

Part I: Understanding the Basic Theory of Analysis

Why a Guide on Analytic Thinking?

Analysis and evaluation are recognized as crucial skills for all students to master. And for good reason, these skills are required in learning any significant body of content in a non-trivial way. Students are commonly asked to analyze poems, mathematical formulas, biological systems, chapters in textbooks, concepts and ideas, essays, novels, and articles—just to name a few. Yet how many students can explain what analysis requires? How many have a clear conception of how to think it through? Which of our graduates could complete the sentence: “Whenever I am asked to analyze something, I use the following framework:...”?

The painful fact is that few students have been taught how to analyze. Hence, when they are asked to analyze something scientific, historical, literary, or mathematical—let alone something ethical, political, or personal—they lack a framework to empower them in the task. They muddle through their assignment with only the vaguest sense of what analysis requires. They have no idea how sound analysis can lead the way to sound evaluation and assessment. Of course, students are not alone. Many adults are similarly confused about analysis and assessment as intellectual processes.

Yet what would we think of an auto mechanic who said, “I’ll do my best to fix your car, but frankly I’ve never understood the parts of the engine,” or of a grammarian who said, “Sorry, but I have always been confused about how to identify the parts of speech.” Clearly, students should not be asked to do analysis if they do not have a clear model, and the requisite foundations, for the doing of it. Similarly, we should not ask students to engage in assessment if they have no standards upon which to base their assessment. Subjective reaction should not be confused with objective evaluation.

To the extent that students internalize this framework through practice, they put themselves in a much better position to begin to think historically (in their history classes), mathematically (in their math classes), scientifically (in their science classes), and therefore more skillfully (in all of their classes). When this model is internalized, students become better students because they acquire a powerful “system-analyzing-system.”

This thinker’s guide is a companion to *Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools*. It supports, and is supported by, all of the other miniature guides in the series. It exemplifies why thinking is best understood and improved when we are able to analyze and assess it EXPLICITLY. The intellectual skills it emphasizes are the same skills needed to reason through the decisions and problems inherent in any and every dimension of human life.

Why the Analysis of Thinking Is Important

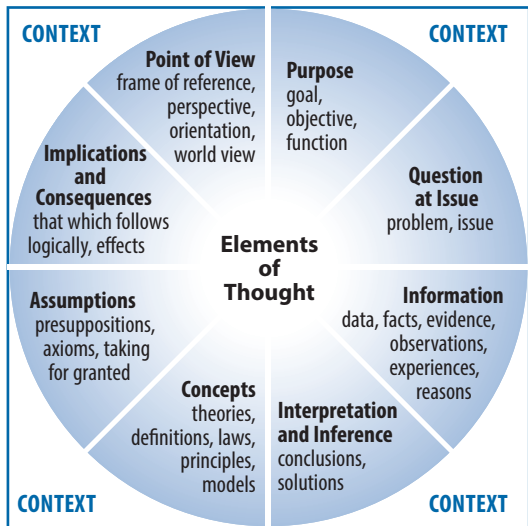
Everyone thinks; it is our nature to do so. But much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed, or downright prejudiced. Yet the quality of our life and of what we produce, make, or build depends precisely on the quality of our thought. Shoddy thinking is costly, both in money and in quality of life. If we want to think well, we must understand at least the rudiments of thought, the most basic structures out of which all thinking is made. We must learn how to take thinking apart.

All Thinking Is Defined by the Eight Elements That Make It Up

Eight basic structures are present in all thinking: Whenever we think, we think for a purpose within a point of view based on assumptions leading to implications and consequences. We use concepts, ideas and theories to interpret data, facts, and experiences in order to answer questions, solve problems, and resolve issues.

Thinking, then:

- generates purposes
- raises questions
- uses information
- utilizes concepts
- makes inferences
- makes assumptions
- generates implications
- embodies a point of view



Each of these structures has implications for the others. If you change your purpose or agenda, you change your questions and problems. If you change your questions and problems, you are forced to seek new information and data. If you collect new information and data...

Essential Idea: There are eight structures that define thinking. Learning to analyze thinking requires practice in identifying these structures in use.

All Humans Use Their Thinking to Make Sense of the World

The words *thinking* and *reasoning* are used in everyday life as virtual synonyms. Reasoning, however, has a more formal flavor. This is because it highlights the inference-drawing capacity of the mind.

Reasoning occurs whenever the mind draws conclusions on the basis of reasons. We draw conclusions whenever we make sense of things. The result is that whenever we think, we reason. Usually we are not aware of the full scope of reasoning implicit in our minds.

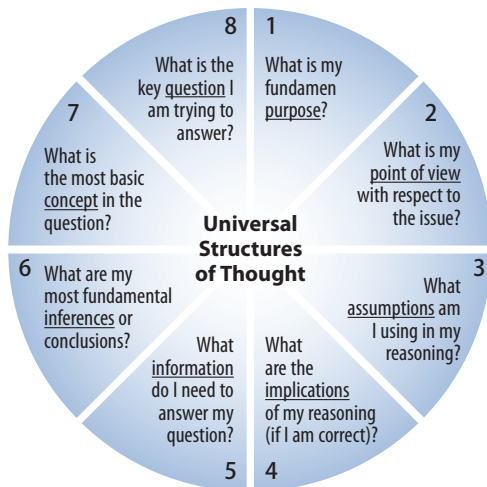
We begin to reason from the moment we wake up in the morning. We reason when we figure out what to eat for breakfast, what to wear, whether to make certain purchases, whether to go with this or that friend to lunch. We reason as we interpret the oncoming flow of traffic, when we react to the decisions of other drivers, when we speed up or slow down. One can draw conclusions, then, about everyday events or, really, about anything at all: about poems, microbes, people, numbers, historical events, social settings, psychological states, character traits, the past, the present, and the future.

By reasoning, then, we mean making sense of something by giving it some meaning in our mind. Virtually all thinking is part of our sense-making activities. We hear scratching at the door and think, “It’s the dog.” We see dark clouds in the sky and think, “It looks like rain.” Some of this activity operates at a subconscious level. For example, all of the sights and sounds about us have meaning for us without our explicitly noticing that they do. Most of our reasoning is unspectacular. Our reasoning tends to become explicit only when someone challenges it and we have to defend it (“Why do you say that Jack is obnoxious? I think he is quite funny”). Throughout life, we form goals or purposes and then figure out how to pursue them. Reasoning is what enables us to come to these decisions using ideas and meanings.

On the surface, reasoning often looks simple, as if it had no component structures. Looked at more closely, however, it implies the ability to engage in a set of interrelated intellectual processes. This thinker’s guide is largely focused on making these intellectual processes explicit. It will enable you to better understand what is going on beneath the surface of your thought.

Essential Idea: Reasoning occurs when we draw conclusions based on reasons. We can upgrade the quality of our reasoning when we understand the intellectual processes that underlie reasoning.

To Analyze Thinking We Must Learn to Identify and Question Its Elemental Structures



Be aware: When we understand the structures of thought, we ask important questions implied by these structures.

To Evaluate Thinking We Must Understand and Apply Intellectual Standards

Reasonable people judge reasoning by intellectual standards. When you internalize these standards and explicitly use them in your thinking, your thinking becomes more clear, more accurate, more precise, more relevant, deeper, broader and more fair. You should note that we focus here on a selection of standards. Among others are credibility, sufficiency, reliability, and practicality. The questions that employ these standards are listed on the following page.

Clarity:

understandable, the meaning can be grasped

Accuracy:

free from errors or distortions, true

Precision:

exact to the necessary level of detail

Relevance:

relating to the matter at hand

Depth:

containing complexities and multiple interrelationships

Breadth:

encompassing multiple viewpoints

Logic:

the parts making sense together, no contradictions

Significance:

focusing on the important, not trivial

Fairness:

justifiable, not self-serving or one-sided

Clarity

Could you elaborate further?
Could you give me an example?
Could you illustrate what you mean?

Accuracy

How could we check on that?
How could we find out if that is true?
How could we verify or test that?

Precision

Could you be more specific?
Could you give me more details?
Could you be more exact?

Relevance

How does that relate to the problem?
How does that bear on the question?
How does that help us with the issue?

Depth

What factors make this a difficult problem?
What are some of the complexities of this question?
What are some of the difficulties we need to deal with?

Breadth

Do we need to look at this from another perspective?
Do we need to consider another point of view?
Do we need to look at this in other ways?

Logic

Does all this make sense together?
Does your first paragraph fit in with your last?
Does what you say follow from the evidence?

Significance

Is this the most important problem to consider?
Is this the central idea to focus on?
Which of these facts are most important?

Fairness

Do I have any vested interest in this issue?
Am I sympathetically representing the viewpoints of others?

35 Dimensions of Critical Thought

A. Affective Dimensions

- thinking independently
- developing insight into egocentricity or sociocentricity
- exercising fairmindedness
- exploring thoughts underlying feelings and feelings underlying thoughts
- developing intellectual humility and suspending judgment
- developing intellectual courage
- developing intellectual good faith or integrity
- developing intellectual perseverance
- developing confidence in reason

B. Cognitive Dimensions—Macro-Abilities

- refining generalizations and avoiding oversimplifications
- comparing analogous situations: transferring insights to new contexts
- developing one's perspective: creating or exploring beliefs, arguments, or theories
- clarifying issues, conclusions, or beliefs
- clarifying and analyzing the meanings of words or phrases
- developing criteria for evaluation: clarifying values and standards
- evaluating the credibility of sources of information
- questioning deeply: raising and pursuing root or significant questions
- analyzing or evaluating arguments, interpretations, beliefs, or theories
- generating or assessing solutions
- analyzing or evaluating actions or policies
- reading critically: clarifying or critiquing texts
- listening critically: the art of silent dialogue
- making interdisciplinary connections

- practicing Socratic discussion: clarifying and questioning beliefs, theories, or perspectives
- reasoning dialogically: comparing perspectives, interpretations, or theories
- reasoning dialectically: evaluating perspectives, interpretations, or theories

C. Cognitive Dimensions—Micro-Skills

- comparing and contrasting ideals with actual practice
- thinking precisely about thinking: using critical vocabulary
- noting significant similarities and differences
- examining or evaluating assumptions for justifiability
- distinguishing relevant from irrelevant facts
- making plausible inferences, predictions, or interpretations
- giving reasons and evaluating evidence and alleged facts
- recognizing contradictions
- exploring logical implications and consequences

Be aware: It is important to realize that the affective dimensions of critical thought, as well as both the micro and macro abilities, can be expanded in multiple directions. For instance we might easily add the following micro-skills to our list:

- clarifying purposes
- checking purposes for consistency and fairness
- stating the question clearly and precisely
- formulating the question in multiple ways to target different aspects of the issue

A Checklist for Reasoning

1) All reasoning has a PURPOSE.

- Take time to state your purpose clearly.
- Distinguish your purpose from related purposes.
- Check periodically to be sure you are still on target.
- Choose significant and realistic purposes.

2) All reasoning is an attempt to figure something out, to settle some QUESTION, to solve some problem.

- State the question at issue clearly and precisely.
- Express the question in several ways to clarify its meaning and scope.
- Break the question into sub-questions.
- Distinguish questions that have definitive answers from those that are a matter of opinion and from those that require consideration of multiple viewpoints.

3) All reasoning is based on ASSUMPTIONS.

- Clearly identify your assumptions and determine whether they are justifiable.
- Consider how your assumptions are shaping your point of view.

4) All reasoning is done from some POINT OF VIEW.

- Identify your point of view.
- Seek other points of view and identify their strengths as well as weaknesses.
- Strive to be fairminded in evaluating all points of view.

5) All reasoning is based on DATA, INFORMATION and EVIDENCE.

- Restrict your claims to those supported by the data you have.
- Search for information that opposes your position as well as information that supports it.
- Make sure that all information used is clear, accurate and relevant to the question at issue.
- Make sure you have gathered sufficient information.

6) All reasoning is expressed through, and shaped by, CONCEPTS and IDEAS.

- Identify key concepts and explain them clearly.
- Consider alternative concepts or alternative definitions of concepts.
- Make sure you are using concepts with precision.

7) All reasoning contains INFERENCES or INTERPRETATIONS by which we draw CONCLUSIONS and give meaning to data.

- Infer only what the evidence implies.
- Check inferences for their consistency with each other.
- Identify assumptions underlying your inferences.

8) All reasoning leads somewhere or has IMPLICATIONS and CONSEQUENCES.

- Trace the implications and consequences that follow from your reasoning.
- Search for negative as well as positive implications.
- Consider all possible consequences.