

# Critical Thinking IN ENGLISH

FIRST BOOK 



# Critical Thinking in English

English classrooms offer many opportunities for developing critical thinking skills because close reading of texts and persuasive writing require analysis, interpretation, and the presentation of informed opinions.

Critical thinking requires us to use our imagination, seeing things from perspectives other than our own and envisioning the likely consequences of our position.

BELL HOOKS, AUTHOR & ACTIVIST

## Best Practices: Critical Thinking in Reading

Reading with care and attention is the first step in thinking critically about texts. Analyzing and reflecting on what they read encourages students to:

- Empathize with diverse experiences
- Analyze the author's perspective
- Ask profound ethical and philosophical questions
- Accept ambiguity

One way to encourage critical thinking is by asking open-ended questions rather than ones with one right answer. If questions are too focused, students may prioritize providing the correct answer over genuinely reflecting on their personal reading experience and relationship with the text.

Instead of asking students to identify metaphors and other rhetorical devices at the beginning of a lesson, begin by asking about their reading experience:

- What was your first impression of the text?
- How did it make you feel?
- Why do you think the writing produced that feeling?

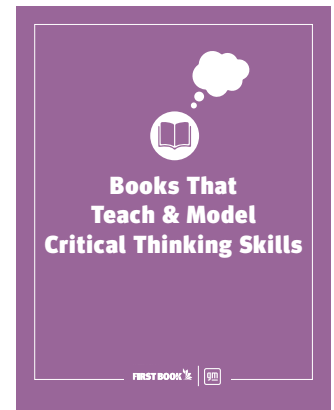
After students have shared their subjective reactions and interpretations, discuss how rhetorical devices and literary styles contributed to their reading experience.

Similarly, before asking about the author’s tone, point of view, or historical context, ask:

- Did you identify with the author? In what ways?
- What did the text tell you — or make you wonder — about the author’s identity and perspective?

Across all ages and subjects, books are one of the best ways to engage students’ critical thinking skills.

Reading requires perspective-taking, analysis, and judgment. Explore a [PreK-12 reading list](#) curated by First Book’s Title Selection Team for inspiring and engaging books that encourage students to read and think critically.



## Best Practices: Critical Thinking in Writing

Writing can be an exercise in determining and refining what we think, offering the opportunity to reevaluate initial impressions, provide evidence, and make deeper connections.

### OPEN-ENDED WRITING PROMPTS

Below are examples of open-ended writing prompts that ask students to reflect on their values, consider different perspectives, and make judgments — all elements of critical thinking.

#### ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

- Consider the Big Bad Wolf’s perspective in *The Three Little Pigs* and re-write the story from his perspective.
- If you could create your own community, what features would it have? How would it be different from or similar to your actual community?
- You wake up tomorrow with a silly superpower that makes you famous. What is that silly power? What would you do?
- What are examples of things you want versus things you need?

#### MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL

- Should video games be considered a sport?
- Should schools offer cash bonuses for good test scores?
- What do the five friends you hang out with most have in common? How are you most like them? How are you different from them?
- How has technology made your life easier? How has it made things harder?

Find additional prompts on [Edutopia](#) and [New York Times Learning Network](#).

## Lessons & Activities

The following strategies strengthen students' attention to detail and analytical skills and can be adapted to complement existing reading and writing assignments.

### ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

#### BACKWARDS THINKING

Backwards thinking is a creative way to engage critical thinking and assess content knowledge. Provide an “answer” and ask students to produce a question – like on Jeopardy! For example, for *Charlotte’s Web*, the answer might be *Templeton*. Students need to think of an appropriate question such as, “Who helped save Wilbur even though he didn’t really like him?” or “What’s the name of the rat that lived in the barn?”



#### COMMON CORE CONNECTION

**ELA: Reading: Key Ideas and Details**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.1 Ask and answer such questions as *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

#### WHAT CAN YOU TELL FROM A BOOK COVER?

What Can You Tell from a Book Cover? asks students to consider book cover illustrations, make connections to prior knowledge, determine the target audience, and notice their emotional responses to visual messages. Book covers are included, and the lesson can be adapted to include other texts.



#### COMMON CORE CONNECTION

**ELA: Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.7 Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.7 Explain how specific aspects of a text’s illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting).



**I love hypothetical questions [in creative writing] because there is no answer key. Students are free to think on their own, which sparks curiosity and helps them with their communication skills as well as their thought process.**



FIRST BOOK EDUCATOR

DOROTHY, FIRST BOOK EDUCATOR AND SCHOOL COUNSELOR

## MIDDLE SCHOOL

### SOCRATIC QUESTIONS

Whether practicing persuasive writing or literary analysis, using Socratic questions will help students refine their arguments and practice metacognition.

Try these frameworks and strategic questions during group discussions or when providing feedback on students' papers.

**Clarifying thinking:** Why do you say that? What do you mean by...? Could you explain that further? What is the main issue?

**Identifying assumptions:** Is that always the case? Can we make this assumption in this context? Can you confirm or disprove this assumption?

**Critiquing evidence:** Why does this evidence support your argument? Is there reason to doubt it? Considering other viewpoints and perspectives: What is the counterargument for your position? Could someone see this in another way?

**Thinking through implications and consequences:** What generalizations can you make? How does this affect...? How does this tie in with what we learned before?

**Questioning the questions:** Why was that question important? Which of your questions turned out to be the most useful? How does this apply to everyday life?



#### COMMON CORE CONNECTION

##### ELA: Writing: Text Types and Processes

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.1 Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.1.a Introduce claim(s) and organize the reasons and evidence clearly.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.1.b Support claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.

## HIGH SCHOOL

### IDENTIFYING FALLACIES

Fallacies are common errors in reasoning or logic. Learning to identify fallacies in their thinking and writing will strengthen students' reasoning and persuasive writing skills. Try these strategies with students to help them identify fallacies and biases in their writing.

- Pretend you disagree with the conclusions in your paper. What assumptions did you make that need more evidence or reconsideration? What are the weakest parts of your argument? Revise your writing by focusing on those parts.
- List your main points. For each one, list the relevant evidence. Presenting your claims and evidence in this format will bring attention to holes in your argument.

- Review the several types of fallacies. Which ones, if any, do you tend to use? Noticing a pattern in your thinking and writing makes it easier to catch a fallacy before it makes it into your writing.
- Scan your paper for broad claims that need more evidence and data. Review your paper and highlight words like *all*, *no*, *none*, *every*, *always*, *never*, *no one*, and *everyone*. These words generally need more proof than claims that use words like *some*, *many*, *few*, *sometimes*, and *usually*.
- Review how you refer to differing opinions and opposing conclusions. Do you present them in a fair and accurate light?



### COMMON CORE CONNECTION

#### ELA: Writing: Text Types and Purposes

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1.a Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that establishes clear relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1.b Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly, supplying evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level and concerns.

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### Sources

[How to Teach Critical Thinking | The Reboot Foundation](#)

[Critical Thinking Skills for Kids \(& How to Teach Them\) | We Are Teachers](#)

[Socratic Questions | Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning | Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning | University of Connecticut](#)

[The Writing Center | University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#)

**The best part of writing is not the communication of knowledge to other people, but the acquisition and synthesizing of knowledge for oneself.**

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