

WHeReAS Heuristic of Critical Thinking¹

Pick anything you want to critique or challenge in a thoughtful way. Now what? Consider making these five challenges and working toward these five results.

Five Challenges	Five Results
<p>“Who?” In a phrase: <i>consider the source</i>. What you wish to critique has come from somewhere and someone. What are their processes and agendas? Are they free or fettered?</p> <p>But your critical thinking comes from <i>you</i>. Are <i>you</i> ready to perform a critique? Do <i>you</i> have the expertise and support that you need? Be honest with yourself about your own agenda and try to counter your own biases.</p>	<p>Reliable Sources You must satisfy yourself that the people involved, including you as a critical thinker appraising the situation, are reasonably informed and not dangerously biased. Besides the people, you also need reliable tools and other information sources.</p> <p>Cultivate your expertise, but also cultivate self-awareness and reasonable humility about your abilities. And learn the capabilities and limitations of the tools you apply.</p>
<p>“Huh?” Whatever you challenge, your first big question about it is <i>what does this mean?</i> Resist the urge to assume that you already know, because productive thinking can happen only in the absence of certainty. Consider alternative interpretations and framings.</p>	<p>Helpful Framing To spot problems and errors you must be able to see the matter clearly in your mind. Evidence and implications constitute puzzle pieces. You must put the puzzle together in a way allows you to persuade yourself and others that you understand the situation and what to do about it.</p>
<p>“Really?” A surprising amount of common knowledge is <i>wrong</i>. So, to think critically you must ask: Is it true? Is it real? How do we know? Look for the evidence. Evaluate the strength of that evidence. Look for counterexamples, too. Interview people, find original sources, or run experiments.</p>	<p>Sufficient Evidence You need not acquire all possible evidence to do an excellent job of critical thinking. You only need <i>enough</i>. How much is enough depends on the risks associated with being wrong. In criminal court, the standard is “beyond reasonable doubt.” What constitutes enough usually depends on who you are trying to persuade—and their particular beliefs and biases.</p>
<p>“And?” What’s the <i>whole</i> story? What haven’t you been told? What alternative methods, systems or options could there be? A big part of critical thinking is appreciating the context of the matter and reflecting on how things could be different.</p>	<p>Context and Alternatives Whatever you are considering, it exists in some setting. The setting may be physical, social, or conceptual—but there is always a setting; a context. And within that context there are alternative options or possibilities. The situation as it is may not be the only way it could be. To think critically is to explore these things.</p>
<p>“So?” Does any of this really <i>matter</i>? How does it matter? What’s the worst that can happen? Are different people affected in different ways? Will anyone profit from the losses of others? How do these problems compare to other problems that we take in our stride?</p>	<p>Reasonable Concerns A key outcome of critical thinking is to uncover problems; to spot mistakes and appreciate risks. Of course, we don’t need to think well to find things to complain about. Any child can complain. <i>Good</i> critical thinking results in a credible and persuasive critique—one that motivates skeptical people to make corrective action.</p>

¹ By James Bach and Michael Bolton. Copyright 2025, Satisfice, Inc.