

## FIRST PERSON

# Critical thinking and reading

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At the beginning of my ninth-grade year at a public high school, I enrolled in the required freshman English class, Critical Thinking I. After 10 months of reading *Romeo and Juliet*, studying vocabulary in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and emulating the writing style of *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991), I passed the course with flying colors and moved on to Critical Thinking II without a clue what “critical thinking” meant. If I had stopped for a moment to consider the course title, I would have been thoroughly confused. Wasn't I just taking an English class?

Three years later, as a freshman at Stanford, I registered for Writing and Critical Thinking, the university's required introductory research-composition course. Again, I passed with flying colors, and again I gave no thought to the course's name. If I had, I would have been no less perplexed than in high school. What did 10 weeks of revising rough drafts, visiting the library, and reviewing the university's plagiarism policy have to do with thinking—critically or not?

## Critical thinking in every classroom

The Encarta World English Dictionary software defines the educationally ubiquitous term as “disciplined intellectual criticism that combines research, knowledge of historical context, and

balanced judgment.” In theory then, critical thinking should be taught in virtually every course in the humanities. In practice, however, my years as a high school English teacher, as well as my decades on the other side of the desk, prove that the lofty title is a gross misnomer, conveniently obscuring the fact that the majority of U.S. schools fail to teach critical thinking and, as a result, the majority of our populace does not practice it.

In a day and age in which more and more children grow up engaged with primarily passive activities like television, video games, and the Internet, teaching critical reading is one of the most important, and most difficult, burdens of the classroom. Unlike popular video games, in which what you see is what you get and you need only engage in the here and now in order to succeed, success in the complexity of the real world demands an ability to step back from a complete absorption in the limited parameters of the superficial moment. If reading the world can be paralleled to reading text, then literature offers an ideal vehicle for teaching the critical thinking skills necessary in analysis.

As in most processes, educational and otherwise, critical reading involves a gradual progression from the superficial to the increasingly complex. In elementary school, as vocabulary and reading comprehension skills develop, texts can and should be read for surface meaning. In mid-

dle school, alongside this twin practice of teaching new words and emphasizing overarching textual content, teachers should begin to establish a foundation of literary terminology. As with the reading process, literary terms must be introduced on a scale of increasing complexity, progressing from plot and setting to point of view and figurative language. This terminology is the basis for literary analysis at every level—even seventh grade. Referring to annotation as “marking up” and the plot arc as the “plot mountain” only mitigates the students’ work and increases the miscommunication that occurs as students move from one grade to the next.

## The first true step in critical thinking

With this base of literary terminology and a rudimentary understanding of literary interpretation, students arrive at the high school level prepared for the first true step in critical thinking: exploring the complex significance of concrete literary techniques. The rationale behind this timeline is twofold. First, after roughly two years of basic identification, students should be familiar enough with the techniques to begin thinking about them on a deeper level. Second, and perhaps more importantly, recent studies conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health (2001) suggested that the frontal lobe, the area of the brain responsible for the reasoning skills that enable critical thinking, undergoes a large wave of development just prior to puberty. Thus, high school freshmen are physically and mentally ready to apply their literary vocabulary to their reading practice—the question is how.

In my ninth-grade classroom last year, I began by drawing a dividing line on the whiteboard and asked students to do the same in their notes. On one side, I wrote, “Images”; on the other, “Concepts.” Images, I explained, are objects—things that can be felt and seen; concepts are intangible, abstract ideas that are usually associated with one or more images. In the weeks and

months that followed, my class spent hours discussing *Agamemnon*, *Julius Caesar*, and *A Separate Peace* while filling the white space of both categories and drawing lines from one side to the other. Their nightly homework was to read and annotate a section of text, circling images and writing concepts in the margins. The approach may sound simple and potentially superficial, but, in fact, it is neither. “Is food an image or a concept?” one of my students asked early on. After we finished laughing, I gave his question a second thought. “Actually, food could be a concept. When Marie Antoinette said, ‘Let them eat cake,’ the image of food—the cake—represented a number of intangible things—hunger, poverty, class.” As for the depth possible with the image–concept approach, consider the concepts associated with Harper Lee’s *Mockingbird* in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

After roughly a month and a half of image–concept discussion, I introduced the next step in the critical thinking process: moving from verbal analysis to written analysis. Again, as with the categories, I gave the class a specific framework within which to work. Again, the framework is much more complicated than it first appears. “We have our first in-class writing next week, and this is your thesis statement algorithm,” I announced, as I wrote on the chalkboard. “In [author’s name]’s [name of text], the author uses images of [X] to argue/imply/suggest [Y]. X can be a single, recurring image, used to suggest three concepts [Y], or [X] can be three separate images, all used in reference to the same concept, Y.” After a fair amount of protest, I convinced the class that, no, there was no amount of money they could pay me to cancel the essay, and, yes, I really wanted a filled-in version of this thesis statement. In fact, I told them, I demanded a filled-in version of this thesis statement—and I had no interest in reading an introduction first.

On that first batch of in-class essays, the thesis statements and their accompanying arguments were a bit forced, but by the end of the year, following roughly the same format, the evi-

dence of critical thinking was phenomenal: “In Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life* (1992), the author uses images of visual contrast to demonstrate humans’ desire for control.” “In the short stories ‘Araby’ and ‘Big Two-Hearted River,’ by James Joyce (1947) and Ernest Hemingway (1977), respectively, the authors both show the significance of material goods, or the lack thereof, in man’s quest for happiness.” Some time between September and June, I expanded my definition of X from images to other literary techniques, such as tone and diction, but the basic framework remained the same.

## Assessment as an incentive for critical thinking

In the real world of education, it is never enough to simply teach—one must also evaluate. However, assessment is not necessarily a deterrent to critical thought. Done right, assessment can provide an additional, important incentive for critical thinking. Just as the image–concept chart and the thesis statement algorithm provide flexible foundations while promoting substantial growth, there are ways to create adaptable assessments that reward analytic thought. Although the rubric I use may look similar to many of its simple or rigid counterparts, within its four weighted categories (structure, support, development, and format) is a basic checklist that demands, rather than stifles, critical thinking. Necessary items like “interpretive thesis statement” and “takes the thesis one step further” are both specific and complex, requiring creativity and encouraging thinking outside a prescribed box. The assessment’s emphasis on malleability and open-ended possibility reinforces the ambiguities and opportunities inherent in critical thinking. As with any other rubric, and perhaps more so given its

ambiguities, using this form of assessment requires that students understand each component on the list so that they may execute what is being asked of them.

Ideally, of course, students will reach the stage in which their critical thinking skills stretch far beyond the intrinsic limits of the image–concept chart and the rubric assessment, but from a developmental standpoint most human brains are not prepared to make this leap until the late teens. In the mean time, educators must scaffold critical thinking skills so that students are more likely and more prepared to make this final jump. We cannot and should not expect 14-year-olds to analyze James Joyce’s *Ulysses* on their own. But that expectation is no less problematic than our current standards in which students simply replicate the right answer for the multiple-choice test, or recycle the same plot summaries from Pink Monkey, SparkNotes, or other online resources, and hope that when all else fails, the teacher will do the bulk of the mental work. As long as we continue to accept (and even reward) the dialysis of the current system, the analysis—by our students and our country as a whole—will suffer.

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