts of use to those interested in an **explicit, global, Socratic, and systematic** approach to critical thinking, rather than on approaches that are **implicit, sophistic, one-dimensional, or episodic**. By the way, each of these terms (descriptive of approaches to critical thinking) are included in this glossary, so if you are puzzled by any of them you can put this glossary immediately to use by looking them up.

The concept of critical thinking, comprehensively viewed, is a rich, variegated, and, to some extent, open-ended concept. There is no way to encompass it “completely” and inexhaustibly. There is no way to encompass it in a one-sentence “definition.” Nevertheless, at its base is a foundational set of meanings presupposed in all of its varied uses. Its multiplicity is given by the fact that one can pursue the improvement of thinking by somewhat different studies with somewhat different scope and trained on different foci.

Thus, critical thinking may be *implicit* in human thought, or **explicit**. It may be fostered **systematically**, or engaged in only **episodically**. It may foster **selfishness** or **fairmindedness**. It may be **global** (multi-dimensional, broad, generalizable) or **specialized** (one-dimensional, narrow, intradisciplinary).¹

Though we recognize all of these forms and manifestations of critical thinking, still we believe that the approach most essential to the non-specialist is that which is most functional across all disciplines and domains. What is more, even specialists are well-advised to master the foundations of global Socratic critical thinking since specialists need to learn to think effectively across disciplines and other domains of thought (for example, to correct for the bias and limitations of their discipline).

Final Details and Qualifications

The network of critical thinking terms in this glossary is in no way exhaustive. Many more terms might be added to it. For example, one important concept in critical thinking is captured in the term ‘intellectual standards,’ which is defined as ‘criteria used to evaluate

¹ See critical thinking forms and manifestations.

or judge the quality of reasoning.’ There is an array of such standards extant in all modern natural languages, including *clarity*, *accuracy*, *precision*, *depth*, *breadth* and *fairness*. These and a number of other intellectual standard terms are included in this glossary. However, due to space limitations, a great many other intellectual standard words have been excluded.

We have also included a significant number of terms which illuminate the barriers to the development of critical thought — for example those terms which center around the problems of *sociocentric* and *egocentric thought*.

For most entries we provide a brief definition followed by elaboration and exemplification of the concept. In a number of cases we link the terms to instruction, for the benefit of our readers who are educators or students.

Finally please note that, for every term, we have included only those definitions relevant to critical thinking, in some cases leaving out a significant number of other possible uses of the term.

assessment or judgment and thus the state of being thorough, accurate, exact, or deep. It involves judiciousness, discernment, and the embodiment of intellectual criteria and standards.

See *critical, critical thinking, intellectual standards*.

critique: an objective judging, analysis, or evaluation of something.

The purpose of critique is the same as the purpose of critical thinking: to appreciate strengths as well as weaknesses, virtues as well as failings. Critical thinkers critique in order to redesign, remodel, and improve. The primary tool for critique used by critical thinkers is the set of intellectual standards extant in natural languages — standards such as clarity, accuracy, precision, depth, breadth, significance, logicalness, fairness, justifiability, reasonability.

See *intellectual standards, evaluation*.

cultural associations: cultural associations are ideas linked in the mind, often inappropriately, due to societal influences.

Many, if not most, of our important ideas are connected with, or guided by, cultural associations. Media advertising juxtaposes and joins logically unrelated things to influence our buying habits (e.g. if you drink this particular brand of beverage, you will be “sexy”; if you drive this type of car, you will be “attractive” and “powerful”). Raised in a particular country or within a particular group within it, we form any number of mental links which, if they remain unexamined, unduly influence our thinking and behavior.

Of course, not all cultural associations are problematic. Only through disciplined

examination can we distinguish between those that are and those that are not.

See *associational thinking, cultural assumption, concept, critical society*.

cultural assumption: unassessed (often implicit) belief adopted by virtue of upbringing in a society and taken for granted.

Raised in a culture, we unconsciously adopt its point of view, values, beliefs, and practices. At the root of each of these are many assumptions. Not knowing that we perceive, conceive, think, and experience within assumptions we have formulated uncritically, we take ourselves to be perceiving “things as they are,” not “things as they appear from a cultural perspective.” Becoming aware of our cultural assumptions so that we might critically examine them is a crucial dimension of critical thinking. It is, however, a dimension largely missing from the educational process. Indeed, schools, and even colleges and universities, often implicitly and unknowingly foster blind acceptance to group ideologies.

See *sociocentricity, ethnocentricity, prejudice, social contradiction*.

- D -

data: facts, figures, or information from which inferences can be made, or upon which interpretations or theories can be based.

Critical thinkers routinely distinguish hard data from the inferences or conclusions that may be drawn from them. Uncritical thinkers often confuse data with interpretation. Of course, it is also

A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
K
L
M
N
O
P
Q
R
S
T
U
V
W
X
Y
Z

A **interpret/interpretation:** to give one's own conception of; to give meaning to; to place in the context of one's own experience, perspective, point of view, or philosophy.

B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
K
L
M
N
O
P
Q
R
S
T
U
V
W
X
Y
Z

Interpretations are characteristically distinguished from the facts, the evidence, the situation. I may, for example, interpret someone's silence as an expression of hostility toward me. Such an interpretation may or may not be "correct." Critical thinkers recognize their interpretations, distinguish them from information or evidence, consider alternative interpretations, and reconsider their interpretations in the light of new evidence.

All learning entails personal interpretation, since whatever we learn we must integrate into our own thinking and action. What we learn must be given a meaning by us, must be meaningful to us, and hence involves interpretive acts on our part.

See *infer/inference*.

intuition: the perception that something is true without the benefit of conscious reasoning; immediate apprehension or understanding; a keen and quick insight.

We sometimes seem to know or learn things without recognizing how we came to that knowledge. When this occurs, we experience an inner sense that what we believe is true. Sometimes we are correct (and have genuinely experienced an intuition). However, sometimes we are incorrect (having fallen victim to one of our prejudices). Critical thinkers realize how easily intuitions are confused with prejudices. Critical thinkers may follow their inner sense that something is so, but only with a healthy sense of intellectual humility.

There is a second sense of "intuition"

important to critical thinking, the meaning of which is suggested in the following sentence: "To develop critical thinking abilities, it is important to develop critical thinking intuitions." This sense of the word is connected to the fact that we can learn concepts at various levels of depth. If we learn nothing more than an abstract definition for a word without learning how to apply it effectively in a wide variety of situations, we end up with little or no intuitive basis for applying it. We lack insight into how, when, and why it applies. In such a case, we have acquired inert information and nothing else. We want to internalize critical thinking concepts (and indeed all powerful concepts) so as to be able to readily and easily apply them to cases in a large array of circumstances. We want critical thinking to become "intuitive" to us, ready and available for immediate application in everyday thought and experience.

See *prejudice, inert information*.

irrational/irrationality: lacking the power to reason; contrary to reason or logic; senseless, unreasonable, absurd.

Humans are both rational and irrational. We have innate egocentric and sociocentric tendencies that often lead us to do things that are illogical (though they seem to us at the time to be perfectly logical). We don't *automatically* sense what is reasonable in any given situation. Rather, the extent to which we think and act rationally depends upon how well our rational capacities have been developed. It depends upon the extent to which we have learned to go beyond our natural prejudices and biases, beyond our narrow, self-serving viewpoint, to see what makes most sense to do and believe