

THINKER'S GUIDE LIBRARY



# CRITICAL THINKING

Concepts & Tools

Richard Paul  
& Linda Elder

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## Why A Critical Thinking Mini-Guide?

This miniature guide focuses on the essence of critical thinking concepts and tools distilled into pocket size. For faculty it provides a shared concept of critical thinking. For students it is a critical thinking supplement to any textbook for any course. Faculty can use it to design instruction, assignments, and tests in any subject. Students can use it to improve their learning in any content area.

Its generic skills apply to all subjects. For example, critical thinkers are clear as to the purpose at hand and the question at issue. They question information, conclusions, and points of view. They strive to be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. They seek to think beneath the surface, to be logical, and fair. They apply these skills to their reading and writing as well as to their speaking and listening. They apply them in history, science, math, philosophy, and the arts; in professional and personal life.

When this guide is used as a supplement to the textbook in multiple courses, students begin to perceive the usefulness of critical thinking in every domain of learning. And if their instructors provide examples of the application of the subject to daily life, students begin to see that education is a tool for improving the quality of their lives.

If you are a student using this mini-guide, get in the habit of carrying it with you to every class. Consult it frequently in analyzing and synthesizing what you are learning. Aim for deep internalization of the principles you find in it—until using them becomes second nature.

If successful, this guide will serve faculty, students, and the educational program simultaneously.

Richard Paul  
Center for Critical Thinking

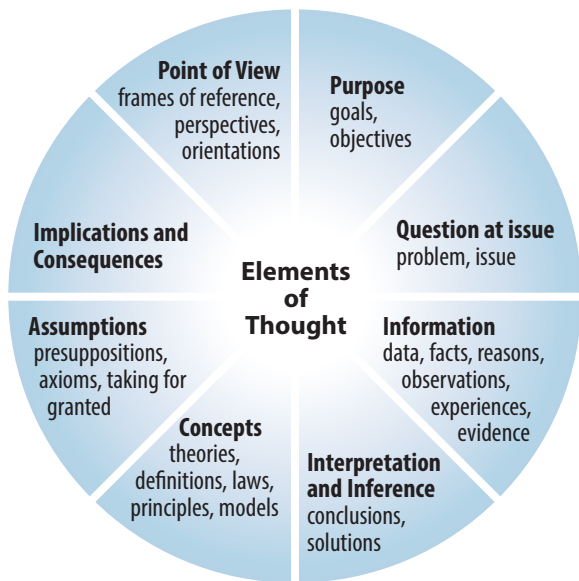
Linda Elder  
Foundation for Critical Thinking

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## The Elements of Thought



## Used With Sensitivity to Universal Intellectual Standards

Clarity → Accuracy → Depth → Breadth → Significance  
Precision  
Relevance  
↓  
Fairness

**Depth:**

How does your answer address the complexities in the question? How are you taking into account the problems in the question? Are you dealing with the most significant factors?

A statement can be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant, but superficial (that is, lack depth). For example, the statement “Just Say No”, which was used for a number of years to discourage children and teens from using drugs, is clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. Nevertheless, those who use this approach treat a highly complex issue, the pervasive problem of drug use among young people, superficially. It fails to deal with the complexities of the issue.

**Breadth:**

Do we need to consider another point of view? Is there another way to look at this question? What would this look like from a conservative standpoint? What would this look like from the point of view of...?

A line of reasoning may be clear, accurate, precise, relevant, and deep, but lack breadth (as in an argument from either the conservative or liberal standpoints which gets deeply into an issue, but only recognizes the insights of one side of the question).

**Logic:**

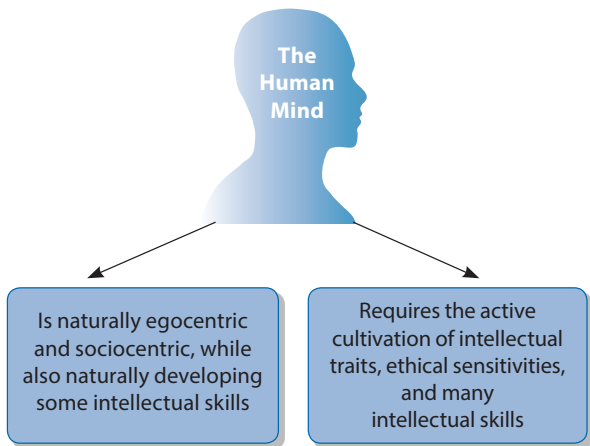
Does this really make sense? Does that follow from what you said? How does that follow? Before you implied this and now you are saying that, I don't see how both can be true.

When we think, we bring a variety of thoughts together into some order. When the combination of thoughts are mutually supporting and make sense in combination, the thinking is “logical.” When the combination is not mutually supporting, is contradictory in some sense, or does not “make sense,” the combination is “not logical.”

**Fairness:**

Are we considering all relevant viewpoints in good faith? Are we distorting some information to maintain our biased perspective? Are we more concerned about our vested interests than the common good?

We naturally think from our own perspective, from a point of view which tends to privilege our position. Fairness implies the treating of all relevant viewpoints alike without reference to one's own feelings or interests. Because we tend to be biased in favor of our own viewpoint, it is important to keep the standard of fairness at the forefront of our thinking. This is especially important when the situation may call on us to see things we don't want to see, or give something up that we want to hold onto.



**Essential Idea:** Humans have a natural tendency, all other things being equal, to make decisions and to reason egocentrically or sociocentrically. Humans also have (largely undeveloped) rational capacities. Humans begin life as primarily egocentric creatures. Over time, infantile egocentric self-centered thinking merges with sociocentric group-centered thinking. All humans regularly engage in both forms of irrational thought. The extent to which any of us is egocentric or sociocentric is a matter of degree and can change significantly in given situations or contexts. While egocentric and sociocentric propensities are naturally occurring phenomena, rational capacities must be largely developed. It is through the development of these rational capacities that we combat irrational tendencies and cultivate critical societies.

## About the Authors:



**Dr. Linda Elder** is an educational psychologist who has taught both psychology and critical thinking at the college level. She is the President of the Foundation for Critical Thinking and the Executive Director of the Center for Critical Thinking. Dr. Elder has a special interest in the relation of thought and emotion, the cognitive and the affective, and has developed an original theory of the stages of critical thinking development. She has coauthored four books on critical thinking, as well as twenty-five Thinker's Guides. She is a dynamic presenter with extensive experience in leading workshops on critical thinking.



**Dr. Richard Paul** is a major leader in the international critical thinking movement. He is Director of Research at the Center for Critical Thinking, the Chair of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, and author of over 200 articles and seven books on critical thinking. Dr. Paul has given hundreds of workshops on critical thinking and made a series of eight critical thinking video programs for PBS. His views on critical thinking have been canvassed in *New York Times*, *Education Week*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *American Teacher*, *Educational Leadership*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Reader's Digest*.



### The Foundation for Critical Thinking

[www.criticalthinking.org](http://www.criticalthinking.org)  
707-878-9100 • 800-833-3645  
[cct@criticalthinking.org](mailto:cct@criticalthinking.org)

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Foundation for Critical Thinking  
P.O. Box 196  
Tombales, CA 94971



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