



OXFORD
CATALYST

What is Critical Thinking & Why does it matter?



www.oxfordcatalyst.com



Critical Thinking: the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgement

Critical thinking skills enable us to think clearly and independently. They help us assess different sources of information and give our own logical answers.

We have more information today than we know what to do with. We don't need people who can only retain and repeat information: we need those who can also analyse it and use it to make properly informed decisions.

We use critical thinking skills every day when, for example, we:

- decide whether to sign the petition forwarded to us on WhatsApp
- choose the more important points that need to be included in an essay
- select GCSEs or other academic options
- choose a product from a vast range on a supermarket aisle.

Approaching small and large decisions critically enables us to make better choices.

Critical vs non-critical thinking

A critical thinker entering a question into Google will look at a number of responses, assess their reliability, and form their own opinion. A non-critical thinker might just copy and paste the first or second result on the list.

A critical thinker will read a news item and think about who has written it and why. A non-critical thinker would be more likely to accept the contents of the news item as fact.

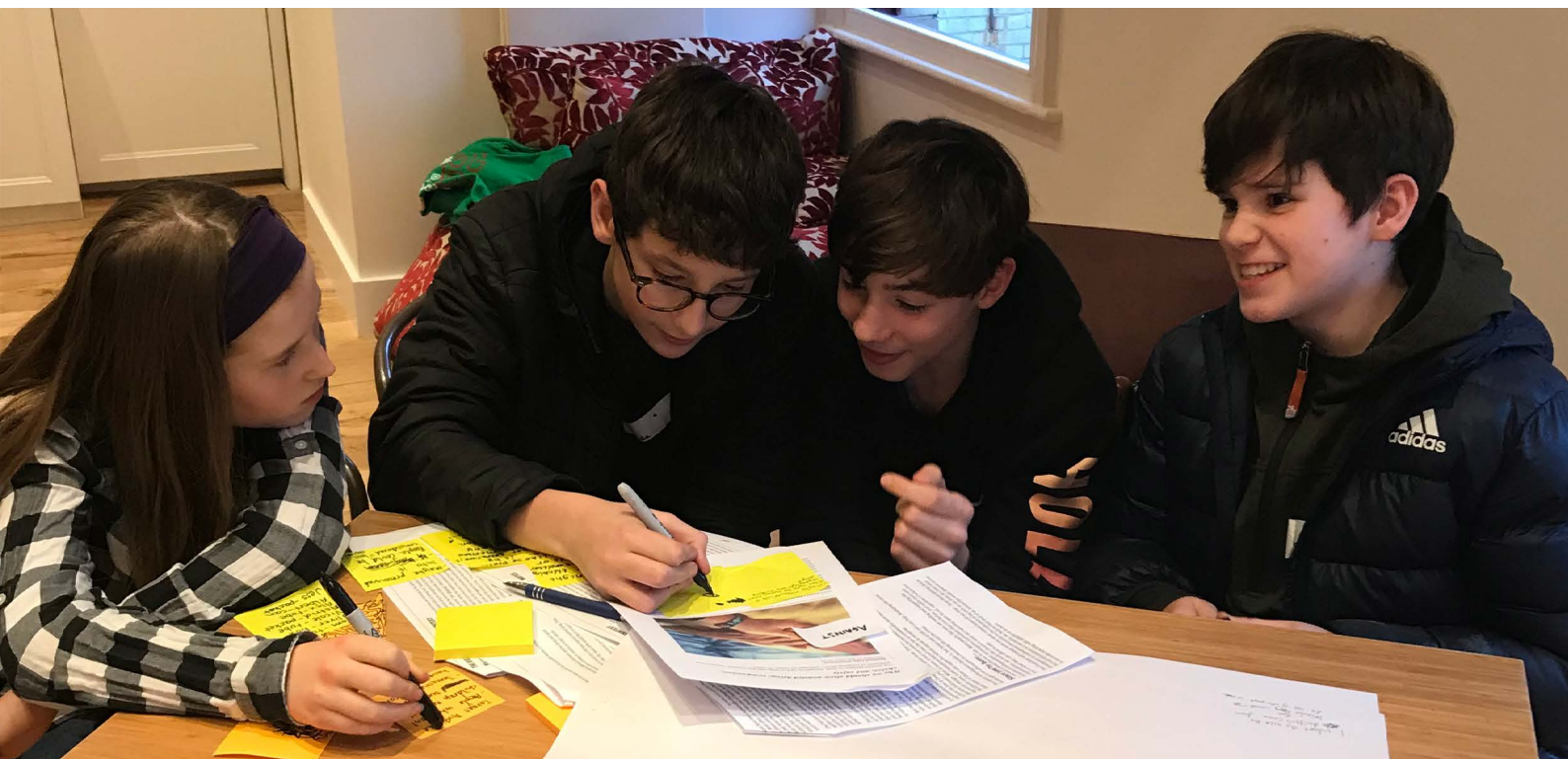
Why advanced critical thinking skills give students an edge

Advanced critical thinking skills are what enables students to stand out in school, in everyday life, and later in university and the workplace. They make the difference between giving a standard, acceptable answer and a smart, original answer that will make their essay, project, competition entry or interview memorable.

And, when it comes to interviews, good test scores might get your child through the door, but their critical thinking skills will determine the interview outcome.

An ability to think critically will help them to:

- challenge and improve ideas
- see things from different perspectives
- ask the right questions and work out what is and isn't valuable information
- put together a convincing argument
- make informed choices about everything from study options to personal health
- recognize how messages aimed at them (e.g. through advertising) may have ulterior motives, question assumptions, and look beyond the obvious answers
- argue persuasively.



How you can help

Critical thinking skills can be developed from childhood. They can't be learned in a matter of weeks, like times tables or the periodic table, they take time to cultivate. The good news is that you can help. Below are five activities you can do at home to help your child develop a critical thinking mindset:

1. Encourage active listening by asking your children to summarise clearly what they have seen or read (an article, a news report, a book). Being able to articulate an idea clearly in their own words is a good sign that children have understood something properly rather than simply repeating it verbatim
2. Help them develop their debating skills. The ability to see any issue from different perspectives helps to broaden your understanding of it, and debating is a great way to learn to do that. Get your child started by giving them a topic and asking them to come up with three reasons for and against the motion:
 - **Children should not have to wear school uniform**
 - **Statues of people who have been involved in immoral activities should be pulled down**
 - **Flying should be banned for environmental reasons**
3. Get them thinking on their feet. Your child won't always know the answer to questions they are asked, so it's important they know how to approach new subjects and problems creatively and come up with angles they haven't thought of before. Start honing those skills by giving your child a subject and ask them to talk about it for 2 minutes without stopping. There aren't any right or wrong answers! Here are some fun ideas to get you started:
 - **What happens when you boil an egg?**
 - **Are bananas a good thing?**
 - **What is comedy?**
 - **Do we need toenails?**
4. Cultivate curiosity! Curiosity fuels learning, the more questions we ask about the world around us, the more opportunities for learning we are provided with. Encourage your children to be curious and to ask questions about areas of life that we take for granted and rituals that go unchallenged. For example, why do we have set mealtimes? What are eyelashes for? How do we decide what animals we will or won't eat? Why do we dance?
5. Encourage creative thinking. For some, the word 'creativity' conjures up images of finger painting, interpretative dance, and other artistic pursuits. However, the ability to think creatively is also a vital component of critical thinking and problem solving. Being creative enables us to come up with new, innovative approaches to intractable issues. Here are some ways to get the creative juices flowing: show your child a picture and ask them to guess what happened before and afterwards, ask them how many uses they can think of for a coffee cup/tooth pick/pencil, give them a 7-minute time limit and ask them to write a 21-word story, draw 30 blank circles on a page and see how many they can turn into a recognizable object in a short period e.g. 5 minutes.



Ways to help your child think critically about the media they consume

All the reading lists and improving documentaries in the world will not make a child smarter unless they actively engage with what they are consuming. Being able to read and decode words and retain facts are useful abilities, but it requires much more advanced skills to be able to understand their significance or possible usefulness.

Books, films, newspaper and magazine articles, documentaries, pictures, advertisements, leaflets in the waiting rooms of doctors and dentists all provide opportunities to help children and young people be analytical about the media all around them.

Here are some questions to ask your child when they have finished a book:

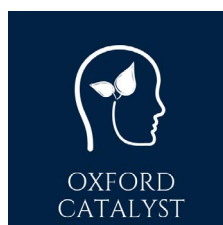
- Why did you choose to read the book?
- Why do you think they designed the cover that way and chose that title?
- Why did you enjoy or not enjoy it?
- Why do you think the author wrote it?
- Does it promote a particular set of values or beliefs?
- Does it seem more or less sympathetic to one character or group of characters than to another?
- What impact does that have on you?

These questions can be adapted to apply to films:

- Why do you think they chose to film the opening scene from that angle?
- Why did they select those particular clips for the trailer?
- What part did the music play in how you felt when you were watching the film?

Or to articles on websites or in newspapers:

- Who is this written for?
- Does it have an 'angle' i.e. is it written in order to promote a particular perspective?
- What words, phrases or content give you that impression?
- How might the same story be covered by a different news source?





Interview questions to get your child thinking

As your child gets older, there will increasingly be academic, extra-curricular, and career opportunities that are reliant on coming across well in an interview. Naturally interview performance will partly be down to knowledge of a particular subject, and interviewers usually like to know some personal information about your child and their hobbies, so it is worth being well prepared for that.

But, they will often also include open-ended questions. There is generally no right answer to these questions, the interviewer just wants to understand how your child approaches them. Here are some examples:

- What does bravery mean to you?
- What would you do if you didn't have to work as an adult?
- What is the biggest problem facing the world today?
- What would a perfect day look like for you?
- What are you most proud of?
- What is more important, being right or being kind?

How to develop your child's critical thinking skills further

Our live, online courses teach students how to communicate effectively, be analytical, argue convincingly, develop fresh perspectives, and find creative solutions. Courses include:

- 24 hours teaching by Oxbridge graduates in small groups
- 2 hours of social activities
- Graduation and certificate
- Individual feedback.

These courses are perfect for students who:

- are aged 12-16
- want to develop their critical thinking skills
- are curious and like a challenge
- are preparing for school interviews or looking ahead to university
- would like to develop confidence in debating, public speaking and presenting
- enjoy meeting friends from around the world.

We teach students how to go beyond the obvious answers and develop the kind of thought-through perspectives that help them to stand out and thrive in school and beyond.



OXFORD
CATALYST

Visit www.oxfordcatalyst.com/onlinecourses
for more details and to book online