# CRITICAL THINKING

## The Parent of Good Writing

### Abstract
This white paper defines critical thinking and discusses the role critical thinking plays in writing.

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# Critical Thinking: The Parent of Good Writing

Anyone who can develop a software program can learn to write well. Anyone who can design a machine, a drug, or an ad campaign can learn to write well. Anyone who can create a marketing plan, an inventory system, or an investment strategy can learn to write well. Anyone who can manage a staff, command troops, or deal with customers can learn to write well.

Anyone, in fact, who can do any of the thousands of demanding jobs required in the 21st century workplace can learn to write well.

How can we be so sure of this? Because the one skill necessary to do any complex job is also the one skill central to writing well. What is that skill? The ability to think critically.
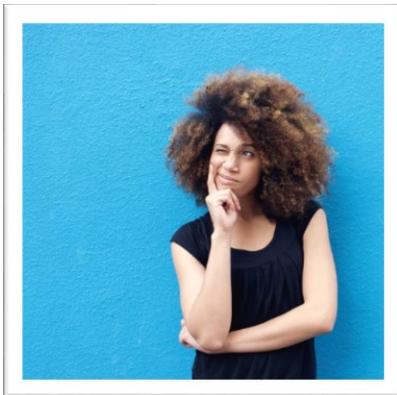


**Critical thinking** is the process of identifying and solving problems by gathering information, analyzing and evaluating evidence, discovering patterns, and reasoning logically. Critical thinking means asking the right questions and questioning the old, no-longer-obvious answers. It means, in the end, finding solutions that are effective and efficient—and, often, new.

Your employees already know how to think critically. If they didn't, they couldn't do their jobs. Given some basic direction, they can learn to apply their critical-thinking skills to their writing projects just as they do to all their other responsibilities. Writing is not some mystery that only those with some rare magical talent can unravel. Once your employees understand that they already have the one important skill they need to write well, you'll find that, when you ask them to produce documents for you, they will work more efficiently, effectively, and confidently.

## Here's How It Works:

Let's say that you ask one of your employees to write a recommendation report. In this report she is to consider whether your company should change the vendor who provides the paper for your copying machines, printers, and paper publications. The report will recommend either staying with the old vendor or choosing a new one. How should this writer proceed? That's where critical thinking comes in.

The first thing we recommend is that the report writer consider two basic questions: 1) Who will read the report? and 2) What is the purpose of the report? If the only answers the writer can come up with are "my boss" and "to help my boss choose a paper vendor," she's not thinking critically. It's likely, for example, that the report will have <u>many</u> readers: the CEO, the CFO, the COO, the chief procurement officer, even some department heads who use a lot of paper. The **purpose** of the report may likewise be a bit more complex: it may be used, for example, not just to help in the paper-buying decision, but also as a

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model for future recommendation reports about other vendors, and its recommendation will certainly influence the work of many others in the workplace (anyone, for example, who will have to make copies with cheap but inferior paper, if that's the recommendation). And, of course, another purpose of the document is to make the writer's supervisor appreciate her reliability, thoroughness, and intelligence.

## A writer should also ask and answer other questions:

**What information should be included?** Cost and quality of paper, of course, but what about payment schedules, customer service, warranties, vendors' histories and reputations, recycling strategies, and so on? What information is relevant, and what isn't?

**What sources of information should the writer consult?** The Internet? Vendors' sales staffs? Fellow employees? The opinions of other companies like the writer's own?

**What level of technical sophistication should the report assume about its readers?** For example, can the writer assume that her readers will understand the difference between, say, 20-weight/96-bright paper and 24-weight/92-bright paper?

**What's the best way to present information?** Should pricing information, for example, be presented in paragraph form, in charts, or in tables? Should testimonials from other companies about potential vendors be presented in bulleted lists or in paragraphs?

A good writer, thinking critically, asks (and answers) these and many other questions. For example: **How should the report be organized? How should it be designed? What tone and level of language sophistication should the document display?**

Only someone practiced in thinking critically knows to raise and answer such questions.

You'll notice that none of these questions says anything about subject-verb agreement, active verbs, parallel structure, sentence fragments, or commas. It's true that proper grammar and punctuation, and an effective style, are important in any document, but far more important is the critical thinking that goes into it. The best grammar and the most stylish writing in the world are not of much use if the content and design of a document are not appropriate to the task—if they don't make the document **persuasive and usable** for its **audience and purpose**. And that comes back to critical thinking.

With training, any employee can learn to apply his or her critical-thinking skills to writing. overall, your employees should understand that they already have the one skill central to writing well: the ability to analyze a problem and come up with an effective solution.

**One final note:** Studies show that critical thinking informs all good writing, and, perhaps surprisingly, that **the act of writing improves one's ability to think critically.** Most professional writers—and many successful corporate executives who are not, first and foremost, writers—will tell you that writing is thinking. More

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often than not, a writer doesn't really know what he thinks until he has tried to express something in writing. Only then can he examine the idea critically, consider its implications, question its validity, and begin to think about how to refine it or whether to throw it away and start over with a new idea. You can begin to solve many a workplace problem by first stating the problem clearly in writing and, second, writing down possible solutions or avenues to a solution. In this way, even if no one else ever sees what you've written, you're well on the way to the achieving the kind of clear critical thinking that solves problems—the kind of thinking essential in the modern workplace.

Do you need help analyzing your teams' writing process? Or are you interested in improving your teams' writing skills? We offer customized onsite and online business, technical, and scientific writing course. Contact us today!

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