

The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking. Concepts and Tools – a book review

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The eighth edition of *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools* by Richard Paul and Linda Elder is the best-selling title in the series of twenty-five books published by the same authors in the *Thinker's Guide Library*.

Dr. Richard Paul was an American philosopher and a leading proponent of critical thinking until his death in 2015. He developed the concepts, principles, and theory essential to a robust and fair-minded conception of critical thinking. He authored more than 200 articles and seven books on critical thinking and conducted hundreds of workshops for educators. He was Chair of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, founded the Center for Critical Thinking followed by the Foundation for Critical Thinking.

Dr. Linda Elder, an educational psychologist and lecturer laid the foundation for the field of Criticology. She is the author of *Critical Thinking Therapy: For Happiness and Self-Actualization* and co-author of four books and all of the *Thinker's Guides*. She has a particular interest in the relationship between thought and emotion, the interplay of cognitive and affective domains, and the stages of critical thinking development. She is the president of the Foundation for Critical Thinking and executive director of the Center for Critical Thinking, both of which aim to bring critical thinking into education as well as into public, professional, and private life.

The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools integrates philosophy, psychology, cognitive psychology, sociology and education. Paul and Elder define critical thinking as 'the art of analyzing and evaluating thought processes with a view to improving them. Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It requires rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem-solving abilities, as well as a commitment to overcoming our native egocentrism and sociocentrism. It advances the character and sensitivities of the dedicated person through the explicit cultivation of intellectual virtues.'

This definition, presented in the introduction, is elaborated across six chapters, where theoretical insights are paired with practical tools, such as lists, sets of questions, templates, and diagrams, designed for both individual and classroom use.

The authors guide readers not only in learning *about* critical thinking but also in *practicing* it across academic, professional, social, and personal contexts. In **Chapter 1** the reader is introduced to the basic structures of all thinking – the *Eight Elements of Thought/Reasoning* and is invited to answer questions framed by them. The purpose of the task is to develop the ability to *think for a purpose* within a *point of view*, to *ask questions*, to *use assumptions* that lead to *implications and consequences*, and to apply *concepts* (theories, definitions, principles) and *information* in order to *interpret, make inferences* and *draw conclusions*.

Chapter 2 enables the thinker to evaluate the quality of their reasoning through the use of ten *Essential Intellectual Standards of All Human Thought*. Each standard has a single-word name—*Clarity, Accuracy, Precision, Relevance, Depth, Breadth, Logic, Significance, Fairness, and Sufficiency*—and is applied by asking and answering guiding questions. For example, in the case of *Accuracy*, one might ask: How could we check on that? How could we find out if that is true? How could we verify or test that? For *Fairness*,

the questions include: Do I have a vested interest in this issue? Am I sympathetically representing the viewpoints of others? Have we fully and fairly considered the important information relevant to the issue? Applying Intellectual Standards, thinkers identify their weaknesses in formulating and expressing thoughts along with the areas of egocentrism or sociocentrism.

Chapter 3 discusses *Intellectual Virtues* (traits) of a fair-minded critical thinker. They include *Intellectual Integrity*, *Intellectual Humility*, *Confidence in Reason*, *Intellectual Perseverance*, *Fairmindedness*, *Intellectual Courage*, *Intellectual Empathy*, and *Intellectual Autonomy*. They are opposed by intellectual vices such as *Intellectual Hypocrisy*, *Intellectual Arrogance*, *Distrust in Reason*, *Intellectual Laziness*, *Intellectual Unfairness*, *Intellectual Cowardice*, *Intellectual Narrow-mindedness*, and *Intellectual Conformity*. Each virtue is interconnected with all others and indispensable for fair-minded critical thinkers. For instance, *Confidence in Reason* enables individuals to think coherently and logically, form rational viewpoints, draw reasonable conclusions, persuade others through reasoning, and become more reasonable themselves. *Intellectual Empathy* allows one to imaginatively place oneself in another's position in order to understand and reconstruct their viewpoints accurately, using their assumptions and ideas. The quality of intellectual empathy depends on the quality and skillful of all the other virtues in a given situation.

Chapter 4, entitled *The Spirit of Critical Thinking*, reflects the authors' conviction that critical thinkers who can discern the logic of anything are effective questioners and problem solvers. Such thinkers are prepared to analyze the logic of a text, evaluate an author's reasoning, and assess research. To develop these abilities the authors provide readers with practical tools: a template (based on the Elements of Reasoning) for deconstructing an article, essay, or textbook chapter; a list of criteria for evaluating reasoning (also based on the Elements of Reasoning); and a set of guidelines (additionally grounded in Intellectual Standards) for analyzing and assessing research. These study aids are ready to use.

The type of reasoning required depends on the kind of question. The authors divide questions into three categories: *Questions of procedure*, which are settled by facts, definitions, or both, and have one correct answer (as in physics, mathematics, or biology); *Questions of preference*, which call for a subjective opinion that cannot be assessed and *Questions of judgment* which have more than one answer from different perspectives. They are most common in history, philosophy, economics and sociology, and are best answered through the application of Intellectual Standards. This categorization allows answers to be structured according to the type of question.

In the development of critical thinking, humans first engage in *Unreflective Lower-Order Thinking*, at a low-to-mixed skill level, which often relies on gut intuition and tends to be self-serving and self-deceptive. Then they move to *Selectively Reflective Higher-Order Thinking*, at a high skill level, but lacking the vocabulary of critical thinking. It is inconsistently fair and may involve sophistry. Finally, they achieve *Explicitly Reflective Highest-Order Thinking*, at the highest skill level, characterized by the routine use of critical thinking tools to analyze and assess thought. It is consistently fair.

This classification highlights that the quality of reasoning, the accuracy of applying critical thinking vocabulary and the degree of fairmindedness are closely interconnected. The more advanced the critical thinking, the more deliberate the use of concepts and tools – such as the Elements of Thought and Universal Intellectual Standards – within the framework of cultivated Intellectual Virtues becomes. Given the authors' conviction that the quality of our lives depends on the quality of our reasoning, it follows that the success of our actions is determined by the quality of reasoning. This idea leads to **Chapter 5: *The Human Mind Is Frequently Irrational While Having the Capacity for Rational Thought*** where the issues of egocentrism and sociocentrism distorting the thinker's perception of reality and their functioning in society are discussed.

Humans perceive reality through the lenses of prejudice, bias, selfishness, projection, group loyalty and other distortions. Unreflective egocentric thinkers react to the 'unsuccessful' (in their view) outcomes of their thinking and actions with arrogance, resentment, anger, depression, alienation, apathy or irritability.

When they notice that an outcome they perceive as ‘successful’, they reward themselves with positive emotions. Such thinkers do not see the limitations of their own perspectives and do not consider the rights and needs of others. Their egoistic actions, accompanied by negative emotions and self-serving communication, do not make them intellectually and emotionally empathetic.

Naturally, people are ‘culture bound’ and function in society through one or more forms of sociocentric thought: group selfishness, group validation, group control or group conformity. These tendencies lie at an unconscious level and often go unnoticed. To reach their sociocentric aims and feel ethical, they convince themselves one thing on the surface while acting upon another. Through deception mechanisms, they perceive their egocentric or sociocentric thoughts and actions fair-minded. In the authors’ view, people can reduce their egocentrism and sociocentrism applying the Elements of Reasoning to their thinking and cultivation of Intellectual Traits.

Chapter 6: *Envisioning Critical Societies* is based on the conviction that humans have the capacity to be rational and fair and that this capacity must be cultivated. The authors assume that critical societies will develop to the extent that the principles of critical thinking become peoples’ guiding principles of life. Among the most important twenty barriers to the formation of critical societies are failure to take thinking seriously; superficial awareness of critical thinking without adherence to its principles; cultural narrowness; uncritical acceptance of authority figures and bureaucratic rules; disregard for the freedom of thought and speech; lack of appreciation for spontaneity and authenticity; the inability to achieve self-actualization, self-command, or enlightenment due to a lack of mastery over one’s thoughts and the relationship between thoughts and emotions.

Richard Paul and Linda Elder’s forty-eight-page *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking. Concepts and Tools* is a coherent and well-balanced introduction to Paul’s theory of critical thinking. It gives the reader (ranging from a student to a scholar) core knowledge and the opportunity to practice critical thinking simultaneously. The book is written in accessible language that incorporates the critical analytic vocabulary of English. Explanatory material – organized logically into tables, lists, templates, diagrams, and sets of questions – helps readers shape thinking triggering actions in all spheres of life and disciplines. The set of Intellectual Standards applicable to any human message and the constellation of Intellectual Virtues are, besides the Elements of Reasoning invaluable tools that enable an unreflective thinker to become an advanced or accomplished one. *The Miniature Guide to Critical thinking* is an excellent starting point for students, teachers, professionals and social groups seeking to train the mind, at least with the use of the authors’ other twenty four books in the Thinker’s Guide Library.