# Strategic Thinking

## 25 Weeks to Better Thinking and Better Living

First Steps to Becoming a Critical Thinker

Dear Reader,

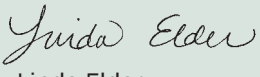
There is a difference between doing something and doing it well. Some skill development can be left largely to experience and informal practice (such as learning to ride a bike or drive a car). Other skill development requires systematic instruction and extensive practice. Learning to think critically is in the latter category. It not only goes to the heart of who and what we are, it has implications for how we go about doing, literally, everything we do. When we develop bad habits of thought, we perform poorly in every domain of human performance that requires thinking, and that is every domain whatsoever. There is nothing that we do as humans that does not involve our thinking.

To become a successful student of human thinking requires that we learn to observe, monitor, analyze, assess, and reconstruct thinking of many sorts in many domains. This task is accomplished only if taken seriously, and throughout a lifetime. It requires the building of important habits of mind. It has implications for how we think, feel, and act. It requires dedication and perseverance, honesty and integrity.

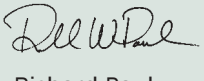
This guide is intended as nothing more than the raw beginning of planning and practicing self-reflection. Our hope is not in a miracle transformation, but in laying a foundation for your future intellectual and emotional growth. We are merely scratching the surface of deep and complex topics. Nevertheless, until one takes one's intellectual growth seriously, it is unlikely to happen. One must begin somewhere.

You should know from the outset that in this guide we sometimes omit qualifications and expanded commentary we would otherwise like to include. Furthermore, in compressing each strategic idea into two pages and in seeking examples from everyday life, we may have unwittingly oversimplified some of the ideas we present. What is more, you may from time to time disagree with us on one or more of our examples. We ask you to apply the principle of charity. We, like all other humans, make mistakes. The question is not, "Do we make mistakes?" It is, "Do we learn from them?" Don't let any mistakes on our part distract you from the larger end: your development as a thinker.

If you read one of our strategic ideas and it does not make sense to you, by all means pass it by and come back to it later. Give yourself time to grow, and use only those ideas that you can put into action. For further reading or explanations of the ideas, you will find recommended readings at the end of the guide. We hope you can learn as much from reading this guide as we have from writing it.



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*"Of all knowledge, the wise and good seek most to know themselves."*
— Shakespeare

*"Do you want to know the man against whom you have most reason to guard yourself? Your looking-glass will give you a very fair likeness of his face."*
— Whately

*"The first step to knowledge is to know that we are ignorant."*
— Cecil

*"The more you practice what you know, the more shall you know what to practice."*
— W. Jenkin

*"Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is the probable reason why so few engage in it."*
— Henry Ford

*"The key to every man is his thought."*
— Emerson

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# The Quality of Your Life is Determined By the Quality of Your Thinking

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To improve the quality of our lives significantly, we must begin to take thinking seriously, to become students, if you will, of thinking. We must begin to observe thinking, to examine it, to witness its power in action. We must begin to discipline our thinking through knowledge of thinking, and practice using that knowledge daily. We must begin to analyze our thinking, assess our thinking, improve our thinking. We must engage in **critical** thinking.

In this thinker's guide, we focus on some of the basic facts about thinking, and present them, we hope, in a useable way. Though the study of thinking and its relationship with emotions and desires is complex, many of its foundations are quite simple. The trick is to use simple ideas systematically to change your life for the better. We call this process **strategic thinking** (critical thinking in action). You can learn it. You can use it. This guide is a start-up kit.

## Can Your Thinking Be Your Problem?

To begin to take thinking seriously, we first must recognize the inherently flawed nature of uncultivated human thought. Put another way — without active intervention, human thinking naturally develops problems. For example, humans are prejudiced. We stereotype one another. We are hypocritical. We sometimes murder, steal, and torture. We often ignore important problems that we could, with determination and good thinking, solve — problems such as hunger, poverty, and homelessness.

What is more, when we behave irrationally, our behavior seems perfectly reasonable to us. When challenged, the mind says (to itself), "So why are these people giving me a hard time? I'm just doing what makes sense. Any reasonable person would see that!" We think of our own thinking as fully justified. As far as we can tell, we are only doing what is **right**. Any fleeting thoughts intimating that we might be at fault are typically overcome by more powerful self-justifying thoughts: "I don't mean any harm. I am just! I am fair! It is those others who are wrong!"

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# A How-To List for Dysfunctional Living

Most people have no notion of what it means to take charge of their lives. They don't realize that the quality of their lives depends on the quality of their thinking. Consider the following and ask yourself how many of these dysfunctional ways of thinking you engage in:

1. **Surround yourself with people who think like you**. Then no one will criticize you.
2. **Don't question your relationships**. You then can avoid dealing with problems within them.
3. **If critiqued by a friend or lover, look sad and dejected** and say, "I thought you were my friend!" or "I thought you loved me!"
4. **When you do something unreasonable, always be ready with an excuse**. Then you won't have to take responsibility. If you can't think of an excuse, look sorry and say, "I can't help how I am!"
5. **Focus on the negative side of life**. Then you can make yourself miserable and blame it on others.
6. **Blame others for your mistakes**. Then you won't have to feel responsible for your mistakes. Nor will you have to do anything about them.
7. **Verbally attack those who criticize you**. Then you don't have to bother listening to what they say.
8. **Go along with the groups you are in**. Then you won't have to figure out anything for yourself.
9. **Act out when you don't get what you want**. If questioned, look indignant and say, "I'm just an emotional person. At least I don't keep my feelings bottled up!"
10. **Focus on getting what you want**. If questioned, say, "If I don't look out for number one, who will?"

As you see, the list is almost laughable. And so it would be if these irrational ways of thinking didn't lead to problems in life. But they do. And often. Only when we are faced with the absurdity of dysfunctional thinking, and can see it at work in our lives, do we have a chance to alter it. The strategies outlined in this guide presuppose your willingness to do so.

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# This is the week to *ask deep questions:*

## Question Question Question

Be on the lookout for questions. The ones we ask. The ones we fail to ask. Look on the surface. Look beneath the surface. Listen to how people question, when they question, when they fail to question. Look closely at the questions asked. What questions do you ask, should you ask? Examine the extent to which you are a questioner, or simply one who accepts the definitions of situations given by others.

"'How do you know so much about everything?' was asked of a very wise and intelligent man; and the answer was, 'By never being afraid or ashamed to ask questions as to anything of which I was ignorant.'" — J. Abbott

**Be Clear**
**Stick to the Point**
**Know Your Purpose**
**Question, Question, Question**

Be Fair, Not Selfish
Check Your Emotions
Check Your Desires
Empathize With Others
Have Mercy
Be Reasonable
Don't Be a Top-Dog
Don't Be An Under-Dog
Don't Be a Worry Wart
Stop Blaming Your Parents
Think Through Implications
Uncover Your Ignorance
Notice Contradictions
Think For Yourself
See Through the News Media
See Through Politicians
Be a Citizen of The World
Notice Media Garbage
Make Your Mark
Be Your Own Teacher
Figure Out Where to Go

**I'm Clear**
**I Stick to the Point**
**I Know My Purpose**
**I Question**

I'm Fair
I Check My Emotions
I Check My Desires
I Empathize With Others
I Have Mercy
I'm Reasonable
I'm Not a Top-Dog
I'm Not An Under-Dog
I'm Not a Worry Wart
I Don't Blame My Parents
I Think Through Implications
I Uncover My Ignorance
I Notice Contradictions
I Think For Myself
I See Through the News Media
I See Through Politicians
I Am a Citizen of The World
I Notice Media Garbage
I'm Making a Difference
I Am My Own Teacher
I Am Planning My Future Development

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# Week Four: Question, Question, Question

Most people are not skilled questioners. Most accept the world as it is presented to them. And when they do question, their questions are often superficial or "loaded." Their questions do not help them solve their problems or make better decisions. Good thinkers routinely ask questions in order to understand and effectively deal with the world around them. They question the status quo. They know that things are often different from the way they are presented. Their questions penetrate images, masks, fronts, and propaganda. Their questions make real problems explicit and discipline their thinking. If you become a student of questions, you can learn to ask powerful questions that lead to a deeper and more fulfilling life. Your questions become more basic, essential, and deep.

## Strategies for formulating more powerful questions:

1. Whenever you don't understand something, ask a question of clarification.
2. Whenever you are dealing with a complex problem, formulate the question you are trying to answer in several different ways (being as precise as you can) until you hit upon the way that best addresses the problem at hand.
3. Whenever you plan to discuss an important issue or problem, write out in advance the most significant questions you think need to be addressed in the discussion. Be ready to change the main question, but once made clear, help those in the discussion stick to the question, making sure the dialogue builds toward an answer that makes sense.

## Questions you can ask to discipline your thinking:

- What precise question are we trying to answer?
- Is that the best question to ask in this situation?
- Is there a more important question we should be addressing?
- Does this question capture the real issue we are facing?
- Is there a question we should answer before we attempt to answer this question?
- What information do we need to answer the question?
- What conclusions seem justified in light of the facts?
- What is our point of view? Do we need to consider another?
- Is there another way to look at the question?
- What are some related questions we need to consider?
- What type of question is this: an economic question, a political question, a legal question, etc.?

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