

Teaching Critical Thinking Through Current Issues

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Critical thinking is a skill that students can learn in order to move beyond the superficial appraisal of a subject and engage with that subject on a deeper level. Critical thinking is the opposite of passive acceptance; it requires students to actively question given information with the aim of forming their own reasoned conclusions concerning the subject at hand. Current issues provide an especially rich source of material for teachers who are trying to impart these skills to their students.

Five Steps to Critical Thinking

Although the elements of critical thinking may overlap in practice, it is easiest to characterize this type of thinking as a process with several steps. The five basic steps in the critical thought process are:

1. Identifying an issue or problem
2. Listening/reading/watching for comprehension
3. Analyzing and evaluating what has been heard/read/viewed
4. Synthesizing ideas and content to form reasoned opinions
5. Presenting a cohesive argument or response

Encouraging students to follow these steps can help them understand what is at stake in each part of the process. It will also teach them to recognize the structure of their own arguments or beliefs and to test any conclusions they draw from them.

Why Use Current Issues to Teach Critical Thinking?

Current issues provide a wealth of debate points that teachers can use to illustrate the benefits of critical thinking. Teachers can draw from news articles, books, online editorials, organizational reports, and many other resources to provide students with nonfiction topics for analysis. Because current issue topics are usually debated by a variety of speakers—from news and political commentators to data analysts—students can learn to recognize the different argumentative strategies and the kinds and sources of evidence that are routinely brought into play. Furthermore, once students become familiar with different argumentative strategies, they will learn to identify them when they are used again in different contexts. This will allow students to more quickly trace patterns of logic and ask the right questions the next time they encounter such strategies. On the following pages is a series of exercises that teachers can use to help their students develop and sharpen critical thinking skills.

Suggested Classroom Exercises for Teaching Critical Thinking

What's the Point?

Identifying the Thesis or Purpose of a Work

Clearly identifying the purpose of an opinionated article, speech, film, or other work is a necessary part of understanding the arguments being made. Have students locate and highlight the stated thesis of an opinionated work. Often thesis statements appear at the beginning of a work, but remind students that some theses may be located elsewhere or, in rare cases, must be inferred (as in satire). Ask students to practice identifying and marking thesis statements to quickly and concisely clarify an author's argument.

Example

Consider the following introductory paragraph.

In recent years, the US government has cut spending on NASA projects. To many observers, the steady decrease in funding indicates that budget makers do not believe space exploration is a national priority. However, it should be. The government must provide more funding for NASA programs. If humanity is ever to progress beyond the bounds of the earth and reap the scientific, economic, and cultural rewards of extraterrestrial exploration, this country cannot ignore its space program.

In this example, the thesis is clear: "The government must provide more funding for NASA programs." However, if this sentence were removed from the paragraph, the thesis of the piece might be different. Depending on how the rest of the argument is developed, the thesis might, for example, be about how space exploration should be a national priority (although a reader might infer that to make it a priority, the government would have to increase NASA funding).

Activity

Now ask your students to locate three opinionated articles and identify their respective thesis statements or derive a clear thesis argument if one is not directly presented.

Who's Speaking and Why?

Detecting Bias and Agenda

Sometimes students are so engaged with a work or an argument that they do not examine the author of that work or the media source that is presenting it. Uncovering the credentials and background of a writer, director, or speaker of a work is important in forming an opinion about a work. Identifying biases and agendas helps students understand how an author structures an argument, what facts he or she chooses to draw upon, and what motivates his or her decision to address the topic in the first place. Give students an example of bias within an argument and how it shapes the information presented.

Example

In his 2015 documentary *Where to Invade Next*, filmmaker Michael Moore presents an argument that the United States pales in comparison to other global powers because it spends more on building up its military than it does on addressing social ills such as growing prison populations, failing school systems, and widening income gaps. Moore's liberal political views clearly inform his argument, and the choice of countries he visits and the social topics he covers (as well as those he chooses to ignore) imply a bias in his reporting.

Activity

Now direct your students to select an opinionated article on a current issue from a magazine, journal, or online source. Ask them to research the author of the article and identify his or her credentials and any bias. Then, ask them to research the print or online source to identify whether it has a known agenda. Finally, ask your students to explain whether knowing these biases impacts their reception of the facts and arguments presented in the article.

Is That a Fact?

Separating Fact from Opinion

Many people are so intent on reading, watching, or listening to an argumentative work that they do not analyze whether the claims being made can be verified. This is the key to understanding the difference between fact and opinion. Facts are verifiable; opinions represent a belief or judgment—a point of view. Give students an example of an opinionated statement and a factual statement on a given topic and discuss what makes one statement fact and the other opinion.

Example

Factual Statement: *In 2016, fatal police shootings were on the rise in the United States.*

Statistics gathered by the *Washington Post* indicate that the number of fatal shootings rose from 465 to 491 in comparable 6-month periods between 2015 and 2016.

Opinionated Statement: *Racism accounts for the increase in fatal police shootings in the United States.*

Because the numbers of blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities shot by police grew in 2015 and 2016, this is an arguable position. However, it is opinionated. The *Washington Post's* statistics, for example, show that the number of fatal shootings of white suspects is also on the rise, and factors other than race might be influencing the increase.

Activity

Now ask your students to choose an article or transcript of a speech. They will use the article or speech to identify which claims are supported by facts and which are opinions. Allow students to use different-colored highlighter markers (or word processor highlighting tools) to mark the two differently. Discuss their findings in class.

Does It Stand Up to Scrutiny?

Identifying the Strengths and Weaknesses of an Argument

All arguments are composed of claims and evidence that readers must judge. In some cases, readers agree with some of the claims within the argument but disagree with others. In other cases, readers might simply dismiss an argument because the evidence is not strong or relevant. To become good critical thinkers, students should understand that they do not need to accept all facets of an argument when engaging with it. They must learn to identify the individual strengths of an argument and compare them to any weaknesses in order to make reasoned appraisal of the argument and to make a logical response to it.

Example

Visualize the strengths and weaknesses of an argument to help put it in sharper perspective. Try composing a side-by-side list, making it as simple or as detailed as you like. Look for pros and cons that relate to structure, content, tone, and purpose. These are some of the questions you can ask when judging the strengths of an argument. Positive answers to these questions—and others like them—would fill the pro side of the argument; negative answers would fill the con side.

- Is the thesis clear?
- Are the claims on topic and supported?
- Is the evidence timely and relevant?
- Does the author draw upon unbiased facts and impartial sources?
- Are the sources credible?
- Does the author consider opposing or alternative views?
- Does reasoning rather than emotion shape the argument?
- Does the conclusion logically follow from the thesis?

Activity

Ask your students to create a side-by-side list comparing the strengths and weaknesses of a work. Have them assess how clear the argument is, how compelling the argument is, how well claims are supported, and whether the author's emotion overtakes reasoned judgment. Then ask them to explain whether and how the list alters or shapes their response to the work.

Does One Thing Lead to Another?

Discerning Cause and Effect

Good argumentation relies on linking cause and effect. That is, a strong argument is one in which a series of causes—or claims—leads to a logical outcome, which is typically stated as the thesis of the argument. When examining any argument, students should ask themselves whether the given conclusion can be drawn from the claims the author presents. They should also question whether the author has overlooked or willfully ignored other variables (causes) that might explain the outcome.

Example

Since the late 1990s, some parents' groups have persistently argued that vaccination increases the risk of autism among children. According to a research paper published in the British journal the *Lancet*, several children who had received the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine exhibited autism-like symptoms. Parents of autistic children in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere blamed vaccines for their children's condition; some groups sued vaccine manufacturers for causing the mental disorder. The National Institutes of Health, the World Health Organization, and other respected medical organizations have all denied that the science supports the connection. Eventually, the *Lancet* article was proven fraudulent, but the outrage and finger-pointing did not end. To some parents, the effect (autism) could only be explained by one cause (vaccines). They did not wish to acknowledge that other factors—perhaps uncontrollable factors—might have resulted in their child's disorder.

Activity

Have your students combine the following pairs of sentences into a single sentence that shows a cause-and-effect relationship. Then ask them to think about the relationship more complexly and come up with alternate perspectives that would require rethinking the cause-and-effect connection.

Example: *Killing an individual is murder. Abortion involves killing an individual.*

Combined: *Abortion is murder because it involves killing an individual.*

Alternative perspectives: (1) *Murder has a legal definition that may not apply to the aborting of fetuses.* (2) *Not all people would agree that a fetus is an individual.*

Try these:

1. *Many mass shooters play violent video games. Violent video games teach players how to kill.*
2. *Solar power is free energy. America should embrace cleaner, less expensive energy sources.*
3. *People who abuse illicit drugs have committed a crime. Criminals should be locked up in jail.*
4. *America has a duty to take in refugees. War in Syria has produced millions of refugees.*

Does This Make Sense?

Looking for Logical Fallacies

Arguments that contain logical fallacies are arguments that have flawed reasoning. Logical fallacies, which can be hard to spot, make arguments appear stronger than they really are. Common logical fallacies include:

- bandwagon appeals: suggesting that because many people do something or believe it, it is valid or true
- false dilemmas: suggesting that there are only two choices when other options exist
- false causalities: presuming that one thing caused another because the two things are or appear to be related
- hasty generalizations: drawing conclusions or making claims based on limited evidence or insufficient statistics
- straw man arguments: misrepresenting, distorting, or exaggerating a person's argument so that it can be more easily attacked

A good way to get your students to spot logical fallacies is to allow them to purposefully commit some of these errors in logic in a practice exercise.

Example

Consider the following argument.

ISIS has coordinated attacks in Iraq and Syria. If American military forces do not step in to halt this global threat, it will soon dominate the Middle East and spread its terrorist agenda to Africa, Asia, Europe, and eventually the United States.

This is an example of a logical fallacy called a slippery slope. A slippery slope argument predicts a series of worsening outcomes if a specific action is not taken to initially halt the downward “slide.” There are two possible faults in logic concerning slippery slopes. First, the specific remedy might be only one of many options to consider that can prevent the slide. Second, the dire outcomes do not clearly, logically result from not taking that action. In this example, a reasonable reader would recognize that using military force is not the only or necessarily best way to confront ISIS and that ISIS's successful operations in Iraq and Syria do not logically suggest that it will be able to repeat its successes elsewhere in the world.

Activity

Now ask your students to choose an issue such as gun control, illegal immigration, or animal experimentation and have them write a short opinion piece using at least three different types of logical fallacies to argue one side of the argument. Make sure they can define the fallacies and explain exactly how they function in their argument.

Where Are You Coming From?

Clarifying Your Position and Your Personal Biases

While understanding what informs an author's perspective is important in critical thinking, students should be taught to recognize their own biases as well. Select a topic of debate such as election reform, capital punishment, or prayer in public schools and then ask students to write a quick position argument on the issue.

Example

A young, female student writes the following argument.

The results of the 2016 US presidential election demonstrate that it is time for Congress to disband the Electoral College. Although the popular vote favored one candidate, the electoral vote—and the office of the president—was given to the other. America cannot allow this outdated institution to ruin democracy. If we, as a nation, expect voters to turn out, then we will have to show them that their votes will directly elect the president.

To explain her own biases in writing this viewpoint, a student might complete the assignment by noting all of the personal beliefs that influence her position.

- I am a liberal who is upset that the Democratic Party candidate, Hillary Clinton, did not earn the presidency despite winning the popular vote.
- I believe that if America stands for democracy, then the majority of popular votes should elect all representatives, including the president.
- I am a young woman who hoped to see the first woman president.

Activity

Have your students follow this model, challenging them to identify all of the personal biases that they believe impact their opinion on whatever subject they choose. Explain that they can refer to age, gender, race, ethnic identity, religious affiliation, outsider/insider status, work experience, core values, or any other part of their personhood that has relevance in shaping their view.

What Are They Thinking?

Understanding Opposing Views

Too often students are so focused on presenting their own arguments that they forget to consider opposing views. Reading for understanding means reading not only to understand the content of a work but also to understand the perspective from which it originates. Being able to rationalize another's viewpoint is a strength of critical thinking because it means students will learn to address opposing views more effectively as well as to find common ground that might lead to a more thoughtful response.

Example

Imagine two students arguing over the future of power generation in the United States. Anne maintains that America's fossil fuel reserves should be opened up to lower the price of energy for consumers. Peter contends that green energy should be expanded to provide cheaper, cleaner alternatives to fossil fuels. Although these two arguments seem oppositional, there might be instances in which Anne and Peter can find common ground. For example, both might agree that America's dependence on foreign oil is not helping reduce energy prices. Anne might agree that cleaner energy production should be an aim of fossil fuel production. Peter might concede that to keep consumer prices low, a mix of fossil and green energies might be best for America in the short term.

Activity

Ask your students to write a short essay that expresses one of their strongly held views. Then require that they find and incorporate opposing arguments into their essay. Students might show the flaws of opposing views, or they might reveal that they agree with part of an opposing argument while dismissing other aspects of it.



Practice, Practice, Practice

Critical thinking is a learned skill that takes time to develop. Teachers can use this list of tools to help students practice this skill so that they will become more proficient critical readers and writers. Using current issues to help students sharpen these critical thinking skills is extremely valuable. Current issue topics provide excellent examples for structured classroom debate, but they also impact the lives of students beyond school walls. The goal of these exercises is to prepare students to use sound critical thinking and form reasoned opinions as they encounter similar issues in the world outside the classroom.