



Lesson 21: Critical thinking

This lesson encourages students to think more deeply about information they read or hear, and about problems and situations they may encounter.

Level: Intermediate and above (equivalent to CEF level B1 and above)

Time: 60-90 mins

How to use this lesson:

This lesson is designed to be done in class. Try to allow plenty of time for students to discuss the different points that are raised.

Worksheet A

1 Read the text and find the word or phrase

This first exercise introduces some key vocabulary for the lesson, so take the time to explain any words that students are unfamiliar with. Allow 3-4 minutes for students to complete the task. Those who finish quickly can compare their answers with a partner.

Answers

- 1 evaluate
- 2 observing
- 3 consider
- 4 reason
- 5 on impulse
- 6 prejudice

2 Do you trust what you hear?

This exercise looks at how we get information about the world, and introduces the idea of questioning what we hear – an important step in critical thinking. Begin by pointing out that we cannot always trust what we see, read or hear. Ask students to fill in as much information as possible in answer to the questions. Allow up to five minutes for this, telling students to compare notes with a partner as they finish.

When everyone has had a chance to discuss their answers with a partner, get feedback from the class and conduct a discussion on the information about world events that we hear and see. For each point, ask students to give you examples. You can prompt them with further questions, e.g.

- 1 *How important is it to see film footage of news events?*
- 2 *Which newspapers or websites have a good/bad reputation?*
- 3 *How important is it to keep up to date with what's happening in the world?*
- 4 *What is the difference between reading and watching the news?*
- 5 *What affects the way a story is reported (think about politics and sensationalism)?*
- 6 *If someone told you about a major event, would you believe them? How would you check it?*
- 7 *A lot of information on the Internet is unreliable; how can we check?*
- 8 *Have you ever been fooled by something you've seen online?*

Finally, refer students back to the text in exercise 1 and ask them to tell you what aspects of critical thinking we should use when processing information such as news. Elicit some or all of the following points:

We should observe and evaluate, before considering the information.

We should use reason, and not act on impulse or be affected by prejudice (ours or anyone else's).



Lesson 21: Critical thinking

Worksheet B

- 3 Put students in pairs and ask them to consider the two articles and discuss the differences in the way they are reported. After about five minutes, ask pairs to give their opinions. Elicit some of the following points:

Article A is written in a sensationalist style. The headline is not very objective. The article contains emotional language (draw attention to the words *shocking*, *deadly* and *miraculously*). The use of capitals is designed to shock. The amount of damage (*thousands of pounds' worth*) gives an impression of exaggeration. The final two sentences are opinion-based, rather than fact-based.

Article B is more objective and appears to report the facts more responsibly, with none of the writer's opinion. You might want to point out to the class that a key element of critical thinking is the ability to separate fact from opinion.

- 4 Tell the class that one important part of critical thinking involves considering things that are not mentioned. Ask the class to try to think of information that might have led to the crime being committed and the offender receiving a prison sentence. After pairs or groups have had the chance to talk, elicit suggestions. If necessary, prompt with the following:

We aren't told the reason for the crime – it may have been a medical emergency.

The second report says he took the car without permission. It's possible that the car belonged to a friend or relative and he often used it. If permission wasn't given this time, then he only technically 'stole' it, as reported in article A.

We don't know that he put anyone's life in danger – it might have been in the middle of the night when there was no one around. Equally, the severe punishment might be because it was in a built-up area or near a school.

We aren't told about any previous offences – they might explain why he was sent to prison. Also, he may have been (suspected of) driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. He might also have used threatening language or behaviour when arrested. It's also possible that he tried to deny the offences, or that he showed no remorse for them.

There is no reliable evidence to support the idea that he was driving too fast. The crash may have been caused by bad weather conditions. He might have crashed while avoiding an oncoming car, a pedestrian or an animal.

The judge in this trial might be particularly strict, with a 'zero-tolerance' approach to crime, or to young people who commit crimes.

Finally, ask the class what we know for sure about the crime (*he was uninsured, he didn't have the owner's permission to take the car, and he crashed, causing damage*). Ask students if any of the 'missing' information should influence our views on the crime and the punishment the teenager received.

- 5 **Are you telling the truth?**

This is a game in which students try to determine whether other people are telling the truth or telling a lie. Begin by asking the class if they can easily tell when someone is lying to them. How? What are the signs to look for?

Ask students to work alone initially. Explain that each student should write down two facts about themselves that are a little unusual, or that few people know. What they write should only be a short statement – about a sentence in length. Help your students by writing these suggested categories on the board: FOOD, HABITS, FEARS, EVENTS, EXPERIENCES, HIDDEN TALENTS, SOMEONE I KNOW.

Then give examples for each one, e.g.

FOOD: *I once put chocolate in my soup.*

HABITS: *The latest I go to bed is 10:30. / I always carry with me. / When I'm alone, I often ...*

FEARS: *To overcome my fear of ..., I once ... / I am scared of ...*

EVENTS: *I once met ... / I once spent a night ... /*

EXPERIENCES: *I have never ... / I have been to ... / A long time ago, I ...*

HIDDEN TALENTS: *I can dance classical ballet. / I know how to ...*

SOMEONE I KNOW: *My friend has ... / My uncle can ... / I know someone who ...*



Lesson 21: Critical thinking

Students should also write down two lies about themselves (explain that they should be believable). They can use some of the ideas above to help them think about what to write. Explain that they will be questioned on their lies, so they need to be prepared for them and they have to make their story sound convincing. They can check their ideas with you, but make sure none of the other students can hear.

Next, put the class into two groups and tell them who is going to go first. (Note that this works best if the class is split into two teams, but for very large classes, it might be more practical to have four or six teams. In this case, choose two teams to start while the other teams just listen).

One member from Team A reads out a statement, without saying whether it is the truth or a lie. Team B asks questions (e.g. *When did this happen? Why did you go there? Why do you always carry a torch with you?* etc.) before declaring whether they think it is the truth or a lie. In larger classes you might want to set a time limit of two minutes for questioning. The person who read out the initial statement says whether they are right or not. Then a member from Team B has a turn. Points are scored when a team correctly guesses whether they have been told the truth or a lie.

Keep playing until each member has had two turns (each player can choose to tell two lies, two 'truths' or one of each).

After the game has finished, ask students what helped them detect the lies and what thought processes helped them correctly guess that something was true. You could expand the discussion to include how critical thinking helps us reach conclusions about the truth.

- 6 Explain that advertisers use a variety of methods to get us to part with our money, and that many of us have to use critical thinking on a regular basis. Go through the task and the example with the class, making sure everyone understands what they have to do.

Allow up to five minutes for students to look through the list, telling them to discuss their views with a partner as they finish.

Elicit responses from the class, encouraging as many students as possible to contribute.

Suggested answers/prompts

- 2 This is similar to item 1 with the addition of the time factor (Will the food reach its expiry date before you have time to use it?). Of course, if you don't like that particular food, it isn't a bargain however cheap it is.
- 3 Fitting solar panels to the roof of your house can reduce your electricity bills but involves a big investment. The key question is: How long will it be before the investment pays for itself in terms of free energy? In some cases, this might be a hundred years (How long do we expect to live?). Alternatively, some people might argue that they do it to save the environment, and we cannot put a price on that.
- 4 A 10% discount if you spend £100 or more at the supermarket is only a bargain if you *planned* to spend that much. If you find yourself buying more things in order to reach £100, then you are spending more, rather than saving (and you are doing exactly what the supermarket wants you to do).
- 5 An 'All you can eat' buffet is very appealing to some and, if you have a big appetite, it can indeed be a bargain. However, it encourages overeating and can leave you feeling uncomfortable, rather than pleasantly satisfied. Some would argue that the quality of the food is more important than the quantity.
- 6 A second-hand car can come with a range of problems that might prove very expensive to fix. It would help to know the car's service history, how many miles/kilometres it has done, and how many owners it has had. Most people also choose to pay a mechanic to make sure it hasn't been in a serious accident that is not immediately obvious (this could also hide the need for expensive repair work later on). The car could be very uneconomical to run, and that's why the owner is selling. There is also the possibility that the car is stolen, which could lead to legal matters and the possibility that you will lose the car *and* your money.
- 7 Coupons offering money off are only really a bargain if you were *planning* to pay for that product or service anyway. There is also the possibility that you might find it cheaper elsewhere if you shop around.
- 8 A cheap re-conditioned computer might do the job you need it for but it could also break down. Is there a guarantee or a warranty? For how long? If the technology is more than a year or two old, there is the danger that it will be out of date very soon, or it won't be compatible with some programs or other equipment.

Further prompts could include:

- ▶ An all-inclusive holiday (you stay at a resort where everything, including food and drink, is included in the price of the package);
- ▶ Free soft drinks if you buy an extra large pizza or a children's meal;
- ▶ A travel pass (e.g. a monthly rail card), season ticket (e.g. to watch a team) or subscription (e.g. to a magazine or service).



Lesson 21: Critical thinking

Finally, ask students to give you examples of these things in their own country. Has anyone bought something that they later found to be worth less than they thought? What critical thinking processes do they go through before paying for something?

Optional extra activity – Problem solving

To allow your students more practice at critical thinking, you could do the following activity, which works in four stages.

- 7 Explain that there are no right or wrong answers here, but that you would like students to discuss the questions in pairs and be prepared to answer some of them as a class. (Some students might find some of the questions sensitive, so don't insist that they discuss *all* the questions.) Allow up to five minutes for pairs to ask and answer the questions before eliciting a variety of answers from the class as a whole, allowing it to develop into a class discussion. Encourage students to use language and ideas from the lesson.
 1. Read out one of the problems below and give students exactly 20 seconds to note down their answer working alone (be strict with the timing but make sure students know what you want them to write, which is the first thing they think of).
 2. With students still working alone, give them a further minute or two to add any other explanations or solutions they can think of.
 3. Put students in pairs and ask them to work together on the problem and try to come up with fresh explanations or solutions. Allow 2-3 minutes for this.
 4. Collect ideas from the class and emphasise the variety of answers. Encourage students to notice the difference between their first (impulsive) answer and the other answers the class came up with. Point out how answers differ in the four stages.

Follow steps 1-4 above for the problems/situations below. The information in brackets is given as a guide – students may come up with different answers. By employing critical thinking (and by collaborating with others) we are usually able to think of more possibilities – sometimes many more – and can often come up with better explanations or solutions to problems.

Problem/Situation: A friend suggests that you move to their town. What do you need to know about the place?

(In stage 1, students may initially note down something about the location or whether they would like it. In stage 4, elicit or suggest ideas such as: How far away is it? / Will you be able to visit relatives? / Is it better than where you live now? / Will you find work or a place to study? / Is it near the countryside or is it built-up? / What are transport links like? / What about shops and services? / Is accommodation expensive? / Is it a nice place to bring up children? etc.)

Problem/Situation: There is a bus strike tomorrow and you don't want to miss your English lesson. The distance is about five kilometres. How will you get there?

(In stage 1, students may initially suggest walking or taking a taxi. In stage 4, elicit or suggest ideas such as: You could arrange to get a lift with someone / borrow a car / use a bicycle / take the train and walk the rest of the way etc. Another solution would be to stay at home and ask someone else to take notes for you. A very creative idea would be to set up a video link.)

Problem/Situation: There is enough land on the Earth for people to have plenty of space. Why do so many live in cramped conditions?

(In stage 1, students may initially note down that people want to live near civilisation. In stage 4, elicit or suggest ideas such as: There is a need to be near amenities like shops, schools and hospitals. / Much of the earth is mountainous or ice or desert. / People need to be somewhere where they can find work. / People want to stay in their country of birth etc.)

Problem/Situation: You need to amuse some young children and all you have is two big boxes filled with paper and coloured pens. What can you do with them?

(In stage 1, students may initially suggest asking the children to draw and colour pictures. In stage 4, elicit or suggest ideas such as: You could play counting games with the pens / make some things with the paper / teach them the English words for colours / use the boxes to build something etc.)

Problem/Situation: You think that someone has been in your room while you were out but you aren't sure. What evidence should you look for?

(In stage 1, students may initially note down that something has been moved or is missing. In stage 4, elicit or suggest ideas such as: There may be a smell of after shave in the room / A light might have been switched on or off / There might be muddy footprints on the floor or fingerprints on the window or computer screen / The computer might still be warm / Something might have been left behind etc.)



Lesson 21: Critical thinking

Problem/Situation: You are in a lecture and you want to remember some important details but you have forgotten to bring a pen. What do you do?

(In stage 1, students may initially suggest borrowing a pen. In stage 4, elicit or suggest ideas such as: You could memorise the important points / ask someone to lend you their notes afterwards / take a photo of someone's notes on your phone / record the lecture on your phone etc.)

Problem/Situation: A student in your class never does any homework. Why is this?

(In stage 1, students may initially note down that the student is lazy or has no time. In stage 4, elicit or suggest ideas such as: The student has problems at home / has recently suffered an illness or a change in circumstances / has an undiagnosed learning difficulty / has had to take on a part-time job / is suffering from a lack of motivation etc. For each suggestion, ask students to think of ways to approach the problem.)

(This activity can also be set as homework with students preparing answers to 3 or 4 problems/situations)

And finally!

The lateral thinking puzzle below relies on our prejudice – one of the biggest obstacles to critical thinking – but don't tell your students that until the end! Try it on your class. Read out the situation and tell students to ask questions (you can only answer yes or no).

Situation

The police break into a house to arrest a murderer. All they know is that his name is John and that he is inside the house. The police find a carpenter, a lorry driver, a mechanic and a fireman in the house, all playing cards around a table. Immediately they arrest the fireman. How did they know he was the killer?

Answer

The carpenter, the lorry driver and the mechanic were all women.



Lesson 21: Critical thinking

Worksheet A

1 Read the text and find the word or phrase which means:

(Paragraph 1)

1 *decide on the importance of something* _____

2 *looking or seeing* _____

3 *think about* _____

(Paragraph 2)

4 *logic* _____

5 *without thinking* _____

6 *pre-formed opinions* _____

What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking helps us to understand whether something is true or false. We use it to evaluate information, and to decide whether we can trust it. We often start by observing a situation, carefully putting together all the information we can find. Then, using our knowledge and experience, we consider all the facts.

When we want to find an explanation for something or a solution to a problem, it is important to use reason. Two things that can get in the way of critical thinking are acting on impulse (which doesn't allow us enough time to think critically, and often leads to bad decisions) and prejudice (sometimes we think we already know the answer, or we know something about a person, for example, but we are mistaken).

2 Do you trust what you hear? (Fill in the information about you and compare with a partner).

1 Where do you normally hear the news (e.g. on TV, on the radio, online, from a newspaper, etc.)? _____

2 Name a newspaper or a website that you often use for the news. How often do you use it? _____

3 What kind of news reports interest you the most (e.g. national/international news, entertainment news, financial news)?

4 Have you ever read or heard the same news story from more than one source (e.g. on TV and in a newspaper)? Was there any difference? _____

5 Do you believe what you hear or read on the news? Why / Why not? _____

6 Do you generally believe other people when they tell you about events? _____

7 What about viral videos on the Internet – how do you react to them? Do you usually believe them to be true? _____

8 Give an example of a photo or a story you have seen online that you know is a hoax. _____



Lesson 21: Critical thinking

Worksheet B

3 Read the two news articles and, with a partner, discuss which of them you think is better reported. Give reasons.

Article A

Get these people off our streets

The shocking behaviour of 18-year-old Jordan Templar left the judge with no choice but to send him to prison for two months. The court heard how, in May, Templar stole a car and drove it at deadly speeds, eventually crashing into NINE parked cars, causing thousands of pounds' worth of damage. Templar, who was not insured, was also banned from driving for four years. After miraculously avoiding killing anyone, Templar has got what he deserves. Let's hope they consider the safety of the public before they let him out again.

Article B

Prison for teenager

18-year-old uninsured driver, Jordan Templar was yesterday given a two-month prison sentence and a four-year ban for dangerous driving. The prison sentence follows an incident on May 24th when Templar took a car without permission before crashing into a line of parked vehicles. The damage to the vehicles was estimated at around £2,000.

4 In pairs or small groups, talk about the information that could be missing from the two articles. Report your ideas to the class. You can use some of the phrases below.

He might/could/may (not) (have) ...

The car might belong to ...

There might have been ...

It's possible that ...

We don't know ...

He might have been sent to prison because ...

Perhaps/Maybe ...

5 **Game: Are you telling the truth?**

- ▶ Write down two unusual facts about yourself and two things that are not true but could be true (your teacher will give you some ideas).
- ▶ In teams, take turns telling the truth or a lie. The other team can ask you questions about it and you should either answer honestly (if it was true) or make up details (if it was a lie).



Lesson 21: Critical thinking

6 Critical thinking is something that we use when buying things. Look at the following and discuss whether they are good value. Which factors do you need to consider before you can evaluate whether or not you are getting a bargain? There is an example at the beginning.

1 A 'Two for the price of one' special offer on shampoo

'Two for the price of one' sounds like a good deal but you need to be sure that the price is also low – the shop may have very high prices and you could perhaps find the same shampoo for less than half-price somewhere else. Of course, the shampoo is not a bargain if you don't use that brand or if it isn't suitable for your hair type. (You could, of course, be buying it for someone else, in which case, you need to think about how appropriate it is to give shampoo as a gift!)

2 A 'Two for the price of one' special offer on a food item

3 Fitting solar panels to the roof of your house

4 10% discount if you spend £100 or more at the supermarket

5 An 'All you can eat' buffet (eat all you want for a fixed price)

6 A second-hand car at a very low price

7 Coupons offering money off

8 A cheap re-conditioned computer

7 In pairs, discuss some of the following questions.

Did you do any critical thinking today? What about?

Have you worked out any solutions to problems recently? How did you reach the solution?

What news stories have you read/heard recently? How truthful do you think they were?

Do you think you know how to tell if someone is lying? Can you give examples?

What are the biggest weaknesses in your thinking – for example, are you always thinking negatively, do you act on impulse, or do you have pre-formed ideas about things?

What role do you think critical thinking plays in:

- ▶ your studies?
- ▶ your career?
- ▶ your relationships?