

What is Critical Thinking?

Clear, reasoned thinking makes the best strategy for escaping human error and ignorance. The study of critical thinking is intended to help you make good decisions and form intelligent opinions by better evaluating the claims, facts, and beliefs you encounter.

- I. For all its undeniable potential, human thinking often falls into error. Critical thinking is a way of avoiding that error.
 - A. Many people adopt unfounded opinions on important issues. Although a free society grants the opportunity to think for oneself, it can't simply grant the ability to.
 - B. The ability to determine good reasons for opinions will develop with the study of critical thinking.
- II. Critical thinking is careful thinking about what we should do with a **claim**.
 - A. A claim is a sentence that has a truth value, that is, is either true or false. We may not know a claim's truth value; what matters is that it has one.
 - B. Although we may respond to a claim in numbers of ways, critical thinking directs itself to the commonest response: assessing its likely truth or falsity.
 1. When assessing a claim in this way, we may accept it, reject it, or suspend judgment.
 - a. Accepting a claim means believing it.
 - b. Rejecting a claim does not mean simply **not** believing it, but rather believing it to be false.
 2. We accept or reject claims with varying degrees of confidence.

C. There is no simple way of deciding whether to accept a claim.

1. When done correctly, the process includes reading and listening carefully, spotting unstated assumptions, evaluating arguments, and assessing the claim's further implications.
2. Most learning entails grasping basic principles, looking at examples, and making guided attempts at doing something for oneself. So does the study of critical thinking.

III. Most frequently, the study of critical thinking is the study of arguments about **issues**.

A. Any matter we try to assess can count as an issue.

1. The issue may arise in a disagreement between two parties - for example, whether the county treasurer should invest public money in mutual funds.
2. It may just as easily arise in one person's deliberations - for example, whether I should go out tonight to see this new band.
3. Because an issue impels us to judge a claim (if possible) true or false, we can state most issues with the word "whether," followed by the claim being evaluated.

B. People often confuse the issues they want to assess.

1. Sometimes the confusion concerns the relative priority of issues, so that they are taken out of order.
2. Confusion more typically causes a dispute when people address different issues in their disagreement.
3. Thus a first rule when preparing to settle an issue is to determine and remain focused on what claim the issue is about.

C. Once we have specified an issue, we may try to settle it with an **argument**.

1. Along with observation and reliable authorities, arguments are among the most important instruments of the critical thinker.
2. An argument is a set of sentences, one of which is the **conclusion** and the rest of which are **premises** intended to support the conclusion, in some case to prove its truth.

- IV. You may divide issues into **matters of fact** and **matters of pure opinion**, as long as you use those words correctly. The tools of critical thinking are particularly well suited to deliberating about the former.
- A. A **fact** is a true claim, whereas an **opinion** is something that someone believes to be true.
1. Notice that these two concepts don't conflict. Just because something is an opinion does not stop it from possibly being true.
 2. Some opinions are indeed true, while others are false: Which they are is determined by careful inquiry, not just on account of their status as opinions.
- B. A claim describes a **matter of fact (factual matter)** when people agree on what methods would decide the truth of the claim.
1. Even when no one yet knows whether a claim is true, it stands as a factual matter as long as clear methods exist for discovering that truth - even if the situation in which one could unearth the relevant facts must remain purely theoretical.
 2. Always bear in mind that a claim about a factual matter is not necessarily a fact itself, because it's not necessarily true; but if it's true, then it's a fact.
- C. A claim describes a **matter of pure opinion** when we have no way of settling it as we would settle a factual matter, that is, when the claim seems impervious to argument.
1. Many (though not all) expressions of personal preference belong in this category.
 2. Whereas disagreement over a matter of fact means that at least one side is wrong, people may disagree on matters of pure opinion without either side being wrong.

- D. The distinction between matters of fact and matters of pure opinion is identical to the distinction between **objective claims** and **subjective claims**.
1. The truth of an objective claim does not depend on our personal preferences and biases, while the truth of a subjective claim does.
 2. The controversy that claims arouse does not automatically make them subjective. "President Clinton's policies improved the economy" is controversial but a matter of fact (either true or false), whereas "President Clinton has an appealing personality" is a subjective claim.
- E. People have long debated whether one large class of claims should count as objective (matters of fact) or subjective (matters of pure opinion).
1. This class includes most serious judgments of value, both ethical ("Lying is wrong") and aesthetic ("This is a good painting").
 2. But even if such judgments turn out to belong in the subjective realm, they resemble objective claims in the important sense that some opinions about them have better reasons behind them than others.
- V. It is misleading to insist too strenuously, and in the wrong spirit, that all people are "entitled to their opinions."
- A. Human beings do deserve dignity, respect, and toleration: To this degree the view says something worth saying.
- B. The view goes wrong when it leaves people's opinions invulnerable to argument or criticism.
1. Given the dangerous falsity of some opinions, too much tolerance will do more harm than good. (Am I entitled to the opinion that tar water will cure my baby's lung infection?)
 2. In the practice of conversation, such putative tolerance rules out serious inquiry into important issues. To insist that we are all entitled to our opinions is to give up trying to reach the truth about an issue.