

CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking does not mean to be critical of others or to think negatively. Instead, it refers to an ability to arrive at decisions through a systematic and logical process. Dr. Raymond S. Nickerson, professor of psychology at Tufts University, has listed numerous characteristics of the “critical thinker,” including the following:

- Uses evidence skillfully and impartially
- Organizes thoughts and articulates them concisely and coherently
- Distinguishes between logically valid and invalid inferences
- Can learn independently and has an abiding interest in doing so
- Can strip a verbal argument of irrelevancies and phrase it in its essential terms
- Habitually questions one’s own views and attempts to understand both the assumptions that are critical to those views and the implications of the views (Schafersman)

Competitive debate promotes all six of these elements as it pits argument against argument; through a process of trial and error, debaters learn the difference between strong and weak arguments. Ironically, many beginning debaters win every round of debate— from their perspectives, their arguments were vastly superior to their opponents. No matter that the judge awarded the win to their opponents. With more experience, however, debaters develop the ability to recognize when they have lost. Learning to recognize the strength of an opposing argument plays a major role in the cultivation of critical thinking skills.

LOVE FOR LEARNING

Too much of the educational process in contemporary American education involves teachers telling students *what* to think. Thus education becomes a dull process of memorizing mountains of facts. Competitive debate takes a different approach: it teaches students *how* to think. The thought process begins by gathering evidence with an open mind.

Most forms of competitive debate involve the switching of sides. Suppose that the national debate question is “Resolved: The United States federal government should regulate handguns.” Switching sides means that a debater will be called upon to advocate gun control in one round and to oppose it in the very next round. In the later rounds of a tournament, debaters toss a coin to determine whether they will support or oppose the debate resolution.

Switching sides produces numerous benefits. Prominent among these benefits is the ability to understand the arguments of an opponent. All of us have a tendency to