Think Critically; 
Detect the Truth in what you Read and Hear

You are staring off in space, imagining you are sitting on a beach in Florida. You picture yourself staring into the sunset as you sip a tropical drink. Would this mental process be thinking?

Imagine you’re discussing politics with friends. “It’s always the same with politicians,” you say. “They’re full of promises until they’re elected, then they never follow through.” Would this be thinking?

In the first case, you are not thinking but daydreaming. You’re following the drift of your fantasies. In the second case, you might not be thinking but just mechanically repeating something you’d said or heard before.

Thinking is purposeful mental activity: you control it and not vice versa. For the most part, thinking is a conscious activity. However, the unconscious mind can continue working on a problem after conscious activity stops- for example, while you sleep. (Ruggeiro, Critical Thinking)

Most of us haven’t been taught to think critically. Until recently, education was built on the idea that thinking can’t be taught and that it is something some of us acquire, others of us don’t. We now believe that thinking can indeed be taught to anyone.

Success in the world of work depends on being able to think critically and apply that thinking to solving problems. Employers don’t need workers who have memorized textbooks; they look for workers who can take what they have learned and apply it. They want employees who are problem solvers and decision-makers.

**Attributes of A Critical Thinker**
1. Willingness to ask pertinent questions and assess statements and arguments
2. Ability to suspend judgment and tolerate ambiguity
3. Ability to admit a lack of information or understanding
4. Curiosity and interest in seeking new solutions
5. Ability to clearly define a set of criteria for analyzing ideas
6. Willingness to examine beliefs, assumptions, and opinions against facts
Evaluating Facts

In most printed materials, fact and opinion go hand in hand. Factual statements such as “Bill Clinton was president in 1995,” run together with statements of an author’s opinion, such as “He was one of our most effective chief executives.” There is nothing wrong with this intermingling of fact and opinion; readers expect and want to know how authors feel about the information they share. Unfortunately, some uncritical readers accept both fact and opinion unquestioningly. As a critical reader, you need to distinguish between the two kinds of statements.

- A factual statement can be tested and checked.
- An opinion statement expresses a preference, feeling, or value. Unless something can be proved or disproved, it remains an opinion.
- Because many people share an opinion does not make it a fact.
- Facts are not necessarily better than opinions.

Many people confuse facts and opinion, often basing their own judgments and actions upon the opinions of others rather than upon factual information.

Evaluating Inferences

You have probably heard the expression “to read between the lines.” When you do this, you pick up ideas that are not directly stated in what you are reading or hearing. These implied ideas are often important for a full understanding of what an author or speaker means. Discovering the ideas that are not stated directly is called making inferences or drawing conclusions.

- Base your inferences on the facts. Pay attention to whether an inference has factual support.
- Use your own background and experience to help you make inferences. The more you know about a subject, the better your inferences will be.
- Consider alternatives. Consider all the facts of a case and all possible explanations, don’t accept the first inference that comes to mind.

Evaluating Judgment

Writers and speakers may be biased- they have already formed a strong preference or prejudice. What they say is influenced by their prejudgments.

- Stereotypes- judgments held by a person or group about members of another group based on certain characteristics. For example, “all professors are absent-minded.”
- Snap judgments- decisions made before all necessary information or facts are presented. Many people try to solve a problem before determining what the problem is.
- The Halo Effect- a tendency to label a person good at doing many things based on one or two qualities. For example, “Ben attends every class
and gets good grades on papers.” Based on this information, you assume that he is smart and makes good grades in every class. Not necessarily so.

- **Unwarranted assumptions-** ideas or beliefs that are taken for granted. For example, you are allowed to cash a check in one store, so you assume that you will be allowed to cash a check in another store.

- **Projection-** the tendency to attribute to others some of our own characteristics in an attempt to justify our own actions. For example, Jane shoplifts because she says “Everybody else does, so why shouldn’t I?”

For more information see:

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