



8 Active Learning Strategies to Build Students' Strength in Critical Thinking

Use critical thinking vocabulary when posing questions to students to reinforce conceptual understanding and promote recognition of reasoning. Use the names of the skills and the habits of mind that are found in the textbook. For example, use phrases such as: "What is your reason for that claim?", "Let's interpret this statement.", "What inferences can we reasonably draw from these facts?", and "Let's be systematic in our analysis."

The Reflective Pause: First, ask a thought provoking question and then intentionally allow 10–15 seconds of silence to elapse before calling on any student to respond. Cognitive science research has shown that a pause of this length is necessary for the human brain to sufficiently process a question and formulate a reasonable response.



Model strong critical thinking. Avoid misleading, and imprecise expressions such as: "How do you feel about that?" and "What is your view of this?" and even "What did you think of this?". Your students watch you, so what you say and what you do might be more powerful in motivating them to build their critical thinking skills than anything they read or hear in a lecture. If you show that you practice the positive critical thinking habits of mind and that you engage in problems and decisions by applying critical thinking skills, that message comes through to them. If you do not, you give them a negative message.

Call out strong critical thinking: Acknowledge when students use critical thinking so that you promote their self-awareness and recognition of reasoning (don't forget to use the critical thinking vocabulary). For example, use phrases such as: "The claim you are making...", "The inquisitiveness of this group was evident when...", "I agree with your interpretation of...", and "In your analysis of..."

Don't let students get by with shut-down clichés such as, "That's just how I feel.", "I was brought up to think that...", "My parents always said that...", and "It's common sense.". Require students to provide reasons or explanations for all their claims, interpretations, analyses, evaluations, and decisions. Ask why and expect a good, well-reasoned answer.

Work from example back to theory: Discuss the examples in the text first, and then draw out the concepts they teach. This active learning technique exercises students' inductive reasoning skills and promotes active engagement and inquisitiveness.

Include student reflective journals: Cue students to practice specific thinking skills or mindset attributes. For example, practice interpretation, analysis, and evaluation skills by journaling "What exactly happened and why was that important?"

Use dynamic active learning activities to promote independent thinking and to expose students to the thinking of others. Here are some examples: conversing with a partner, small groups, or the whole class; investigations, inquires, and informed conversations; debates; simulations; role playing; fishbowl activities; panel discussions; brainstorming exercises; case studies; course blogs or wikis; individual or group argument mapping; social networking features such as asynchronous bulletin boards that are often found in course management systems; maintaining a paper or electronic Portfolio, and so on. Every moment is an opportunity. Provide frequent opportunities to practice critical thinking skills and receive formative feedback from the instructor and peers. Interactions that result in constructive feedback can be incorporated by the student and reinforce self-regulation.

This material about using active learning strategies to promote critical thinking is shared by **Dr. Carol Gittens, PhD.**, Dean of the School of Education at St. Mary's University. Dr. Gittens is a strategic planning consultant and a well-known expert in the training and assessment of critical thinking. If you are interested in additional strategies for teaching and training reasoning skills, check out the [Deep Dives](#) and [Skill Builders](#) at [InsightBasecamp](#).