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The Eight Tenets of Critical Thinking

Wade and Tavis (2005) define Critical Thinking (CT) as “the ability and willingness to assess claims and make objective judgments on the basis of well-supported reasons and evidence rather than emotion or anecdote” (p. 12).

Critical thinking has eight tenets, eight premises, and those premises have been clearly detailed:

1. **Ask questions; be willing to wonder.** Always be on the lookout for questions that have not been answered in the textbooks, by the experts in the field or by the media. Asking ‘What’s wrong here?’ and/or ‘Why is this the way it is, and how did it come to be that way?’ leads to the identification of problems and challenges.
2. **Define the problem.** An inadequate formulation of question can produce misleading or incomplete answers. Ask neutral questions that don't presuppose answers. Be very concrete, very absolute in defining our terms as vague or poorly defined terms can lead to misinformation, misleading conclusions, and incomplete answers.
3. **Examine the evidence.** Ask yourself, "What evidence supports or refutes this argument and its opposition?" Just because many people believe, including so-called experts, it doesn't make it so. How *reliable* is the evidence? If checking the reliability of the evidence directly is not possible, the person considers whether it came from a *reliable source*.

4. **Analyze assumptions and biases.** All of us are subject to biases, beliefs that prevent us from being impartial. Evaluate the assumptions and biases that lie behind arguments, including your own. Researchers, for example, put their own assumptions to the test by stating a hypothesis in such a way that it can be *refuted* or disproved by counterevidence.

5. **Avoid emotional reasoning: "If I feel this way, it must be true."** Passionate commitment to a view can motivate a person to think boldly without fear of what others will say, but when "gut feelings" replace clear thinking, the results can be disastrous. Making sound, reasoned decisions and being very emotional when a decision is made are incompatible; you can't be reasonable and completely rational if you're very emotional about something.

6. **Don't oversimplify.** Critical thinkers avoid either-or reasoning because life – and science – is rarely that simple. Look beyond the obvious, resist easy generalizations, reject either/or thinking. Don't argue by anecdote.

7. **Consider other interpretations.** A crucial aspect of critical thinking is not to limit oneself to only one or two possibilities. Before settling on an explanation of some behavior, however, critical thinkers are careful not to shut out alternative possibilities. They generate as many interpretations of the evidence as they can before choosing the one that is most likely. Formulate hypotheses that offer reasonable explanations of characteristics, behavior, and events.

8. **Tolerate uncertainty.** Sometimes there is little or no evidence available to examine. Sometimes the evidence permits only tentative conclusions. Sometimes the evidence seems strong enough to permit strong conclusions ...until, exasperatingly, new evidence

throws our beliefs into disarray. *Critical thinkers are willing to accept this state of uncertainty.* They are not afraid to say, “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure.”
(pp. 13-16)

Bibliography

Wade, C. & Tavis, C. (2005). Invitation to Psychology, 3rd Ed., pp. 12 – 17. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.