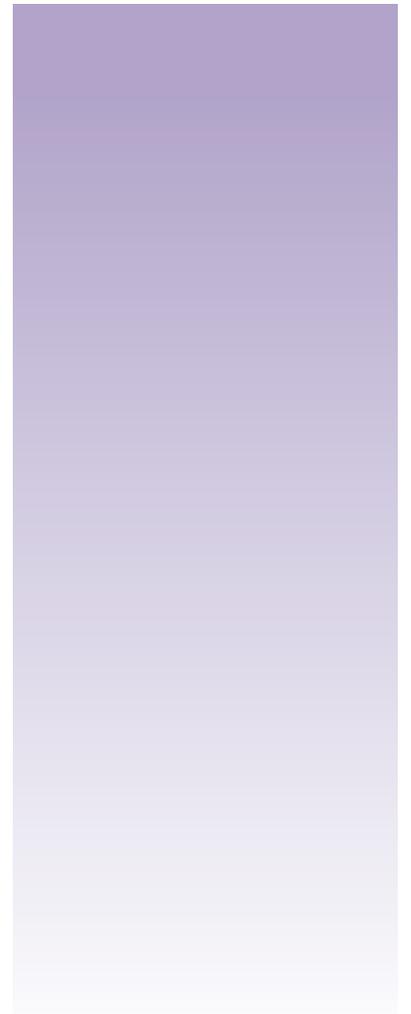


# Developing Critical Thinking

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## What It Is and What Research Can Tell Us

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Harris and Hodges (1995) define critical thinking as “the thought processes characteristic of creativity and criticism in literature and other arts; divergent thinking.” (p. 50). In most instances, there are no right or wrong answers in thinking critically or divergently about the ideas in text (as compared to convergent thinking, where there is always a “correct” answer). Critical-thinking abilities in reading instruction allow individuals to analyze, evaluate, and personally and creatively react to information presented in a text passage based on their own prior knowledge and past experiences.

With the shift to viewing reading as an active, creative, strategic, and problem-solving process, the topic of critical-thinking abilities as a goal in reading instruction has received renewed attention. In today’s world, literacy involves much more than merely comprehending ideas on a literal or factual level. It involves the ability to thoughtfully assess, analyze, react to, and evaluate ideas and arguments. Specific examples of critical-thinking abilities are hypothesizing, summarizing, inferring, judging, looking for assumptions, and imagining. The critical reader is a reflective thinker, who responds with healthy skepticism to the text and in effect asks, “So what?”

Critical thinking doesn’t develop by chance. If students are not instructed in thinking critically, they simply will not do so.

## Teacher Behaviors

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- Allocate sufficient instructional time for developing critical thinking.
- Explain, model, and demonstrate critical-thinking strategies to students.
- Scaffold or aid students in the application of a critical-thinking strategy.
- Monitor student progress.
- Be a critical reader yourself, and share this excitement with your students.

## Teaching Strategies

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1. *After reading a story, ask questions to tap higher-level thinking abilities.* While it is certainly easier to ask lower-level cognitive questions during story discussions, it is much more exciting and beneficial to students if they are routinely asked high-level questions. You should strive for a balance between low- and high-level questions during discussion periods.
2. *Directly or explicitly explain and model specific critical-thinking abilities,* such as summarizing and hypothesizing. Follow up with cooperative assignments that allow you to scaffold a particular critical-thinking ability with your students.
3. *Devise thinking assignments* for which students can apply their reading abilities. In such activities, students collect, organize, and criticize information on a topic of interest to them. In doing so, they must classify, interpret, and react critically to the information they read. A complete listing of thinking activities for all grade levels is found in the excellent book *Teaching for Thinking: Theory, Strategies,*

*and Activities for the Classroom* by Raths et al. (1986). Sample topics of creative assignments, which may be done individually or as group projects, include how humans study the weather; music of the 1970s; the lives and accomplishments of prominent Americans, such as Rosa Parks, General Colin Powell, Martin Luther King, Jr., former Interior Secretary Manuel Lujan, and President John F. Kennedy; oil and the Middle East; China today; and life in our city 50 years ago.

4. *When conducting a discussion with students, situations will develop in which the students must be redirected or put back on the right track.* They may need a question rephrased, or further elaboration, or they may need to be challenged to think critically. In such cases, give feedback with clarifying or probing questions. Clarifying questions are used to redirect and refine students' responses to a question. The following are examples of probing questions: "Are you sure you mean what you said?" "Can you give me another example?" "What are some other alternatives?" "Can you tell me more?" "What assumptions are you making?" "Can you explain why?" "Do you agree? Disagree? Why?"
5. *Use good literature, including multicultural books, with your students.* Gentile and McMillan (1989) recommend placing a greater emphasis on literature to promote higher-order thinking, especially with "at-risk" students. Their compelling rationale for using fine literary material is as follows:

Literature is the vehicle for helping "at-risk" students make sense out of and through written language. It provides them the means to apply skills contextually, using rich material that educates and entertains. Moreover, good literature is knowledge-based and furnishes these students a broad range of historical, geographical, political, scientific, mathematical, religious, biological, and literacy information. It stirs wonderment and imagination, facilitates these students' understanding of themselves and others and the world they live in, and offers them a sense of identity or control that can empower the spirit and motivate them to express their thoughts and feelings. (p. 12)

