

Critical Thinking*

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Abstract

Critical thinking is one of the most important topics. Its absence is one of the leading causes of personal and societal strife throughout history. This essay will explain what critical thinking is, why it matters, how and why it is avoided, and what can be done about it. While critical thinking is not a cure for every human problem, the lack of it is at the root of most problems created by humanity itself. As seen in today's schools and in society at large, very few people truly understand critical thinking. Others may understand it in theory but never apply it in practice. It must be consciously and consistently exercised. Much of the conflict in the world can be traced back to this single failure.

1 Introduction

We all hold beliefs. Together, these beliefs form the mental model we use to understand the world. Some of those beliefs are true. Some are not. **The process of evaluating our beliefs logically, separating truth from falsehood, and updating our views when new facts emerge is called critical thinking.**

While a small portion of what we believe is based on direct observation and evidence, most of it is not. Most beliefs are absorbed from the culture we grow up in—what our parents teach us, what schools emphasize, what our friends believe, what we read, and what we see in media. All of this, combined with our initial genetic makeup, shapes who we are and what we believe.

When we are young, we are uncertain and therefore open. As we age, our views gradually solidify. Despite being surrounded by conflicting ideas and facts, our beliefs begin to harden, and we become identified with them. These beliefs helped us get where we are. Our relationships, social standing, and opportunities are often built on them. As a result, we become deeply reluctant to question them. Facts that threaten our belief system are ignored. Noise is filtered out. We avoid examining the foundations of who we are.

When faced with competing ideas, most people decide what to believe based on questions like:

- Which view do I hear most often?
- Which do I want to believe?
- Which do my friends, community, or people I respect believe?
- Which makes me feel or appear intelligent or virtuous?

*This is an excerpt from the author's 2026 book, *Life Explained*.

Although this is how most people evaluate ideas, none of these criteria are valid. A person who is thinking critically examines the facts and follows them to a conclusion. A person who is not thinking critically starts with a conclusion and then searches for supporting facts. Evidence is not being used to discover truth. It is being used selectively to defend what the person already wants to believe. The human mind is exceptionally good at rationalizing false beliefs and dismissing inconvenient facts. This single failure is at the core of most wars and much of the suffering throughout human history.

Because these justifications operate largely below awareness, people often do not realize they are doing it. Critical thinking is the ability to push past these impulses and evaluate ideas based on the best truth we can determine—independent of popularity, comfort, or social reward.

At its core, **critical thinking is the ability to distinguish fact from opinion.**

If high schools and colleges treated this as the foundation of education, many of today's academic and societal problems would likely disappear. Since the output of our schools feeds directly into government, media, technology, and public opinion, the failure to teach critical thinking has far-reaching consequences.

There is a clear sign that someone is not thinking critically. They will refuse to debate an idea on its merits, or they will resort to personal attacks and invalid arguments. This happens because they cannot defend their position without relying on popularity, identity, or emotion.

Critical thinking consists of three basic steps:

1. Pay attention to new information.

Do not simply wait for your turn to speak.

2. Separate facts from your own opinions and prejudices.
3. Be willing to change your views when facts demand it.

The goal is not to be right. The goal is to discover the best truth available.

Understanding and applying critical thinking—along with knowing how to determine truth¹—are the most important skills a person can learn in high school or college. These come before subjects like language arts and social studies. No one should graduate without a solid grasp of them.

2 Not Thinking Critically

There are many reasons people avoid critical thinking. There are also clear signs when it is not being used, as well as common strategies people employ to avoid it altogether. The following sub-sections examine each of these in turn.

3 Reason Not To Utilize Critical Thinking

There are many reasons people choose not to engage in critical thinking. Some are benign, others are deeply rooted. The most common include the following.

Non-interest Many people hold shallow opinions about topics they encounter but have little real interest in. A good example is how a computer works. People use computers daily and

¹Located in the 2026 *Life Explained*

may have had brief curiosity about how they function. Someone gives them a simple—often flawed—explanation, and they accept it as “good enough.” They never pursue the question further because understanding the internal workings of a computer is unnecessary for simply using it. The truth is complex and offers little practical benefit to them, so deeper thinking is avoided.

Blind belief People often develop strong beliefs about subjects they know little about. These beliefs usually do not come from careful study, but from the beliefs of family, peers, and the surrounding culture—especially while a person is young and still forming their identity. Many social connections are built around shared beliefs. Questioning those beliefs risks a person's relationships, opportunities, and their place in the community itself.

Inability to justify When confronted with a conflicting view, many people attempt to mentally defend their position and quickly realize they cannot. Rather than reconsidering their beliefs, they avoid the discussion altogether. Walking away is easier than admitting error.

Keeping the peace Some topics are inherently contentious. Religion and politics are obvious examples. Even if there may be a truth, engaging critically often risks conflict. Given non-interest, strong opinions, and social pressure, many people choose silence over discussion in order to preserve relationships.

Avoiding critical thinking is often more comfortable than practicing it. Unfortunately, comfort comes at the cost of truth.

4 Reasons to utilize critical thinking

The truth of many things people believe is largely irrelevant. For example, most people do not need a deep understanding of how computers work, how electricity works, or how gravity governs planetary orbits. Their beliefs—true or false—have little impact on their lives and no impact on others. In these cases, it simply does not matter what they believe.

Some beliefs have effects that are mostly personal. Smoking cigarettes is a good example. The belief that leads someone to smoke primarily affects the smoker. While it may shorten their life or harm their health, the consequences fall far more heavily on them than on others. These are personal matters.

The situation changes entirely when beliefs significantly affect other people. Politics and religion are obvious examples. Although they are often described as “personal beliefs,” they are not personal in their consequences. What people believe influences how they vote, what laws are enacted, how society is structured, and which values are enforced on everyone.

History makes this clear. Entire societies have been shaped—and countless people killed—based on the collection of individual beliefs. Religious persecution, political purges, and wars did not arise from facts, but from unexamined convictions held by large numbers of people.

Beliefs that affect others are not a private matter. They carry real consequences. For that reason, they must be examined, challenged, and evaluated through critical thinking.

5 Signs Critical Thinking is not Occurring

In my experience, critical thinking is rare. It becomes especially rare after roughly the mid-twenties, when a person's views tend to harden. At that point, many people claim to have an open mind, but

they do not. Their primary interest is no longer understanding—it is defending what they already believe.

Once views harden, many people become incapable of even comprehending perspectives outside their own. They either refuse to listen to opposing arguments or are unable to process them at all. The following are common signs that critical thinking is not taking place:

1. Refusal to engage with contradictory information.

- (a) They refuse to discuss the issue.

- (b) They allow you to speak but ignore everything you say.

2. Emotional reactions to contradiction.

They become upset simply because their view is challenged.

3. Personal attacks replace discussion.

Instead of addressing ideas, they resort to name-calling or ad hominem attacks.

4. Selective focus.

They refuse to examine an issue fully and insist on discussing only the parts that support their position.

5. Summary dismissal.

One person presents a careful, detailed argument supported by reasoning or evidence. The response is something like, “Well, that’s not the way I see it,” or “I just disagree,” with no attempt to address the substance of the argument.

This is not engagement. It is avoidance. It dismisses the entire argument without interacting with a single point made.

6. Avoidance of inconsistency.

When confronted with a conflict between their beliefs and new information, they ignore the discrepancy or react emotionally rather than reconcile it.

7. Inability to comprehend opposing arguments.

Their internal beliefs prevent them from even paying attention and absorbing what is being said.

8. Inability to justify their beliefs.

Because their beliefs are not based on critical thinking, they cannot support them with valid arguments. When pressed, they repeat their opinions, become dismissive, or grow angry.

9. Monologue instead of dialogue.

They keep talking and do not allow genuine exchange.

10. Starting with the conclusion.

Instead of looking at the facts and forming a belief, they begin with the belief and then selectively gather only what supports it.

These behaviors are not signs of confidence or intelligence. They are signs that thinking has stopped.

6 Why People Become Inflexible About Their Beliefs

Our minds have no direct access to the world outside our bodies. Everything the mind knows comes through the senses—sight, sound, touch, and so on. All input the mind has ever received consists of signals generated by the body itself. In that sense, the mind has never experienced anything except its own internal representations.

As we move through life, the mind constructs a model of what it believes exists outside the body. This model represents what the mind thinks is causing the sensations it experiences. The sensory data feeding this model is both extremely limited and extremely complex. It is limited because many real things exist beyond our sensory reach, such as radio waves, ultraviolet light, and microscopic organisms. It is complex because even ordinary experiences contain far more information than the mind can fully process. As a result, the mind selects, simplifies, and abstracts.

From birth—and likely before—and especially during roughly the first twenty-four years of life, each person builds their own internal model of the world based on their experiences. This model is used to predict outcomes, make decisions, and navigate life in ways that serve the individual's perceived interests. Because it is impossible to store or process everything, the model is necessarily incomplete and imperfect.

When a person is young, this model is flexible and absorbent. Over time, it becomes increasingly rigid. While people continue to learn throughout life, learning slows dramatically after early adulthood. More importantly, the mind begins to resist information that contradicts the model it has already constructed.

This resistance occurs for two reasons. First, the model is physically embedded in the brain, which gradually loses the plasticity required for major restructuring. Second, the model becomes tightly bound to personal identity. Challenging the model feels like challenging the self, and the self instinctively resists that threat.

For these reasons, changing a person's deeply held beliefs—particularly religious or political beliefs—is rare and difficult. After a certain point, people become increasingly insensitive, and often effectively immune, to facts that contradict their worldview.

In my experience, political belief systems become largely fixed around the age of twenty-four. While exceptions exist, once a belief model reaches a certain level of maturity, it is extremely difficult—sometimes impossible—to change. Outside of the deliberate practice of critical thinking, I know of no reliable way to counteract this tendency.

Because our internal models are summaries and abstractions, they are necessarily flawed. Becoming trapped in an incorrect model harms both the individual and society. This problem is made worse by educational systems that function more as indoctrination mechanisms than as training grounds for thinking. Schools strongly influence the models children build, and those children later become voters, leaders, and policymakers.

When dealing with non-critical thinkers, it is often best not to challenge their core beliefs at all. Evidence will not change their minds. Attempting to do so usually leads only to frustration and damaged relationships.

The process of reducing error in our internal models—remaining open to contradiction, revision, and improvement—is critical thinking. Without it, our models harden, our mistakes persist, and the consequences spread outward into society itself.

7 Promoting critical thinking

Once a person's views have hardened, it becomes nearly impossible for them to engage in critical thinking on the subjects tied to those views. In my experience, the only thing that typically causes a person to reengage critical thinking on a particular topic is a major life event—something serious enough to disrupt their existing model of the world. These events sometimes force people to reevaluate beliefs they would otherwise defend indefinitely.

Most belief systems—especially religious and political ones—solidify before roughly the age of twenty-four. This leads to the following problem. Rather than hardening beliefs early in life, what should be hardened is a deep understanding of, and commitment to, critical thinking itself. Cultural, religious, and political ideas can be presented as background and context, but critical thinking must be treated as supreme. It must be taught as the primary tool for evaluating all other ideas.

If this is done correctly and early enough, it becomes possible to raise individuals who maintain a lifelong habit of critical thinking. The benefit of such people—to themselves and to society—is immeasurable. They are harder to manipulate, less prone to fanaticism, and better equipped to deal with complex problems.

Critical thinking is so fundamental that it should be embedded throughout every high school and college curriculum. I am not talking about a single elective course that students take, pass, and forget. Critical thinking must be reinforced across subjects, applied continuously, and tested repeatedly. Students must demonstrate that they can separate fact from opinion, identify invalid arguments, and revise their views in the face of evidence.

This understanding must be unmistakable and universal. No student should graduate without clearly grasping what critical thinking is, why it matters, and how to apply it. Without this foundation, education becomes indoctrination, and society pays the price.

8 Signs of Critical Thinking

A person who agrees with the following statement demonstrates critical thinking. Those who do not are, to that extent, closed-minded.

“My views on topic [whatever topic] are formed through a reasoned evaluation of the evidence available to me. I recognize that my knowledge is incomplete and that my conclusions may therefore be mistaken. I am explicitly open to evidence and arguments that contradict my current views, and I am willing to revise or abandon those views when such evidence warrants it. I can articulate what would change my mind, I do not treat beliefs as matters of personal identity, and I can fairly represent opposing positions even when I disagree. The confidence I hold in my views is proportional to the quality and reliability of the evidence supporting them.”

Some individuals openly state that they do not care whether their beliefs are true. They value belief for its emotional, social, or identity-affirming function rather than for its correspondence with reality. Such a stance lies outside the scope of critical thinking altogether since critical thinking presupposes that truth matters and that beliefs should, in principle, be answerable to evidence.

A person who explicitly disavows concern for truth is not closed-minded but non-epistemic; critical thinking cannot apply where truth is not valued.

9 Faith

There are groups who treat faith as an arbitrator of truth. Faith is a strong belief in something that is insufficiently supported by evidence, or even contrary to it. Faith is almost entirely cultural. If your community believes something, you will be viewed as a good person and will gain friends and opportunities if you share those same beliefs. From a narrow and practical social perspective, holding such faith can be advantageous.

The problem with faith is twofold.

Other people If shared beliefs create friendship and opportunity, the reverse is also true. Dissimilar beliefs, to varying degrees, create conflict, division, and lost opportunity. A great deal of human conflict has arisen not from material necessity, but from disagreements rooted in unfounded beliefs.

Reality Science is the process of discovering truths about reality and using those truths to our advantage. Beliefs that are not true cannot be used to improve life or solve problems. When belief replaces truth, progress stalls.

I will not belabor the point. A person who relies on faith as a source of truth is almost never persuaded by logic, reason, or facts.