

Critical Thinking

This chapter looks at how debaters think and why these thinking skills are vital to success. That's not to say that all debaters should—or do—reach the same conclusions or share the same opinions. However, effective debaters think about the world in a critical manner and tend to apply that approach to their interactions with the world more generally. This chapter will also take a look at how this approach works.

The chapter begins with a definition of critical thinking in general terms and then develops that in terms of debate. It then looks at the skills involved in practical terms and how these are applied during a debate. Finally, it examines how the skills learned in the classroom and debating chamber transfer to the outside world.

Critical thinking is more an attitude than a set of skills, but it certainly encourages the use of particular skills that we shall examine as they relate to debating. As well as requiring critical thinking, debate also encourages its development and is thus a self-replicating process that allows the debater to test and improve her skills. By encouraging her to reflect on and criticize the opinions and arguments she hears, she is required to question ideas and practices that are taken for granted in her own society or elsewhere. Although it would be quite untrue to suggest that there are “right” opinions that the critical thinker must hold, it would certainly be possible to say that there are plenty of sloppy or ill-considered ones that she would likely reject. It would be unusual if the process of developing these skills did not lead the debater to question, refine, and, at times, reject her own assumptions about the world—and that is no bad thing.

What Is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking is the essential condition for living an examined life. It involves the disposition to reflect on the world and on our beliefs and to apply our reason to their examination.