

Thinking critically

Students grow to be better global citizens when they learn to empathize with people of the world. But how do you learn to perceive the world from beyond a North American perspective? How can you dig deeper to discover how others perceive the world? Here are some ideas on developing critical thinking skills to help you become world leaders.

What is critical thinking?

Thought is shaped by all sorts of information, concepts, principles and theories of various subjects, as well as by one's experiences and observations. Critical thinking skills include interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference and explanation — skills that are needed to assess ideas, information and experiences, and to take into account opposing points of view.

By developing critical thinking skills, you move your learning beyond mere memorization, to understanding and arriving at rational decisions. As critical thinkers, you should:

- have purposes for learning
- know when and how to question
- recognize when you need more information and what type of knowledge you require
- know how to find and organize information
- generate and evaluate a number of alternatives to the information provided
- dig deeper
- understand alternative viewpoints
- decide what you think and why, and avoid being overly influenced by what others say
- defend and adapt your positions intelligently

Learn the tools for developing critical thinking skills

Critical thinking draws on a range of skills and abilities including:

Knowledge — recall previously learned material by explaining facts, terms, basic concepts and answers

Comprehension — show an understanding of facts and ideas by organizing, comparing, translating, interpreting, giving descriptions and stating main ideas

Application — solve problems by applying acquired knowledge, facts, techniques and rules in a different way

Analysis — examine and break information into parts by identifying motives or causes, making inferences and finding evidence to support generalizations

Synthesis — compile information in a different way by combining elements in a new pattern or proposing alternative solutions

Evaluation — present and defend opinions by making judgments about information, the validity of ideas, or the quality of work based on a set of criteria

Ask the right questions

Critical thinking is knowing what questions to ask. Often, the answer to a question will depend on how the question is phrased. Critical thinking is also questioning assumptions and asking *why*. To encourage critical thinking, learn how to evaluate evidence, and use that evaluation to assess statements and make judgments.

When you are confronted with new information, think about the following types of questions:

Clarification — What am I being asked to believe or accept? Could I get an example? Is the basic point *this* or *that*? To answer this question, what other questions would I have to answer first?

Reasons and evidence — What evidence is available to support the statement? How could I go about finding out whether that is true? Is there reason to doubt that evidence?

Investigate assumptions — Are assumptions being made? What justifies taking this for granted? Is this always the case?

Viewpoints or perspectives — Are there alternative ways of interpreting the evidence? How would other people respond? Why? What would influence them? How would people who disagree with this viewpoint argue their case? How would I look at this beyond a North American perspective?

Implications and consequences — What conclusions are most reasonable? What effect would that have? If *this* and *this* are the case, then what else must also be true?

Engage in critical thinking activities

Hands-on learning provides greater opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills. Get involved in some of the following activities to get yourself thinking critically:

Brainstorm words and ideas — Complete the following statement: "Learning happens when I ..." Here are some words to help you get started: reflect, investigate, analyze, create, relate, summarize, evaluate, imagine, interpret, question, select, and explain. Ask yourself: "What else do I do when I am thinking critically?"

Find opportunities to role play or be involved in simulation activities — Choose current or historical events where people hold or held conflicting views. For example, the calls for military action against Iraq by both the United States and the United Kingdom governments, and the UN Security Council's decision-making process leading up to the war on Iraq in March 2003. Or, the constitutional debate between the federal government, the governments of the provinces and the leaders of the First Nations, the Métis and non-status Indians in the early 1980s.

Organize "structured controversy" — Get involved in discussions and debates that tackle more than one side of an issue. For example, a model United Nations or a mock trial. Back your arguments with evidence and reference to consequences.

Consider different points of view — Attend community meetings, watch television programs or read newspaper articles which express different viewpoints. With your peers, examine the relative strengths and weaknesses of the arguments, including a discussion of the possible motives or human purposes underlying the differing viewpoints.

Analyze popular media — Review the content of popular media — music, movies or television — for accuracy and completeness. Comment on whether the media portrays life as you know it. Compare the media's portrayal of human behaviour with ideals, such as treating people with respect and tolerance and refraining from stereotypical, sexist or racist views. Discuss this issue in terms of the consequences of human actions.