

As a result, it encourages us to consider ideas and conclusions that might seem obvious but, when scrutinized rationally, become highly questionable. Often the very concepts we come to question are the assumptions on which we build other ideas about how the world works or should work.

When thinking critically, we might examine whether these ideas are compatible with each other and the world as we observe it, attempting to undertake that observation as dispassionately and rationally as possible. For the critical thinker, inconvenient truths must be accepted just as convenient or comfortable fallacies must be rejected. By applying reason and honesty to the world around us, we are able to build not only a clearer view of that world but a sharper vision of what it, and we, might become and how that change could be achieved.

What Is Critical Thinking in Debate?

For the debater, critical thinking requires the consideration not just of a statement or argument but also of the assumptions and intentions that underlie it and are contained within it. Frequently these assumptions may sound convincing, and we may wish to believe that they are true. Nevertheless, if a process of rational scrutiny is applied to every idea put forward in a debate and to the links between these ideas, and, equally, if ideas are examined through the lens of compatibility with each other, what appeared to be sensible and true is frequently revealed as being nothing more than pleasant-sounding words built on nothing of substance.

The process of debate is about testing the ideas at the heart of any given proposal. Each side of the debate has a critical role in that process, attempting to find ways of defending a particular course of action or set of values that are consistent both with each other and with the model of the world they assert is true. Every case that a debater puts forward can be thought of as a chain of evidence, logic, and conclusions (the evidence, warrant, claim model we looked at in Chapter 3). The role of the speakers on the other team is to test every link in that chain for flaws. The chain may look strong enough to pull the weight of the speaker's claims, but is it really? Of course, the debater uses other skills, eloquent speech among them, to try to persuade his audience, but the role of his opponents is to listen their way through all of these distractions to the underlying logic of the argument and then use critical thought to test whether it is actually true.

The next chapter looks at listening skills that are important to assessing what a speaker is actually saying, but, having got down to the core of their argument, it is the thinking