

**Long Beach City College  
Faculty Teaching and Learning Center:**

**Enhancing Students'  
Critical Thinking Skills**

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## THINKING FOR YOURSELF

*A scholar does not accept. He questions, examines, then suggests a possibility.*

*--Louis L'Amour, The Haunted Mesa*

In formal terms, critical thinking is a process through which one carefully examines and questions details, possibilities, or conclusions in order to improve one's understanding of a situation. More simply, critical thinking means studying the aspects of a situation in order to reach one's own conclusion rather than simply accepting what one is told. As the epigraph above implies, this is the basic difference between the average person and a true scholar: whereas most people tend to take information at face value, a scholar will analyze and evaluate situations or evidence and form his or her own opinions based on that analysis. A scholar also recognizes that an absolute truth is a rare thing to find, for nearly all "facts" can be interpreted differently based on one's perspective. As an educated person, you should train your mind to question any statement with which you are presented, to look for various alternatives in any situation, and most of all to develop your own positions and opinions based on evidence rather than emotion.

The first step in critical thinking is to evaluate any information with which you are presented. An educated person should never simply accept a statement without analyzing its validity. Evidence to support a proposition or position may come in various forms, including statistics, opinions of experts, or personal experience. Whatever type of supporting detail you may encounter, you should question whether the facts with which you are presented are accurate before deciding whether to accept them. Questions such as the following will help you in conducting your analysis:

- Is the person giving you the information knowledgeable in the particular subject area in question? Does the person have some special expertise that would make his or her opinions have merit on this subject?
- If the person giving you the information is basing his or her conclusions on personal experience, what were the circumstances under which the observations took place? Does the person have reasons for his or her opinion to be biased? Are there any factors that might have distorted the person's perceptions? Have other people had similar experiences, or do this person's observations seem unusual?
- Are you given information on the sources of any statistical or factual information? If so, do the sources seem credible and appropriate? Are you told how the information was compiled or how any research was conducted?
- Do the conclusions with which you are presented seem logical? Could the information be interpreted in other ways?

As a critical thinker, you should also realize that all of us understand situations and information according our personal experiences and values. For this reason, almost any apparently factual statement might be interpreted in

various ways when looked at from different perspectives. Consider, for example, the following sets of newspaper headlines. Each pair of statements deals with a single situation. What can you tell about the beliefs, values, and assumptions of each writer based on the different wording that is used?

1a. White Vigilante Maims Five Black Youths

1b. Subway Victim Shoots Five Assailants

2a. U. S. Targets Terrorist Bases in Tripoli

2b. American Massacre Raid Kills Thirty

3a. Anti-abortion legislation struck down

3b. President's policy reverses pro-life progress

As these headlines show, any situation may be perceived differently by different observers. You should therefore always consider what you know about the background or beliefs of any writer or speaker who presents you with information in order to determine whether that information might be distorted. Similarly, you should always be conscious of your own values, biases, and assumptions in order to be certain that you are evaluating a particular situation fairly and accurately.

### **Exercise: Differing Perspectives**

Write two separate headlines for each of the following events. Each set of headlines should address its issue from two different perspectives.

1. Animal rights activists blockade a laboratory.
2. A riot involving the burning of buildings and looting of stores breaks out between members of different ethnic groups in downtown Los Angeles.

## Critical Reading Exercise

The following passage is taken from Barack Obama's book The Audacity of Hope. In this excerpt, Obama describes his first meeting with President George W. Bush, a man whom Obama has criticized vehemently and regularly throughout his political career. The meeting takes place at a reception for new senators when Obama is first elected to the U. S. Senate. For reference, Alan Keyes is an extremely conservative republican who challenged Bush for the republican presidential nomination in 2000 and who was also Obama's opponent in the U. S. Senate election.

"You've got a bright future," [Bush] said. "Very bright. But I've been in this town awhile, and, let me tell you, it can be tough. When you get a lot of attention like you've been getting, people start gunnin' for ya. And it won't necessarily be coming from my side, you understand. From yours, too. Everybody'll be waiting for you to slip, know what I mean? So watch yourself."

"Thanks for the advice, Mr. President."

"All right. I gotta get going. You know, me and you got something in common."

"What's that?"

"We both had to debate Alan Keyes. That guy's a piece of work, isn't he?"

I laughed, and as we walked to the door I told him a few stories from the campaign. It wasn't until he had left the room that I realized I had briefly put my arm over his shoulder as we talked—an unconscious habit of mine, but one that I suspected might have made many of my friends, not to mention the secret service agents in the room, more than a little uneasy. (Obama 46-47)

Answer each of the questions below and be prepared to explain your response in class discussion. Think about why you feel as you do about each question; for example, consider whether your reasons are based on evidence from the text or on your own knowledge of either Bush or Obama. Note that for each question, while there are two choices, there are five possible spaces to check between those choices. The space in the middle means that you think either choice is equally correct. A check on the second or fourth lines means that you would lean toward the answer on that side but are not fully convinced. A check on the farthest line on either side means that you find that answer to be much more correct than the other.

A. Bush's comments to Obama show that he is trying to

threaten and intimidate  
a popular new senator

\_\_\_\_\_

give good advice and  
an honest warning

B. The tone of Bush's comments to Obama is

Patronizing and condescending

\_\_\_\_\_

friendly and helpful

C. Obama's response in laughing and putting his arm on the shoulder of Bush, a man he has frequently and publicly criticized, is

politically motivated  
and hypocritical

\_\_\_\_\_

open and good-natured

D. Obama states that his actions while talking with the president may have made his friends nervous. Such a reaction would show that his friends are

politically paranoid

\_\_\_\_\_

cautious and aware of

### Counter-Argument Exercises for Class Discussion

Working in groups, take a for or against position on one of the following issues. Compile a list of points or arguments that one might make in defense of your position. Then exchange your list with another group that was working on the opposite side of the same issue. Think about how you might deal with the points you have been given if you wanted to address them in an essay that took a position contrary to those points.

1. Many community colleges have a physical education requirement for graduation. Most universities do not. Should physical education be a graduation requirement for students seeking a college degree?
2. Since the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States Government has claimed wider powers in combating terrorism, including the power to search the telephone, e-mail, and financial records of private citizens without a court order. Some groups have claimed that such searches are a violation of the Fourth Amendment protection against unreasonable searches and seizures. Should the government have these investigative powers without a court order?

# Sample Test Questions

## Example One:

### Section C: Quotation Identifications (Five points each)

Choose **five** of the following eight quotations. Identify the quotations by writer, work title, and speaker. If the speaker is an unnamed narrator, say so. Then, for each quotation you choose, provide a brief analysis—no more than a paragraph—that explains how the quotation is important in terms of the overall point of the work, connections to other works we have studied, or whatever other significance you can find. Each identification is worth two points, and each analysis is worth three. If you do more than five quotations, I will only count the first five. **Be sure to indicate by number which quotation you are discussing.**

1. The means he has used will always be judged honorable and will be praised by everybody, because the crowd is always caught by appearance and by the outcome of events, and the crowd is all there is in the world.
2. Before me nothing but eternal things were made, and I shall last eternally.  
Abandon every hope, all you who enter.
3. Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;  
The world was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest. and Providence their guide.

## Example Two:

Choose **one** of the following three concepts which we have discussed in relationship to various of the works we have read. Write a short discussion (just two or three paragraphs— probably no more than a page or so) of the ways in which the works we have studied seem to make similar or different statements about this concept. Be certain that you discuss at least two different works that deal with the specific concept you have chosen. Note that different books of the Bible do not count as separate works. Again, remember that I will count spelling and grammar.

1. **The duties or role of a king or a leader**
2. **Do humans make their own decisions, or are the actions and decisions of humans controlled by the gods?**
3. **The roles of women in different societies**

Special note: I do not expect complete essays on these concepts. Do not worry about introductions and conclusions. Be as detailed as you can, but since you cannot use your books, you do not need to worry about such specific details as exact quotes or line references.

## Sample Writing Assignments

### *English 3 (Critical Thinking):*

1. Choose any topical news event--international (the fighting in Afghanistan. The earthquake in Haiti ), domestic (health care, the economy), perennial (affirmative action), or whatever interests you. Then choose **two** newspaper or magazine articles that approach the topic from different ideological positions. Write a 3-5 page essay which addresses the following question:

**What are the basic differences in the values, beliefs, priorities, or backgrounds of the authors that lead to their conflicting perspectives in these articles?**

In order to answer this question, you will need to consider the similarities and differences in the presentations of the two articles, the implications of what the articles claim, the particular facts they highlight, the information they choose to leave out, and the ideologies they appear to represent. Try to avoid such broad categories as conservative/liberal, democrat/republican, or male/female; look more to the values, priorities, or experiences being represented or implied.

2. The video and the readings for this assignment discuss the role of the media in our society. One of the major points discussed in both the video and in "Talking About the Media Circus" is the way in which the press reports on the private lives of politicians. The central issue in this debate, that of personal privacy versus the public's right to know, might also apply to celebrities in various other fields. One of the panelists in the video states that "public officials at high levels don't have a right of privacy," and the media often seems to feel that the same principle applies to other public figures. Your assignment is to decide if you agree with this philosophy or, if not, where the right to privacy begins and ends.

Consider the issues raised in the video, in the readings, and in class discussion. Then write a 4-6 page formal essay in which you address the following topic:

**What legal restrictions, if any, should be placed on the media regarding the reporting of information about the private lives of public figures?**

You may, of course, come up with various answers to this question. You may consider such issues as where the reporting takes place, who should be considered a public figure, what types of detail are fair game, and other possibilities we have raised or that may occur to you. What matters is that you develop a clear and definite point. You will also need to demonstrate your reasoning with specific support.

Notice that the question includes the words "if any," so you are allowed to answer that there should be no restrictions, but in that case you need to defend why there should not be and what is at stake. Do not try to defend your answer on the basis of first amendment rights. We are talking about the way things should be here, not how they are, so the Constitution is irrelevant to this discussion.



*English 801AB (non degree applicable basic skills):*

1. Choose one particular person who has influenced you, changed the way you look at the world or at yourself, or who made some difference in your life. Write an essay of at least one typed page which addresses the following question:

**In what way did the person you have chosen affect your life?**

Notice that you are not just being asked to describe a person or to tell a story. You will want to give details about the person you choose and to give real examples of the person's influence on you, which may involve telling one or more stories. However, in order to make an effective point you will also have to discuss and explain your examples to connect them to your main point.

2. Choose one specific belief, tradition, or ritual from a culture or group to which you belong. This culture need not be related to ethnicity or nationality; you may choose to apply the term to your family, your neighborhood, or any other specific, clearly defined group. Then write an essay that addresses the following question:

How does the belief, tradition, or ritual you have chosen influence or impact the members of the group to which it applies, and is its impact more positive or negative?

*Literature (English 33: Mythology):*

All of the works we have read so far in this class involve some form of interaction between humans and gods. However, because these works are composed by different writers and come from different cultures, they may present this interaction differently. Consider the relationship between humans and gods in any two different works we have studied or discussed (note—different books of the Old Testament do not count as different works). Then write a formal essay of 3-5 pages that addresses the following question:

**How is the relationship between humans and gods characterized differently in the two works you have chosen?**