

# Critical Thinking in Everyday Life: 9 Strategies

Most of us are not what we could be. We are less. We have great capacity. But most of it is dormant; most is undeveloped. Improvement in thinking is like improvement in basketball, in ballet, or in playing the saxophone. It is unlikely to take place in the absence of a conscious commitment to learn. As long as we take our thinking for granted, we don't do the work required for improvement.

Development in thinking requires a gradual process requiring plateaus of learning and just plain hard work. It is not possible to become an excellent thinker simply because one wills it. Changing one's habits of thought is a long-range project, happening over years, not weeks or months. The essential traits of a critical thinker require an extended period of development.

How, then, can we develop as critical thinkers? How can we help ourselves and our students to practice better thinking in everyday life?

First, we must understand that there are stages required for development as a critical thinker:

**Stage One:** The Unreflective Thinker (we are unaware of significant problems in our thinking)

**Stage Two:** The Challenged Thinker (we become aware of problems in our thinking)

**Stage Three:** The Beginning Thinker (we try to improve but without regular practice)

**Stage Four:** The Practicing Thinker (we recognize the necessity of regular practice)

**Stage Five:** The Advanced Thinker (we advance in accordance with our practice)

**Stage Six:** The Master Thinker (skilled & insightful thinking become second nature to us)

We develop through these stages if we:

- 1) accept the fact that there are serious problems in our thinking (accepting the challenge to our thinking) and
- 2) begin regular practice.

In this article, we will explain 9 strategies that any motivated person can use to develop as a thinker. As we explain the strategy, we will describe it as if we were talking directly to such a person. Further details to our descriptions may need to be added for those who know little about critical thinking. Here are the 9:

1. Use “Wasted” Time.
2. A Problem A Day.
3. Internalize Intellectual Standards.
4. Keep an Intellectual Journal.
5. Reshape Your Character.
6. Deal with Your Ego.
7. Redefine the Way You See Things.
8. Get in touch with your emotions.
9. Analyze group influences on your life.

There is nothing magical about our ideas. No one of them is essential. Nevertheless, each represents a plausible way to begin to do something concrete to improve thinking in a regular way. Though you probably can't do all of these at the same time, we recommend an approach in which you experiment with all of these over an extended period of time.

**First Strategy: Use “Wasted” Time.** All humans waste some time; that is, fail to use all of their time productively or even pleasurably. Sometimes we jump from one diversion to another, without enjoying any of them. Sometimes we become irritated about matters beyond our control. Sometimes we fail to plan well causing us negative consequences we could easily have avoided (for example, we spend time unnecessarily trapped in traffic — though we could have left a half hour earlier and avoided the rush). Sometimes we worry unproductively. Sometimes we spend time regretting what is past. Sometimes we just stare off blankly into space.

The key is that the time is “gone” even though, if we had thought about it and considered our options, we would never have deliberately spent our time in the way we did. So why not take advantage of the time you normally waste by practicing your critical thinking during that otherwise wasted time? For example, instead of sitting in front of the TV at the end of the day flicking from channel to channel in a vain search for a program worth watching, spend that time, or at least part of it, thinking back over your day and evaluating your strengths and weaknesses. For example, you might ask yourself questions like these:

When did I do my worst thinking today? When did I do my best? What in fact did I think about today? Did I figure anything out? Did I allow any negative thinking to frustrate me unnecessarily? If I had to repeat today what would I do differently? Why? Did I do anything today to further my long-term goals? Did I act in accordance with my own expressed values? If I spent every day this way for 10 years, would I at the end have accomplished something worthy of that time?

It would be important of course to take a little time with each question. It would also be useful to record your observations so that you are forced to spell out details and be explicit in what you recognize and see. As time passes, you will notice patterns in your thinking.

**Second Strategy: A Problem A Day.** At the beginning of each day (perhaps driving to work or going to school) choose a problem to work on when you have free moments. Figure out the logic of the problem by identifying its elements. In other words, systematically think through the questions: What exactly is the problem? How can I put it into the form of a question? How does it relate to my goals, purposes, and needs?

- 1) Wherever possible take problems one by one. State the problem as clearly and precisely as you can.
- 2) Study the problem to make clear the “kind” of problem you are dealing with. Figure out, for example, what sorts of things you are going to have to do to solve it. Distinguish Problems over which you have some control from problems over which you have no control. Set aside the problems over which you have no control, concentrating your efforts on those problems you can potentially solve.
- 3) Figure out the information you need and actively seek that information.
- 4) Carefully analyze and interpret the information you collect, drawing what reasonable inferences you can.
- 5) Figure out your options for action. What can you do in the short term? In the long term? Distinguish problems under your control from problems beyond your control. Recognize explicitly your limitations as far as money, time, and power.
- 6) Evaluate your options, taking into account their advantages and disadvantages in the situation you are in.
- 7) Adopt a strategic approach to the problem and follow through on that strategy. This may involve direct action or a carefully thought-through wait-and-see strategy.
- 8) When you act, monitor the implications of your action as they begin to emerge. Be ready at a moment’s notice to revise your strategy if the situation requires it. Be prepared to shift your strategy or your analysis or statement of the problem, or all three, as more information about the problem becomes available to you.

**Third Strategy: Internalize Intellectual Standards.** Each week, develop a heightened awareness of one of the universal intellectual standards (clarity, precision, accuracy, relevance, depth, breadth, logicalness, significance). Focus one week on clarity, the next on accuracy, etc. For example, if you are focusing on clarity for the week, try to notice when you are being unclear in communicating with others. Notice when others are unclear in what they are saying.

When you are reading, notice whether you are clear about what you are reading. When you orally express or write out your views (for whatever reason), ask yourself whether you are clear about what you are trying to say. In doing this, of course, focus on four techniques of clarification: **1) Stating what you are saying** explicitly and precisely (with careful consideration given to your choice of words), **2) Elaborating** on your meaning in other words, **3) Giving examples** of what you mean from experiences you have had, and **4) Using analogies**, metaphors, pictures, or diagrams to illustrate what you mean. In other words, you will frequently STATE, ELABORATE, ILLUSTRATE, AND EXEMPLIFY your points. You will regularly ask others to do the same.

**Fourth Strategy: Keep an Intellectual Journal.** Each week, write out a certain number of journal entries. Use the following format (keeping each numbered stage separate):

1. Situation. Describe a situation that is, or was, emotionally significant to you (that is, that you deeply care about). Focus on one situation at a time.
2. Your Response. Describe what you did in response to that situation. Be specific and exact.
3. Analysis. Then analyze, in the light of what you have written, what precisely was going on in the situation. Dig beneath the surface.
4. Assessment. Assess the implications of your analysis. What did you learn about yourself? What would you do differently if you could re-live the situation?

**Strategy Five: Reshape Your Character.** Choose one intellectual trait---intellectual perseverance, autonomy, empathy, courage, humility, etc.--- to strive for each month, focusing on how you can develop that trait in yourself. For example, concentrating on intellectual humility, begin to notice when you admit you are wrong. Notice when you refuse to admit you are wrong, even in the face of glaring evidence that you are in fact wrong. Notice when you become defensive when another person tries to point out a deficiency in your work, or your thinking. Notice when your intellectual arrogance keeps you from learning, for example, when you say to yourself “I already know everything I need to know about this subject.” Or, “I know as much as he does. Who does he think he is forcing his opinions on me?” By owning your “ignorance,” you can begin to deal with it.

**Strategy Six: Deal with Your Egocentrism.** Egocentric thinking is found in the disposition in human nature to think with an automatic subconscious bias in favor of oneself. On a daily basis, you can begin to observe your egocentric thinking in action by contemplating questions like these: Under what circumstances do I think with a bias in favor of myself? Did I ever become irritable over small things? Did I do or say anything “irrational” to get my way? Did I try to impose my will upon others? Did I ever fail to speak my mind when I felt strongly about something, and then later feel resentment?

Once you identify egocentric thinking in operation, you can then work to replace it with more rational thought through systematic self-reflection, thinking along the lines of: What would a rational person feel in this or that situation? What would a rational person do? How does that compare with what I want to do? (Hint: If you find that you continually conclude that a rational person would behave just as you behaved you are probably engaging in self-deception.)

**Strategy Seven: Redefine the Way You See Things.** We live in a world, both personal and social, in which every situation is “defined,” that is, given a meaning. How a situation is defined determines not only how we feel about it, but also how we act in it, and what implications it has for us. However, virtually every situation can be defined in more than one way. This fact carries with it tremendous opportunities. In principle, it lies within your power and mine to make our lives more happy and fulfilling than they are. Many of the negative definitions that we give to situations in our lives could in principle be transformed into positive ones. We can be happy when otherwise we would have been sad.

We can be fulfilled when otherwise we would have been frustrated. In this strategy, we practice redefining the way we see things, turning negatives into positives, dead-ends into new beginnings, mistakes into opportunities to learn. To make this strategy practical, we should create some specific guidelines for ourselves. For example, we might make ourselves a list of five to ten recurrent negative contexts in which we feel frustrated, angry, unhappy, or worried. We could then identify the definition in each case that is at the root of the negative emotion. We would then choose a plausible alternative definition for each and then plan for our new responses as well as new emotions. For example, if you tend to worry about all problems, both the ones you can do something about and those that you can't; you can review the thinking in this nursery rhyme: “For every problem under the sun, there is a solution or there is none. If there be one, think til you find it. If there be none, then never mind it.”

Let's look at another example. You do not have to define your initial approach to a member of the opposite sex in terms of the definition “his/her response will determine whether or not I am an attractive person.” Alternatively, you could define it in terms of the definition “let me test to see if this person is initially drawn to me—given the way they perceive me.” With the first definition in mind, you feel personally put down if the person is not “interested” in you; with the second definition you explicitly recognize that people respond not to the way a stranger is, but the way they look to them subjectively. You therefore do not take a failure to show interest in you (on the part of another) as a “defect” in you.

**Strategy Eight: Get in touch with your emotions:** Whenever you feel some negative emotion, systematically ask yourself: What, exactly, is the thinking leading to this emotion? For example, if you are angry, ask yourself, what is the thinking that is making me angry? What other ways could I think about this situation? For example, can you

think about the situation so as to see the humor in it and what is pitiable in it? If you can, concentrate on that thinking and your emotions will (eventually) shift to match it.

**Strategy Nine: Analyze group influences on your life:** Closely analyze the behavior that is encouraged, and discouraged, in the groups to which you belong. For any given group, what are you "required" to believe? What are you "forbidden" to do? Every group enforces some level of conformity. Most people live much too much within the view of themselves projected by others. Discover what pressure you are bowing to and think explicitly about whether or not to reject that pressure.

**Conclusion:** The key point to keep in mind when devising strategies is that you are engaged in a personal experiment. You are testing ideas in your everyday life. You are integrating them, and building on them, in the light of your actual experience. For example, suppose you find the strategy "Redefine the Way You See Things" to be intuitive to you. So, you use it to begin. Pretty soon you find yourself noticing the social definitions that rule many situations in your life. You recognize how your behavior is shaped and controlled by the definitions in use:

1. "I'm giving a party," (Everyone therefore knows to act in a "partying" way)
2. "The funeral is Tuesday," (There are specific social behaviors expected at a funeral)
3. "Jack is an acquaintance, not really a friend." (We behave very differently in the two cases)

You begin to see how important and pervasive social definitions are. You begin to redefine situations in ways that run contrary to some commonly accepted definitions. You notice then how redefining situations (and relationships) enables you to "Get in Touch with Your Emotions." You recognize that the way you think (that is, define things) generates the emotions you experience. When you think you are threatened (i.e., define a situation as "threatening"), you feel fear. If you define a situation as a "failure," you may feel depressed. On the other hand, if you define that same situation as a "lesson or opportunity to learn" you feel empowered to learn. When you recognize this control that you are capable of exercising, the two strategies begin to work together and reinforce each other.

Next consider how you could integrate strategy #9 ("Analyze group influences on your life") into your practice. One of the main things that groups do is control us by controlling the definitions we are allowed to operate with. When a group defines some things as "cool" and some as "dumb," the members of the group try to appear "cool" and not appear "dumb." When the boss of a business says, "That makes a lot of sense," his subordinates know they are not to say, "No, it is ridiculous." And they know this because defining someone as the "boss" gives him/her special privileges to define situations and relationships.

You now have three interwoven strategies: you "Redefine the Way You See Things," "Get in touch with your emotions," and "Analyze group influences on your life." The

three strategies are integrated into one. You can now experiment with any of the other strategies, looking for opportunities to integrate them into your thinking and your life. If you follow through on some plan analogous to what we have described, you are developing as a thinker. More precisely, you are becoming a “Practicing” Thinker. Your practice will bring advancement. And with advancement, skilled and insightful thinking may become more and more natural to you.

Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2001). Modified from the book by Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2001). *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life*.