

## Critical Thinking

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*An Excerpt from Homeschooling in High School for Higher Education by David P. Byers Ph.D.*

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College students are often told to utilize “critical thinking” skills. Critical thinking means so much more than trying to remember new information like you would in order to pass a spelling test or a history date quiz, which is sometimes called surface learning. Critical thinking means putting new knowledge into a useful context by relating it to existing knowledge. The key concept is that students *think* about what they are learning in a way that it becomes meaningful and hopefully useful to them to some degree.

Being able to read well and critically think about what was read are important skills for the college student. Critical reading skills are sometimes referred to as “reading for comprehension”, which goes way beyond just being able to remember what you’ve read (surface learning).

Critical reading skills mean being able to think about the written words as the author intended, as well as understanding how you perceived them. It also means being able to *internalize* the material so that it is useful when you need to put it to work.

Many times college students fail to go beyond surface learning because they fail to think. Sometimes failing to critically think is a lack of maturity. Sometimes failing to think in a critical manner is because the student only wants to pass the class and he/she is putting in just enough effort to achieve that goal. More often than not, students simply lack experience using critical thinking skills.

For children, new information is just that, *new*. As a child develops, associations between pieces of new information also develop. New information for adult learners can be a tremendous resource that they can then use for problem solving because they can incorporate new information into the knowledge that they already have acquired from formal learning, life experiences, and even emotional reactions to their experiences (Mezirow, 1997).

Young children lack experience with life simply because of their age. Because their emotional and mental development is still in progress, they also lack the ability to understand themselves in the same way that adults can. As children become teenagers, they gradually acquire the ability to be more self-reflective as a result of their natural development and their experiences with life (Cornford, 1999).

As teenagers progress toward adulthood, they begin to get the idea that they are no longer children who must blindly follow their parents' instructions. As a result, they frequently test this theory by trying to exercise their physical, mental, and emotional independence, often at the risk of testing their parents' patience. These exercises lay the groundwork for the types of critical thinking teenagers will need to be successful learners in higher education and for their transition into adulthood.

Since children are not necessarily born with the ability to engage in critical thinking or self-directed learning, a large part of an educator's responsibility is to help their learners acquire these skills and to understand the importance of these skills in the continued development of our society. As educators, parents who teach their children at home also share in this responsibility.

In the classroom, educators help make students aware of the value of learning new information and then critically thinking about it in the context of their past/present beliefs and assumptions about the world. As students are challenged in college and in life with new ways of thinking about their world, they may discard old beliefs, create new beliefs, or strengthen their original beliefs as a result (Mezirow, 1997).

Ultimately, the goal of education should be to have students learn to think for themselves rather than blindly follow whatever anyone tells them, which is also a wonderful skill for teens and adults to have in the "real" world. In the world of education, whether at the high school level or the college level, students who learn to think for themselves are often better learners because they take greater responsibility for determining what they want to learn, how, when, and why! This skill is called "self-directed learning". Happy learning!

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