

The Thinker's Guide
to

The Art of
**Socratic
Questioning**

Based on Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools

By Dr. Richard Paul and Dr. Linda Elder

*A Companion to:
The Thinkers Guide to Analytic Thinking
The Art of Asking Essential Questions*

The Foundation for Critical Thinking

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.

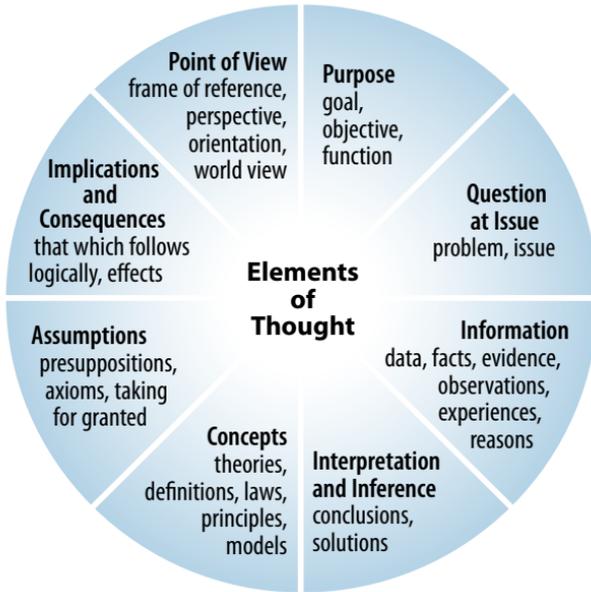
The goal of critical thinking is to establish an additional level of thinking to our thinking, a powerful inner voice of reason, that monitors, assesses, and reconstitutes—in a more rational direction—our thinking, feeling, and action. Socratic discussion cultivates that inner voice through an explicit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

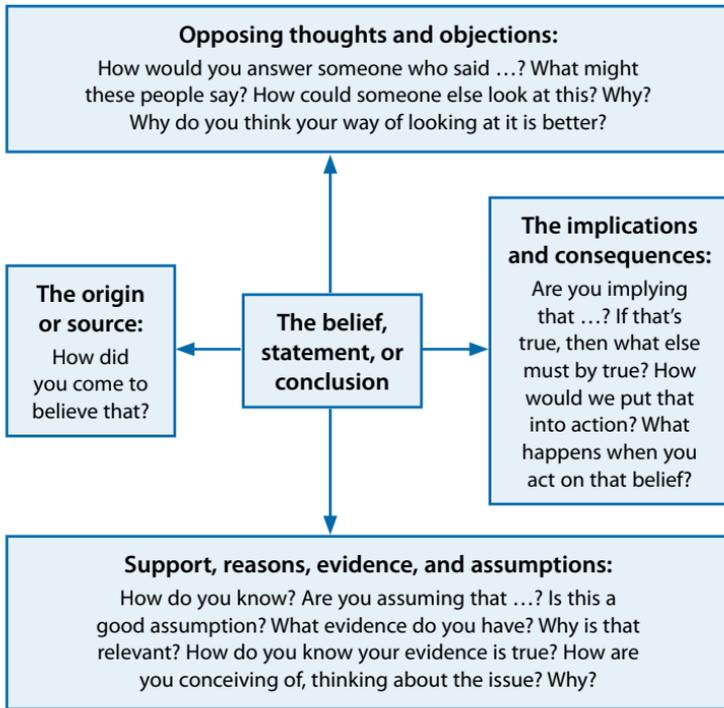


understand the agenda behind it. Some of the many questions that focus on purpose in thinking include:

- 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?



This diagram, and the classifications implicit in it, helps accentuate the following important facts about thinking.

- All thinking has a history in the lives of particular persons.
- All thinking depends upon a substructure of reasons, evidence, and assumptions.
- All thinking leads us in some direction or other (has implications and consequences).
- All thinking stands in relation to other possible ways to think (there is never just one way to think about something).

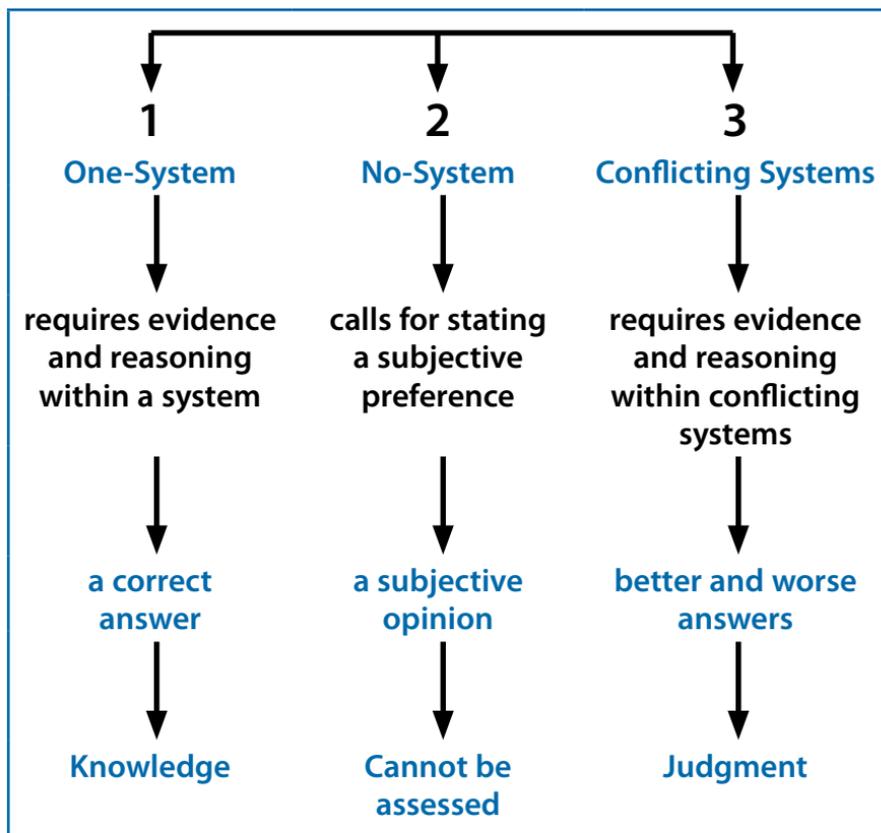
This classificatory scheme highlights four ways we can help students come to terms with their thought:

- We can help students reflect on how they have come to think the way they do on a given subject. (In doing this, we are helping them examine the *history* of their thinking on that subject, helping them find the source or origin of their thinking.)
- We can help students reflect on how they support or might support their thinking. (In doing this, we are helping them express the reasons, evidence, and assumptions that underlie what they think.)

- We can help students reflect on what “follows from” their thinking, what implications and consequences their thinking generates. (In doing this, we are helping them recognize that all thinking entails or involves “effects” or “results” that we are obliged to consider.)
- We can help students reflect on how it is that people with points of view different from theirs might raise legitimate objections or propose alternative ways to think that they should take into account. (In doing this, we are helping them think more broadly, more comprehensively, more fair-mindedly.)

Three Kinds of Questions

In approaching a question, it is useful to figure out what type it is. Is it a question with one definitive answer? Is it a question that calls for a subjective choice? Or does the question require us to consider competing answers.



Part Three

The Mechanics of Socratic Questioning

Three Kinds of Socratic Discussion

We can loosely categorize three general forms of Socratic questioning and distinguish three basic kinds of preparation for each: spontaneous, exploratory, and focused. Each of these forms of questioning can be used to probe student thinking at any level of instruction—from elementary throughout graduate school.

All three types of Socratic discussion require developing the art of questioning. They require the teacher to learn a wide variety of intellectual moves and to develop judgment in determining when to ask which kinds of questions (realizing that there is rarely one best question at any particular time).

Spontaneous or Unplanned

When your teaching is imbued with the Socratic spirit, when you maintain your curiosity and sense of wonderment, there will be many occasions in which you will spontaneously ask students questions that probe their thinking. There will be many opportunities to question what they mean and explore with them how you might find out if something is true, logical, or reasonable. If one student says that a given angle will be the same as another angle in a geometrical figure, you may spontaneously question how the class might go about proving or disproving this assertion. If a student says, “Americans love freedom,” you may spontaneously wonder aloud about what such a statement might mean (Does that mean, for example, that we love freedom more than other people do? Does it mean that we live in a free country? What would it mean to live in a free country? How would we know if we did? Does “freedom” mean the same thing to all Americans?). If in a science class a student says that most space is empty, you may spontaneously ask a question as to what that might mean and how you together might find out.

Such spontaneous discussions provide models of listening critically as well as exploring the beliefs expressed. If something said seems questionable, misleading, or false, Socratic questioning provides a way of helping students become self-correcting, rather than relying on correction by the teacher. Spontaneous Socratic discussion can prove especially useful when students become interested in a topic, when they raise an important issue, when they are on the brink of grasping or integrating a new insight, when discussion becomes bogged down or confused or hostile. Socratic questioning provides specific moves which can fruitfully take advantage of student interest. It can help you effectively approach an important issue. It can aid in integrating and expanding an insight, move a troubled discussion forward, clarify or sort through what appears confusing, and diffuse frustration or anger.

Although by definition there can be no preplanning for a particular spontaneous discussion, you can prepare yourself by becoming familiar and comfortable with generic Socratic questions, by developing the art of raising probing follow-up questions and by

giving encouraging and helpful responses. Consider the following “moves” you might be prepared to make:

Spontaneous Socratic Questioning “Moves”

- Ask for an example of a point a student has made, or of a point you have made.
- Ask for evidence or reasons for a position.
- Propose a counter-example or two.
- Ask the group whether they agree. (Does everyone agree with this point? Is there anyone who does not agree?)
- Suggest parallel or similar examples.
- Provide an analogy that illuminates a particular position.
- Ask for a paraphrase of an opposing view.
- Rephrase student responses clearly and accurately.

In short, when you begin to wonder more and more about meaning and truth, and so think aloud in front of your students by means of questions, Socratic exchanges will occur at many unplanned moments in your instruction. However, in addition to these unplanned wonderings, we can also design or plan out at least two distinct kinds of Socratic discussion: one that explores a wide range of issues and one that focuses on one particular issue.

Exploratory

What we call exploratory Socratic questioning is appropriate when teachers want to find out what students know or think and to probe student thinking on a variety of issues. For example, you might use it to assess student thinking on a subject at the beginning of a semester or unit. You could use it to explore student values, or to uncover problematic areas or potential biases. You could use it to identify where your students are the most clear or the most fuzzy in their thinking. You can use it to discover areas or issues of interest or controversy, or to find out where and how students have integrated academic material into their thinking (and into their behavior). Such discussions can be used in introducing a subject, in preparing students for later analysis of a topic, or in reviewing important ideas before students take a test. You can use it to determine what students have learned from their study of a unit or topic, or as a guide to future assignments.

After an exploratory dialogue, you might have students take an issue raised in discussion and develop in writing their own views on the issue. Or you might have students form groups to further discuss the issue or topic.

With this type of Socratic questioning, we raise and explore a broad range of interrelated issues and concepts, not just one. It requires minimal preplanning or prethinking. It has a relatively loose order or structure. You can prepare by having some general questions ready to raise when appropriate by considering the topic or issue, related issues, and key concepts. You can also prepare by predicting students' likeliest responses and preparing

Appendix B

Analyzed Transcript of a Socratic Dialogue from Plato's *Euthyphro*

What follows is an excerpt from Plato's *Euthyphro*. This is a dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro, in which Socrates is questioning Euthyphro on what it means to be pious (and, by implication, what it means to be impious). Through this excerpt, we get a good idea of the basic approach taken by Socrates when questioning others. At the heart of most Socratic dialogues is a concept that is both abstract and deep. Socrates pretends that he doesn't understand the concept, and that he needs help from the person he is questioning in understanding the concept clearly and accurately.

This dialogue takes place outside the courthouse where Socrates is shortly to stand trial. There he meets Euthyphro, "a seer and religious expert, who says that he is going to charge his own father with manslaughter. Socrates is startled, and inquires how Euthyphro can be sure that such conduct is consistent with his religious duty. The result is a discussion of the true nature of Piety. Euthyphro does not represent Athenian orthodoxy; on the contrary, he is sympathetic towards Socrates. He is an independent specialist, confident in his own fallibility, and therefore a fit subject for Socrates' curative treatment, which aims at clearing the mind of false assumptions and so making it receptive of real knowledge...although the argument moves in a circle, it offers clues for the solution of the problem."

What we want most to notice in this, and indeed any dialogue led by Socrates, is how Socrates guides the discussion. We want to understand the precise intellectual moves, if you will, Socrates makes at each point along the way, so that we might emulate those moves. The best way to do this is to use the language of critical thinking to label those moves. As you read through this dialogue, notice the notes we provide relevant to this point (in parentheses and italics). We begin shortly after the beginning of the dialogue, and include a good portion, but not all, of the dialogue.

Euthyphro: The man who is dead was a poor dependent of mine who worked for us as a field laborer at Naxos, and one day in a fit of drunken passion he got into a quarrel with one of our domestic servants and slew him. My father bound him hand and foot and threw him into a ditch, and then sent to Athens, to ask of a diviner what he should do with him. Meantime he had no care or thought of him, being under the impression that he was a murderer; and that even if he did die there would be no great harm. And this was just what happened. For such was the effect of cold and hunger and chains upon him, that before the messenger returned from the diviner, he was dead. And my father and family are angry with me for taking the part of the murderer and prosecuting my father. They say that he did not kill him, and if he did, the dead man was but a murderer, and I ought not to take any notice, for that a son is impious who prosecutes a father. That shows,

Socrates, how little they know of the opinions of the gods about piety and impiety.

Socrates: *And what is piety, and what is impiety?*

(Socrates asks Euthyphro to explicitly state the fundamental difference between two concepts. This is an important early step in conceptual analysis.)

E: Piety is doing as I am doing; that is to say, prosecuting any one who is guilty of murder, sacrilege, or of any other similar crime—whether he be your father or mother, or some other person, makes no difference—and not persecuting them is impiety. And please to consider, Socrates, what a notable proof I will give you of the truth of what I am saying, which I have already given to others—of the truth, I mean of the principle that the impious, whoever he may be, ought not to go unpunished. For do men regard Zeus as the best and most righteous of the gods?—and even they admit that he bound his father (Cronos) because he wickedly devoured his sons, and that he too has punished his own father (Uranus) for a similar reason, in a nameless manner. And yet when I proceed against my father, they are angry with me. This is their inconsistent way of talking when the gods are concerned, and when I am concerned.

S: *May not this be the reason, Euthyphro, why I am charged with impiety—that I can not away with these stories about the gods? And therefore I suppose that people think me wrong. But, as you who are well informed about them approve of them, I cannot do better than assent to your superior wisdom. For what else can I say, confessing as I do, that I know nothing of them? I wish you would tell me whether you really believe that they are true.*

(Here, Socrates is saying that Euthyphro, since he purports to know a lot about the gods, should tell Socrates of his knowledge. Socrates refers to the indictment against him—that he believes in gods different from those sanctioned by the state. Socrates is demonstrating intellectual humility, while implying that Euthyphro is intellectually arrogant in purporting to know what the gods believe.)

E: Yes, Socrates; and things more wonderful still, of which the world is in ignorance.

S: *And do you really believe that the gods fought with one another, and had dire quarrels, battles, and the like, as the poets say, and as you may see represented in the works of great artists? The temples are full of them. Are all these tales of the gods true, Euthyphro?*



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