

**Lesson title:** “What Kind of Critical Thinker Are You?”

**Lesson’s author:** Mark Allen Peterson (with Lisa Suter)

**Summary:** Because students in ITS will be exposed to multiple ways of looking at events, some development of critical thinking skills is almost inevitable—if they are open enough to growth. Drawing on the work of education theorist Susan K. Wolcott, this exercise offers students an opportunity to self-assess their critical thinking skills, and to think about how well they employ these skills in class.

**Objectives:**

1. Students will be able to critically analyze academic texts, international news, maps, histories, and their own received ideologies and received wisdom for assumptions, political and cultural points of view, and stated and unstated biases
2. Students develop core liberal arts skills: reading unfamiliar information and making sense of it; thinking critically about what they’re reading; synthesizing material; coming to a conclusion about it; and articulating that conclusion verbally and in writing.

**Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students examine five different models of critical thinking and decide which one best describes their own cognitive approach.
2. Students use meta-reflection to determine what they have learned about learning.

**Materials Required:**

1. Handout: What Kind of Critical Thinker Are You? (below)

**Lesson Activities:**

1. Ask students to read the following handout and reflect on their own approach to learning new material: which model best sums up their perspective?
2. Have students write a paragraph or two about the reading answering the following questions:
  - a. What was insightful to them?
  - b. Did they learn anything new about themselves as learners?
  - c. What role might the media plays in creating “Confused Fact-Finders” or “Biased Jumpers”?
  - d. What opportunities are they receiving—or creating—to become “Strategic Revisioners” within their university.
3. Have the class discuss the reading and their responses to it. Ask them what opportunities this class might offer them to become better critical thinkers.

**Comments:** Obviously it is not necessary to have students write before speaking. Many faculty have students engage in brief writing exercises as a way to ensure everyone is prepared to join in the discussion. It ensures that students who are too shy or “cool” to speak, or who require more time for reflection, nonetheless can participate.

The original author of the assignment gives special encouragement to students who are able to reflect on the critical thinking categories themselves: that one might fall between categories, or that one might be one kind of critical thinker in one activity or another category in another class. I also encourage them to recognize that professors never really know or assess their actual thinking—so they must treat every assignment as an opportunity to show what they’ve learned.

## What Kind of Critical Thinker Are You?

Critical thinking—the ability to consider multiple points of view, analyze and synthesize information, and come to thoughtful conclusions—is one of the strengths of liberal arts education. Employers highly reward critical “outside the box” thinkers. Yet employers around the world complain that most college graduates they hire lack critical thinking skills. The following, drawn from the work of education theorist Susan K. Wolcott, offers an opportunity for self-evaluation. How good are *you* at critical thinking? How well do you employ these skills in your classes? Think about your course work and how you come off to your professors as a critical thinker.

### 1. Confused Fact-Finder

Proceeds as if goal is to find the single, “correct” answer.

- Looks for the “right” answer; insists professors, the textbook, or other experts provide the “correct” answer, even to open-ended problems
- Prefers textbooks to primary and secondary sources
- Does not always recognize contradictions between different sources
- Does not always read carefully because not interested in how authors come to their conclusions

#### Classroom Vignette: The Confused Fact-Finder

Professor Anderson was grading his international studies final exams. One question required students to describe the pros and cons of U.S. involvement in the Gulf war. Instead of describing pros and cons, several students simply described the war.

**Approximately half of U.S. first-year college students are “confused fact finders”!**

### 2. Biased Jumper

Proceeds as if goal is to stack up information and evidence to support own opinion/conclusion

- Jumps to conclusions
- Does not recognize own biases; accuses others of being biased (appears to think “bias” is whatever he or she has never heard before)
- Stacks up evidence for own position; Ignores contradictory evidence
  - Uses arguments to promote own position
  - Uses arguments against other positions  
(does not understand argumentation as a *learning* process)
- Equates unsupported personal opinion with other forms of evidence
- Acknowledges multiple viewpoints, but cannot adequately address a problem from viewpoint other than own

#### Classroom Vignettes: The Biased Jumper

Professor Anderson was grading his international studies final exam. One question required students to describe the pros and cons of U.S. involvement in the Gulf war. Instead of describing pros and cons, several students provided only the pros OR the cons of U.S. involvement in the Gulf war, but not both. Two of his students were very angry about their exam grades. One argued, “I don’t understand how I could get a C—I have a right to my opinion!” The other student complained on the teaching evaluation, “This professor was very biased in his grading.”

**Majority of U.S. college seniors are “biased jumpers”!**

### 3. Perpetual Analyzer

Proceeds as if goal is to establish an unbiased, balanced view of evidence and information from different points of view.

- Doesn't reach or adequately defend a solution
- Exhibits strong analysis skills, but appears to be "wishy-washy"
- Writes papers that are too long and seem to ramble
- Doesn't want to stop analyzing:
  - "I can look at it this way, and I can look at it that way, and..."
  - "Wait! What about \_\_\_\_\_?"

#### Classroom Vignette: The Perpetual Analyzer

Professor Hey was very excited as she read one student's paper. The student had clear, detailed paragraphs describing the event in historical, geographical, political, cultural, and economic contexts. "This student really knows how to analyze," she thought. By the end of the paper, however, she had become disappointed. The student's conclusion was weak; she had failed to use the multiple contexts to argue a point. Instead, the author just summarized what she had already said.

### 4. Pragmatic Performer

Proceeds as if goal is to come to a well-founded conclusion based on objective consideration of priorities across viable alternatives.

- Objectively considers alternatives before reaching conclusions
- Focuses on pragmatic solutions
- Incorporates others in the decision process and/or implementation
- Views task as finished when a solution/decision is reached
- Gives insufficient attention to limitations, changing conditions, and strategic issues
- Sometimes comes across as a "Biased Jumper," but reveals more complex thinking when prompted

#### Classroom Vignette: The Pragmatic Performer

Professors Toops was describing the final projects in his international studies capstone course. "I'm sure that some of these students can think more strategically than they demonstrate in their papers!" Professor Toops exclaimed. "But they just don't seem to take the time to think past making the most obvious policy recommendations."

### 5. Strategic Revisionary

Proceeds as if goal is to strategically construct knowledge, to move toward better conclusions (or greater confidence in conclusions) as the problem is addressed over time.

- Seeks continuous improvement/lifelong learning
- Sees every assignment as an opportunity to build thinking and writing skills
- Enjoys thinking "outside the box"
- Anticipates change
- Works toward constructing knowledge over time

#### Classroom Vignette: The Strategic Re-Visioner

Professor Stevens had no reservation about writing a glowing letter of recommendation for this student. "Sandy is the rare student who not only learns quickly and thoroughly, but also performs superior analyses, recognizes and incorporates the most important issues, and always seeks to learn more," he wrote.