The Thinker's Guide to

THE ART OF SOCRATIC QUESTIONING

Based on *Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools*

A companion to:

The Thinker's Guide to Analytic Thinking

The Art of Asking Essential Questions

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Dear Reader,

It is hard to imagine someone being a good critical thinker while lacking the disposition to question in a deep way. It is also hard to imagine someone acquiring the disposition to question in a fuller way than Socrates. It follows that those truly interested in critical thinking will also be interested in the art of deep questioning. And learning the Socratic art is a natural place to start.

Of course, to learn from Socrates we must identify and practice applying the components of his art. Without a sense of these components, it is hard to grasp the nature of the questioning strategies that underlie the art of Socratic questioning. The art requires contextualization. And in that contextualization, the spirit of Socratic questioning is more important than the letter of it.

In this guide, we provide analyses of the components of Socratic questioning, along with some contemporary examples of the method applied in elementary through high school classes.

To get you started in practicing Socratic questioning, we begin with the nuts and bolts of critical thinking (Part One), followed by some examples of Socratic dialogue (Part Two), and then the mechanics of Socratic dialogue (Part Three). The fourth and fifth sections focus on the importance of questioning in teaching, the contribution of Socrates, and the link between Socratic questioning and critical thinking.

As you begin to ask questions in the spirit of Socrates—to dig deeply into what people believe and why they believe it—you will begin to experience greater command of your own thinking as well as the thinking of others. Be patient with yourself and with your students. Proficiency in Socratic questioning takes time, but time well worth spending.

We hope this guide is of use to you and your students in achieving greater command of the art of deep questioning.

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Introduction

The unexamined life is not worth living—Socrates

Socratic questioning is disciplined questioning that can be used to pursue thought in many directions and for many purposes, including: to explore complex ideas, to get to the truth of things, to open up issues and problems, to uncover assumptions, to analyze concepts, to distinguish what we know from what we don't know, and to follow out logical implications of thought. The key to distinguishing Socratic questioning from questioning per se is that Socratic questioning is *systematic, disciplined,* and *deep,* and usually focuses on foundational concepts, principles, theories, issues, or problems.

Teachers, students, or indeed anyone interested in probing thinking at a deep level can and should construct Socratic questions and engage in Socratic dialogue. When we use Socratic questioning in teaching, our purpose may be to probe student thinking, to determine the extent of their knowledge on a given topic, issue or subject, to model Socratic questioning for them, or to help them analyze a concept or line of reasoning. In the final analysis, we want students to learn the *discipline* of Socratic questioning, so that they begin to use it in reasoning through complex issues, in understanding and assessing the thinking of others, and in following-out the implications of what they, and others think.

In teaching, then, we can use Socratic questioning for at least two purposes:

1. To deeply probe student thinking, to help students begin to distinguish what they know or understand from what they do not know or understand (and to help them develop intellectual humility in the process).
2. To foster students' abilities to ask Socratic questions, to help students acquire the powerful tools of Socratic dialogue, so that they can use these tools in everyday life (in questioning themselves and others). To this end, we need to model the questioning strategies we want students to emulate and employ. Moreover, we need to directly teach students how to construct and ask deep questions. Beyond that, students need practice, practice, and more practice.

Socratic questioning teaches us the importance of questioning in learning (indeed Socrates himself thought that questioning was the only defensible form of teaching). It teaches us the difference between systematic and fragmented thinking. It teaches us to dig beneath the surface of our ideas. It teaches us the value of developing questioning minds in cultivating deep learning.

The art of Socratic questioning is intimately connected with critical thinking because the art of questioning is important to excellence of thought. What the word "Socratic" adds to the art of questioning is systematicity, depth, and an abiding interest in assessing the truth or plausibility of things.

Both critical thinking and Socratic questioning share a common end. Critical thinking provides the conceptual tools for understanding how the mind functions (in its pursuit of meaning and truth); and Socratic questioning employs those tools in framing questions essential to the pursuit of meaning and truth.

The goal of critical thinking is to establish an additional level of thinking to our thinking, a powerful inner voice of reason, that monitors, assesses, and reconstitutes—in a more rational direction—our thinking, feeling, and action. Socratic discussion cultivates that inner voice through an explicit focus on self-directed, disciplined questioning.

In this guide, we focus on the mechanics of Socratic dialogue, on the conceptual tools that critical thinking brings to Socratic dialogue, and on the importance of questioning in cultivating the disciplined mind. Through a critical thinking perspective, we offer a substantive, explicit, and rich understanding of Socratic questioning.

To get you started in practicing Socratic questioning, we begin with the nuts and bolts of critical thinking (Part One), followed by some examples of Socratic dialogue (Part Two), and then the mechanics of Socratic dialogue (Part Three). The fourth and fifth sections focus on the importance of questioning in teaching, the contribution of Socrates, and the link between Socratic questioning and critical thinking.

Socratic Questioning

- Raises basic issues
- Probes beneath the surface of things
- Pursues problematic areas of thought
- Helps students discover the structure of their own thought
- Helps students develop sensitivity to clarity, accuracy, relevance, and depth
- Helps students arrive at judgments through their own reasoning
- Helps students analyze thinking—its purposes, assumptions, questions, points of view, information, inferences, concepts, and implications

Part One

A Taxonomy of Socratic Questions

Based in Critical Thinking Concepts

To formulate questions that probe thinking in a disciplined and productive way, we need to understand thinking—how it works and how it should be assessed. It is critical thinking that provides the tools for doing this, for analyzing and assessing reasoning. This is why understanding critical thinking is essential to effective Socratic dialogue.

As teachers, then, we need to understand the conceptual tools that critical thinking brings to Socratic questioning, and we need to foster student understanding of them. In this section we focus briefly on the following foundational critical thinking concepts:

1. **Analyzing thought** (focusing on the parts of thinking)
2. Assessing thought (focusing on standards for thinking)
3. Analyzing questions by system (distinguishing between questions of preference, fact and judgment)
4. **Developing prior questions** (focusing on questions we would need to answer before we could answer more complex questions)
5. Identifying domains within complex questions (focusing on questions we would need to answer within different subject areas or disciplines to adequately address a complex issue)

When we actively use these critical thinking concepts in the questions we formulate and ask, we raise thinking to higher levels of understanding and quality.

Questions that Target the Parts of Thinking[1]

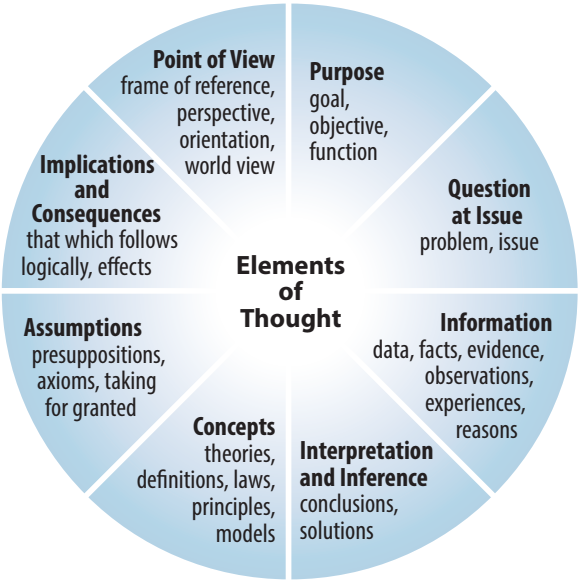
Using analytic questions in Socratic dialogue is foundational to understanding and probing reasoning. When we analyze, we break a whole into parts. We do this because problems in a "whole" are often a function of problems in one or more of its parts. Success in thinking depends on our ability to identify the components of thinking by asking questions focused on those components.

One powerful way to discipline questions, then, is to focus on the components of reasoning, or parts of thinking as illustrated by the following:

As you formulate questions, consider the following guidelines and sample questions:

1. **Questioning Goals and *Purposes*.** All thought reflects an agenda or purpose. Assume that you do not fully understand someone's thought (including your own)

[1] For a deeper understanding of the structures of thought, see *A Miniature Guide to the Foundation of Analytic Thinking,* by Linda Elder, and Richard Paul, 2005, Foundation For Critical Thinking, www.criticalthinking.org. Also see *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life,* by Richard Paul, and Linda Elder, 2006, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.



until you understand the agenda behind it. Some of the many questions that focus on purpose in thinking include:

- What is your purpose right now?
- What was your purpose when you made that comment?
- Why are you writing this? Who is your audience? What do you want to persuade them of?
- What is the purpose of this assignment?
- What are we trying to accomplish here?
- What is our central aim or task in this line of thought?
- What is the purpose of this chapter, relationship, policy, law?
- What is our central agenda? What other goals do we need to consider?

2. **Questioning *Questions.*** All thought is responsive to a question. Assume that you do not fully understand a thought until you understand the question that gives rise to it. Questions that focus on questions in thinking include:
   - I am not sure exactly what question you are raising. Could you explain it?
   - What are the main questions that guide the way you behave in this or that situation?
   - Is this question the best one to focus on at this point, or is there a more pressing question we need to address?

dimensions of their lives. The first will control their deeds, especially private deeds; the second will control their words, especially public words. The first will be used when acting for themselves, the second when performing for others. Through disciplined questioning, teachers can help students discover, and come to terms with, the inconsistencies within and between these two ways of thinking, can help them explore contradictions, double standards, and hypocrisies in their thoughts and deeds as well as the thoughts and deeds of others, and, through the process, foster fair-minded critical thinking.

General Guidelines for Socratic Questioning

Think Along With the Class

There is no good mechanical way to lead a Socratic discussion. You should strive, therefore, to think along with the class as you lead the discussion. In doing so, it is essential that you listen carefully to each and every input into the discussion. Whenever a student responds to a question, you must seriously think about what that student has said and size up what sort of contribution it provides to the discussion. However, for an answer to contribute to the discussion, it must be clear. Do not determine the place of a student comment in the discussion until you are sure you understand what the student is saying. Try to enter the student's point of view before you decide how the student's comment fits in.

There Are Always A Variety of Ways You Can Respond

Remember, that no matter what a person says or thinks, there are multiple ways to respond to that person's thought. Here are a few possibilities:

- How did you come to believe that?
- Do you have any evidence to support that?
- Does anything in your experience illustrate that?
- If we accept what you are saying, what are some implications?
- How might someone object to that position?

Do Not Hesitate to Pause and Reflect Quietly

Don't feel that you have to rush in responding to what students say. Good thinking usually takes time. Give yourself—and the students—time to think through what is being said. Be prepared to say things like, "I need a moment to think that through." "That's an interesting thought. I'd like each of you to take a few minutes to think of how you might respond to that point if I called on you. In fact, I need to think for a few minutes to figure out what I might say in response."

Consistently attempting to live in accordance with the ideals he espoused, and never afraid to stand alone in his views, as long as those views had been rigorously analyzed and assessed, Socrates was a living example of both **intellectual integrity** and intellectual autonomy. And through **intellectual courage**, he was willing to face an angry mob of accusers at his trial and to stand alone in his views, views that had been developed with discipline and rigor throughout a lifetime, even when facing the probability of a death sentence.

The Systematic Nature of the Socratic Method

Socrates was concerned with developing a systematic method of disciplined questioning that could be emulated. By studying the Socratic dialogues, we can explicate the components and processes that came to be known as the Socratic method. In fact, if we are to emulate the intellectual skills and dispositions of Socrates, it is important to delineate, as clearly and precisely as we can, the dialectic method he advocated. This method can be outlined as follows:

1. **The best way to teach is through dialectic reasoning, primarily through a question-and-answer process.** This method of learning enables students to practice, through many years, pursuing answers to questions in a rigorous, methodical way. Disciplined questioning should focus on a specific foundational concept or question, and should include a careful use of analogies intuitive to the "student."
2. There are two primary processes required for replacing faulty thinking with sound thinking—the destructive and the constructive process. In the destructive process, ideas formerly held dear to the student are shown to be illogical or otherwise unsound. In other words, the student comes to recognize the flawed nature of his reasoning. In the constructive process, the student is encouraged to replace the flawed thinking with logical or justifiable thinking.
3. The teacher should help students uncover self-deception in their thinking. (This makes evident the fact that Socrates was aware of the self-deceptive nature of human thought—and the tremendous problem of self-deception in human life.)
4. A primary goal of the teacher should be to help students formulate principles by which to live, principles that emerge out of deep conceptual understandings.

Placing the Dialectic Process at the Heart of Teaching

Socrates viewed education, properly so called, as a complex process requiring active disciplined engagement in learning. In his view, the only way students can learn important and meaningful ideas is through engaging their minds *intellectually*. Therefore, the role of the teacher is to foster intellectual discipline and skill. He thought that the best way to foster the development of deep and important insights was, not by telling students what to do or think, nor by giving them information that would lie dormant in the mind, but through a question-and-answer method, wherein students were, in essence, forced to engage their minds in thinking through a complex concept or issue.

intellectual autonomy in ethical reasoning. He highlighted the fact that no one could think for another, that each person must develop skills of mind and use those skills in reasoning through life's many complex problems and issues.

Focusing on Foundational Concepts and Issues

We can see in the Socratic dialogues, that through probing questions Socrates attempted to understand, and help others understand, how to live a rational and just life. He often did this by focusing on a specific ethical concept, attempting to get increasingly closer to the essence of the concept. Consider the following description of his method, written by Xenophon:[4]

> [Socrates] was always conversing about human beings—examining what is pious, what is impious, what is noble, what is shameful, what is just, what is unjust, what is moderation, what is madness, what is courage, what is cowardice, what is a city, what is a statesman, what is rule over human beings, what is a skilled ruler over human beings, as well as the other things, knowledge of which he believed makes one a gentleman (noble and good), while those who are ignorant of them would justly be called slavish (pp. 4–5).

The Two Primary Processes of the Socratic Method

Let us briefly consider the two primary processes inherent in the Socratic method, the destructive, and the constructive process (as described in the *Encyclopedia Britanica)*:

> In the application of the "dialectic" method two process are distinguishable—the destructive process, by which the worse opinion was eradicated, and the constructive process, by which the better opinion was induced.

Though Socrates felt it important for people to reach and work through the constructive process *if possible*, he nevertheless thought that the destructive process was useful in–and-of itself:

> "Before I ever met you," says Meno in a Socratic dialogue by Plato, "I was told that you spent your time in doubting and leading others to doubt: and it is a fact that your witcheries and spells have brought me to that condition; you are like the torpedo: as it benumbs any one who approaches and touches it, so do you. For myself, my soul and my tongue are benumbed, so that I have no answer to give you." Even if, as often happened, the respondent, baffled and disgusted by the destructive process, at this point withdrew from the inquiry, he had, in Socrates' judgment, gained something: for whereas formerly, being ignorant, he had supposed himself to have knowledge, now, being ignorant, he was in some sort conscious of his ignorance, and accordingly would be for the future more circumspect in action (p. 335).

[4] Xenophon, a student of Socrates, wrote about the life and practices of Socrates shortly after Socrates' indictment and death. This quote is taken from the following source: *Xenophon: Memorabilia.* 1994. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

