Critical Thinking

Building Healthy Decision-Making Skills

Lessons for upper elementary students aged 8-11

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Critical Thinking – Teacher/Parent Guide

Learning Objectives

By the end of these lessons, students will be able to:

1. Explain and apply critical thinking as a process for making thoughtful, informed decisions in school, friendships, and daily life.
2. Practice making healthy choices by weighing pros and cons, considering consequences, and seeking input when needed.
3. Use structured problem-solving strategies to analyze challenges, evaluate options, and select solutions.
4. Identify and interpret patterns, evidence, and logic across subjects (math, reading, science, and social interactions).
5. Reflect on their own thinking and decision-making by evaluating what worked, what didn't, and how to improve future choices.

Learning Rationale

Children between ages 8 and 11 are in a dynamic stage of cognitive and social development:

They are moving from concrete thinking toward more abstract reasoning.

They are making more independent and impactful choices (friend groups, online activities, study habits).

They are increasingly aware of patterns, fairness, and perspective.

Reflection becomes more sophisticated.

By nurturing these skills in upper elementary, we strengthen their ability to navigate social challenges, engage deeply with academics, and build resilience for middle school and beyond. Critical thinking at this stage becomes less about "asking questions" and more about using reasoning, evidence, and reflection to make smart, ethical, and confident choices.

Critical Thinking – Teacher/Parent Guide

Introduction for the Teacher/Parent

Critical thinking is how we make sense of the world—by asking questions, weighing evidence, and making thoughtful choices. For upper elementary students, critical thinking becomes especially important. They are becoming more independent, handling more responsibility, and making decisions that affect not only themselves, but also their friendships, learning, and daily life.

Students in grades 3–5 are ready to:

- Think more deeply before acting by asking themselves, "What are my options?"
- Consider consequences and make healthy choices they can be proud of.
- Use logic, patterns, and evidence to solve academic and real-life problems.
- Practice fairness, kindness, and perspective-taking when working with others.
- Reflect on their thinking by asking, "What worked? What could I try differently next time?"

By practicing these skills now, students strengthen the habits that lead to academic success, confident decision-making, and positive relationships. Critical thinking in upper elementary sets the stage for middle school and beyond—where strong reasoning, reflection, and problem-solving will become essential.

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- **Pre-Assessment** – A quick check of what students already know and how they think about decision-making.
- **Lesson 1: Understanding Critical Thinking** – Explore what critical thinking means and why it's an important skill in everyday life.
- **Lesson 2: The Power of Critical Thinking** – Discover how careful thinking helps us make smarter choices, solve problems, and strengthen relationships.
- **Lesson 3: Finding Clues and Patterns** – Practice using logic, evidence, and patterns to solve puzzles, academic problems, and social challenges.
- **Lesson 4: Making Healthy Choices** – Learn how to make responsible decisions by considering options, consequences, and fairness.
- **Lesson 5: Critical Thinkers Reflect** – Strengthen metacognition by looking back on our decisions, learning from mistakes, and improving future choices.
- **Post-Assessment** – Reflect on how students' understanding and use of critical thinking has grown.

Critical Thinking – Teacher/Parent Guide

Using this Critical Thinking Pack

This pack is designed to be student-centered and developmentally appropriate for grades 3–5. To make teaching easier, you will see symbols throughout the lessons that guide you on what to read, what to prepare, and how to lead activities.f the lesson to the next.

Learning Objectives: This symbol shows the goals for each lesson so you and your students know what skills they are building.

Anchor Text: This symbol highlights a suggested picture book to use with the lesson. Anchor texts are optional, but free read-alouds for each book can be found on YouTube if you don't have a copy.

The Lesson: This symbol marks the start of the student lesson. Here you'll find clear explanations of the ideas and concepts to introduce before moving into activities.

Activities: This symbol signals the start of a new activity. Activities are designed to help students practice and apply what they've learned, while also extending their critical thinking around each lesson topic.

Challenge: This symbol marks an extension or more advanced option that you can use to push student thinking further or add extra depth to the activity.

Discussion/Reflection Question: This symbol marks a thought-provoking question to ask the whole class. These questions are designed to spark conversation and deepen understanding.

CRITICAL THINKING PRE-ASSESSMENT
Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Learning Objectives

By the end of the pre-assessment activity, students will:

1. Share what they already know (or think they know) about “thinking” and “making choices.”
2. Demonstrate their current ability to ask questions, notice patterns, and solve small problems.
3. Reflect on how they make decisions in everyday life.

Learning Rationale

The pre-assessment is not a test — it’s a tool for discovering how students already approach choices, problem-solving, and reasoning. At this stage, children are beginning to think more abstractly, compare perspectives, and justify their ideas. Understanding their starting point helps set up richer, more tailored learning experiences.

This starting point will:

- Guide instruction – Teachers/parents can see how students naturally explain their decisions and adapt lessons with examples that connect to their everyday lives.
- Identify misconceptions early – Many upper elementary students may believe there’s only one “right” way to solve a problem, or that good choices should always be easy or obvious.
- Highlight student reasoning – Instead of just sharing answers, students are encouraged to explain how they got there, giving insight into their thought process.
- Track growth over time – Comparing pre- and post-assessments will reveal how students’ reasoning, reflection, and confidence as decision-makers develop throughout the unit.

Because “thinking about thinking” can feel abstract, the activities in this pre-assessment use scenarios, choices with consequences, and logic-based puzzles. This allows students to share their thinking in ways that feel concrete and relevant, while also reducing the pressure of being “right” or “wrong.”

CRITICAL THINKING PRE-ASSESSMENT
Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Lesson Plan

1. Read each statement aloud slowly and point to the response icons (smiley, thinking face, and an upset/confused face).
    - Make sure students understand that they are showing how much they agree or know about the statement.
    - Encourage honesty—there are no “correct” answers at this stage.

2. Clarify the format: Students can circle or color the box that matches their answer. If doing in a group, you can have them point to a face on the page or a large visual in the room.

3. Optional discussion:
    - After each statement, you may ask for brief examples but avoid correcting them yet—just listen and note answers.
    - Keep it light and exploratory. The goal is to learn what they think, not to teach in this step.

4. Record insights: Consider jotting down brief notes of their responses so you can look back during the post-assessment to see changes in understanding.

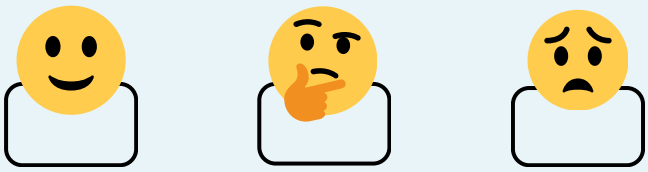
5. Set the tone: Let students know that by the end of the lessons, they’ll have learned new things about critical thinking, and it’s perfectly fine if their answers change later.

CRITICAL THINKING PRE-ASSESSMENT

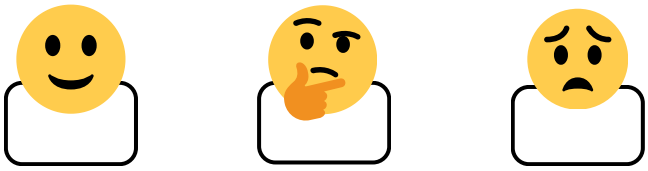
For each statement below, rate how well you understand the idea by choosing one of the following:

- I understand this well 🙂
- I am not sure if I understand this 🤔
- I don't understand this well 😟

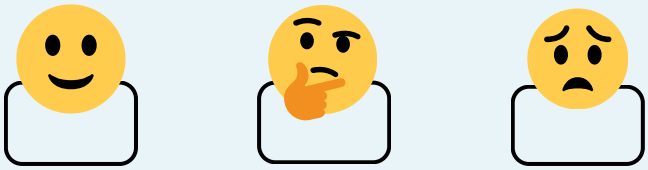
I can explain what "thinking" means.



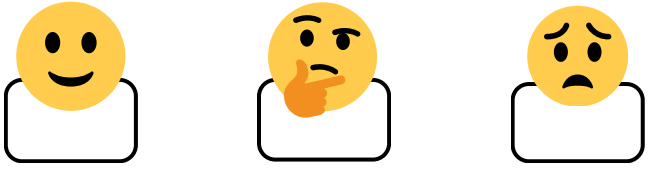
I can tell the difference between a fact (something true) and an opinion (something someone thinks).



I can stop and think before I make a choice.

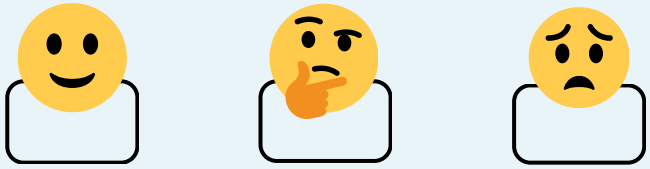


I know that every choice can have consequences (something that happens after).

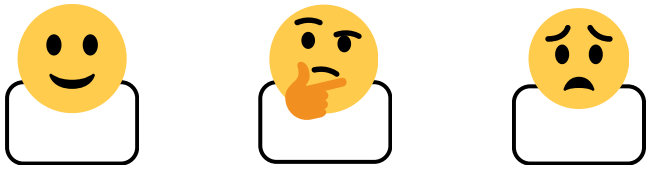


CRITICAL THINKING PRE-ASSESSMENT

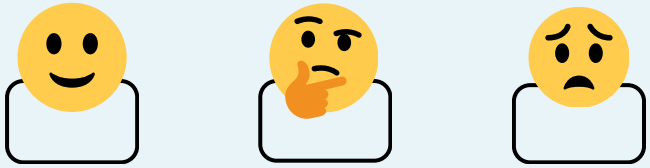
I can find more than one way to solve a problem.



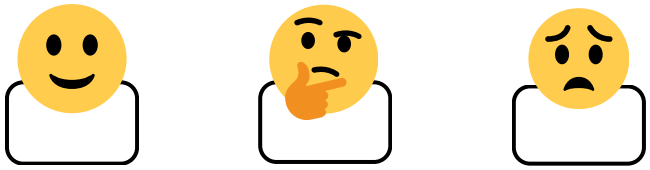
I can find patterns, like what comes next in a sequence.



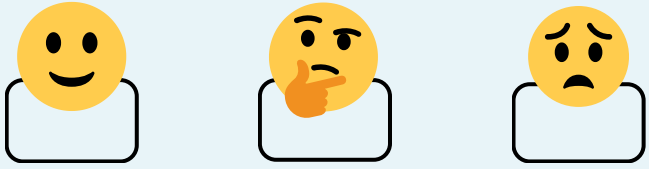
I can explain why I made a choice or solved something a certain way.



I can make fair choices when I am with friends.



I can reflect and change my mind when I learn something new.



UNDERSTANDING CRITICAL THINKING
Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand that critical thinking means using our brains to be curious and ask questions about the world.
2. Identify an "I wonder…" question as a type of question that helps us explore and discover.
3. Practice asking their own wonder questions about pictures, objects, or the story I Wonder.
4. Recognize that wondering is part of learning — not every question has an easy answer, and that's okay.

Learning Rationale

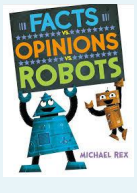
This lesson introduces students to the idea that critical thinking begins with curiosity. Instead of focusing on technical differences between statements and questions, it invites children to see themselves as thinkers and wonderers.

Why this matters:

- **Age-appropriate entry point** – Young children are naturally curious. Centering the lesson on "wonder questions" taps into that strength without making the concept feel too abstract.
- **Sets the tone** – By starting with the message "your questions matter", students gain confidence that they already use critical thinking in everyday life.
- **Encourages open-ended thinking** – Wonder questions spark imagination and deeper thought, laying the groundwork for later lessons on choices, problem-solving, and reflection.
- **Normalizes not knowing** – Students see that it's okay to ask questions we don't have answers for — wondering itself is valuable.

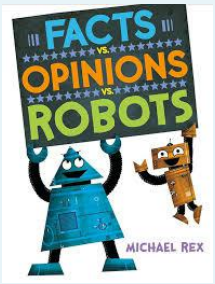
Anchor Text for this lesson:

Facts vs. Opinions vs. Robots by Michael Rex



UNDERSTANDING CRITICAL THINKING
Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Materials Needed:



- The picture book ***Facts vs. Opinions vs. Robots*** **by Michael Rex**
  - If you don't have a copy, you can use a free YouTube reading of this book. Here is one example: https://youtu.be/6E_M4NHxj6o?si=JemlqutudDSLtMOn
- Crayons, colored pencils, or markers

Lesson Plan

1. Read ***Facts vs. Opinions vs. Robots*** **by Michael Rex** out loud to your students to begin this lesson.
   - You can introduce this by saying: "This book will help us understand the difference between facts and opinions in a fun way. As we read, listen carefully and think about: How do I know if this sentence is something true for everyone (a fact) or just what someone thinks or feels (an opinion)?"

2. Read the Introduction
   - Read or have students read the introductory page out loud.
   - Emphasize the main idea: Critical thinkers ask questions and look closely at information to tell the difference between facts and opinions. This helps them make healthier choices and understand the world better.
   - Let students reflect on the reflection questions.

3. Activity 1: Fact or Opinion
   - Read the directions to your students and make sure they all have a blue and yellow crayon, marker, or colored pencil.
   - Ask students to talk through the challenge question in pairs or small groups.

4. Activity 2: Wonder Walk
   - You can do your walk inside (down a school hallway, around the living room) or outside (in a park, nature trail, your backyard).
   - Encourage students to draw about things they wonder about and share their questions with you.

UNDERSTANDING CRITICAL THINKING

Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Lesson Plan

5 Activity 3: Question Detective

- In small groups, have students ask questions for each picture.
- Example questions might be:
  - Is the dog happy in his costume?
  - What type of dog is this?
  - Who dropped the ice cream?
  - Are they embarrassed?
  - Are they playing for fun or is this a competition?

6 Activity 4: Two Facts and an Opinion

- Facilitate this activity by having students write their statements and then share them in small groups or the class.
- The challenge activity may require students to use the internet; supervise this and remind students they must ask permission before they go online.

7 Activity 4: Fact vs. Opinion Debate

- Read through the directions.
- Give students time to fill in the chart and then have a debate on whether recess should be longer.
- A challenge activity would be to have them SWITCH SIDES once they have completed the debate. Can they see things from another side?

Understanding Critical Thinking

Learning Goals for this lesson:

- Tell the difference between a fact and an opinion.
- Ask questions that help you learn more about something.
- Explain why critical thinkers don't just believe the first thing they hear.

What is a critical thinker?

Critical thinkers are like detectives. They don't just accept the first thing they hear — they stop, ask questions, and check if something is a fact or an opinion.

Facts are things we can check or prove. Opinions are what someone feels or thinks. Both are important, but we need to know which is which. A fact helps us understand what is true for everyone. An opinion helps us understand what someone likes, believes, or prefers.

Examples:

- Fact: "This robot is red."
  - Question: "What other colors do robots come in?"
- Opinion: "Red robots are the best."
  - Question: "Why do you think that? Do others agree?"

Do you see how the question changes depending on whether we are looking at a fact or an opinion? When we ask questions, we aren't just accepting what we hear at face value. We're digging deeper. Asking questions helps us:

- Gather more information (so we know the full picture).
- Understand different perspectives (why people might feel differently).
- Make better decisions (because we've thought about it instead of just reacting).

That's what critical thinkers do — they slow down, ask questions, and make thoughtful choices.

Reflection Questions:

- How can I tell the difference between facts and opinions?
- Why do critical thinkers ask questions before making decisions?
- How does understanding facts and opinions help me think more clearly?

Understanding Critical Thinking

Activity 1: Fact or Opinion?

In this activity, we're going to be detectives and sort statements into two groups—facts that can be proven true, and opinions that show what someone thinks or feels.

Color the box **BLUE if it's a fact** and color it **YELLOW if it's an opinion**.

Dogs have four legs.	**Elephants are the largest land animals.**	**Homework is good for kids.**
Chocolate is healthier than vanilla.	**Dogs are friendlier than cats.**	**The sun rises in the east.**
A triangle has three sides.	**Elephants are the largest land animals.**	**Video games make you smarter.**

Challenge

Now that you have sorted each statement, can you explain WHY you sorted it as a fact or opinion? How do you know?

Understanding Critical Thinking

Activity 2: Wonder Walk

Asking questions and being curious helps strengthen our critical thinking brain. For this activity, you'll go on a Wonder Walk. Use your eyes, ears, and detective skills to notice things that make you curious. Any time you see or hear something that makes you think, "I wonder…" stop and write it down or sketch it. Your job is to collect as many wonder-questions as you can, just like a detective gathering clues.

I wonder...

I wonder...

I wonder...

I wonder...

I wonder...

I wonder...

I wonder...

I wonder...