Critical Thinking

Building Healthy Decision-Making Skills

Lessons for middle school students aged 11-14

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Critical Thinking – Teacher/Parent Guide

Learning Objectives

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

1. Ask deeper, more purposeful questions to challenge assumptions, clarify meaning, and explore multiple perspectives.
2. Detect bias and evaluate the reliability of evidence across media, texts, and everyday situations.
3. Identify and avoid common logical fallacies while strengthening their own reasoning and argumentation skills.
4. Apply critical thinking to complex decision-making by considering ethical implications, long- and short-term consequences, and the perspectives of others.
5. Reflect on their own thinking processes (metacognition) to recognize strengths, blind spots, and strategies for improvement.

Learning Rationale

Middle schoolers are entering a pivotal stage of cognitive and social development:

They are shifting from concrete reasoning toward more abstract, analytical, and independent thinking.

They are navigating new responsibilities as they form stronger personal identities, engage with peers and technology in more complex ways, and begin to consider long-term consequences of their choices.

They are more aware of fairness, bias, and influence, and are capable of recognizing flaws in reasoning and weighing multiple perspectives.

Reflection deepens as they begin to examine their own thinking processes, developing metacognitive awareness that supports growth in both academics and personal life.

Critical Thinking – Teacher/Parent Guide

Introduction for the Teacher/Parent

Critical thinking is how we make sense of the world—by asking deeper questions, testing ideas, and making thoughtful, informed choices. For middle school students, these skills are especially important: they are becoming more independent, navigating peer influence, using technology, and making decisions that impact not only themselves but also their relationships, learning, and long-term goals.

Students in grades 6–8 are ready to:

- Push beyond surface-level questions to challenge assumptions and explore multiple perspectives.
- Detect bias and evaluate the reliability of evidence in media, schoolwork, and daily life.
- Recognize flawed reasoning and strengthen their ability to build sound, respectful arguments.
- Apply critical thinking to complex decisions by weighing short- and long-term consequences and considering fairness and ethics.
- Reflect on their own thought processes to grow more aware of strengths, blind spots, and strategies for improvement.

By practicing these skills now, middle schoolers strengthen the habits that lead to academic achievement, responsible decision-making, and positive self-awareness.

Critical Thinking – Teacher/Parent Guide

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- **Lesson 1: Digging Deeper with Questions** – Learn how asking stronger questions helps us challenge assumptions, uncover deeper meaning, and explore multiple perspectives.
- **Lesson 2: Seeing Bias and Finding the Truth** – Discover how to detect bias, evaluate evidence, and recognize what makes information reliable or misleading.
- **Lesson 3: Avoiding Thinking Traps** – Practice spotting common logical fallacies and faulty reasoning while learning how to strengthen arguments with evidence and logic.
- **Lesson 4: Making Wise Choices** – Apply critical thinking to real-life decisions by weighing consequences, considering fairness and ethics, and using both logic and empathy.
- **Lesson 5: Reflecting on my Thinking** – Build metacognitive skills by reflecting on how we think, recognizing personal strengths and blind spots, and reflecting.
- **Post-Assessment** – Reflect on how students' critical thinking skills have grown and identify strategies they can carry into high school and beyond.

Critical Thinking Pre-Assessment Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Learning Objectives

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

1. Demonstrate their current understanding of what critical thinking means.
2. Show how they typically approach decision-making, problem-solving, and evaluating information.
3. Reflect on their own confidence in asking questions, weighing evidence, and considering consequences.
4. Provide a baseline that teachers/parents can use to track growth over the course of the lessons.

Learning Rationale

The pre-assessment gives a snapshot of where students are starting in their journey with critical thinking. Middle schoolers enter with different levels of experience—some may already question evidence and spot bias, while others may make quick decisions without reflection. By checking in at the beginning, teachers and parents can see students' strengths, areas for growth, and initial attitudes toward critical thinking.

This step is not about grading or judgment. Instead, it helps adults tailor discussions, examples, and support throughout the lessons. It also encourages students to pause and reflect on their own habits of thinking—so that when they revisit these same questions in the post-assessment, they can clearly see how much they've grown.

Critical Thinking Pre-Assessment Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Lesson Plan

1. Ask students to read each statement and decide how much they understand or agree with each idea. Remind them that this is not a test and there are no “right” or “wrong” answers—honesty is most important.

2. After each statement, you may invite students to share quick examples or thoughts. Keep the discussion open and light—this step is about listening, not correcting. Allow students to explain their thinking in their own words so you can see how they view critical thinking right now.

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

4. Set the tone: Let students know that by the end of the lessons, they will have explored new ways to ask better questions, spot bias, recognize faulty reasoning, and make stronger decisions. Reassure them that it’s natural for their answers and perspectives to change—growth is the goal.

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 kind of understand
- I'm unsure or confused

Statement	I understand this well!	I somewhat understand this.	I'm unsure or confused by this.
I know what it means to be a critical thinker.			
I can ask deeper questions that help me understand a problem or idea better.			
I can tell when information may be biased or unfair.			
I can figure out whether evidence is strong, weak, or unreliable.			
I can recognize when someone's argument doesn't make sense.			
I know how to avoid common "traps" in thinking, like assuming something is true just because everyone else believes it.			
I can make decisions by thinking about consequences, fairness, and multiple perspectives.			
I use both logic and empathy when solving problems that affect others.			
I can reflect on how I think and notice my own strengths and weaknesses.			
I feel confident that I can improve my thinking skills with practice.			

Critical Thinking Pre-Assessment

What does being a “critical thinker” mean to you right now?

_____

_____

When you face a tough choice, how do you usually make your decision?

_____

_____

Which part of thinking is easiest for you right now (asking questions, noticing bias, avoiding traps, making choices, or reflecting)?

_____

_____

What is most challenging for you when you have to think carefully or make a decision?

_____

_____

How do you usually decide if information is true, fair, or worth trusting?

_____

_____

Digging Deeper with Questions Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Learning Objectives

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

1. Differentiate between surface-level questions and deeper, probing questions.
2. Practice asking clarifying, interpretive, and evaluative questions to explore ideas more fully.
3. Recognize and challenge assumptions hidden in information, conversations, or texts.
4. Develop curiosity as a tool for stronger critical thinking and problem-solving.

Learning Rationale

Middle schoolers are naturally curious, but their questions often stay at the surface. This lesson helps them move from quick "What?" questions to deeper "Why?" and "What if?" questions that reveal assumptions and open new perspectives. Encouraging exploration over "right answers" engages students more fully in academics, strengthens reflection in social situations, and builds a foundation for evaluating evidence and making informed decisions in later lessons.

How This Lesson Supports Middle School Development

- **Cognitive Growth**: Builds abstract thinking by shifting from memorizing facts to analyzing ideas.
- **Identity Development**: Strengthens personal voice by encouraging thoughtful, open-ended questions.
- **Social Awareness**: Helps students pause before accepting assumptions, stereotypes, or peer pressure.
- **Academic Success**: Promotes deeper engagement with texts, problems, and evidence across subjects.
- **Metacognition**: Encourages students to reflect on the quality of their own thinking.

Digging Deeper with Questions Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Preparation

- Review the student lesson text on “Digging Deeper with Questions”
- Read through the lesson plan

Lesson Plan

1. Read the Introduction
   - Students can read the introduction silently, in pairs, or listen as you read it aloud
   - Key points:
     - Essential Question: How can asking better questions help me think more deeply and understand more clearly?
     - Core Idea: Critical thinkers don’t stop at surface-level questions—they push further by challenging assumptions and asking “why” and “what if” to uncover deeper meaning.

2. Activity 1: Curiosity Chain
   - Read the directions with your students and go through the sample chain.
   - Give students time to think and write.
   - End with the discussion questions as a pair-share or in small groups.

3. Activity 2: Assumption Detective
   - Give students time to work on this activity. If they are struggling, let them work in pairs. The example create a model to help struggling students.

Digging Deeper with Questions Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Lesson Plan continued...

4 Activity 3: Brainstorm Session

- Make this activity fun – give students a chance to act out their brainstorming or work in small groups. The classroom might feel "loud" with everyone talking.
- After this activity, youc an extend the learning by asking:
  - Which kind of question (clarifying, probing, evaluative) was easiest for your group to come up with? Which was hardest?
  - How did hearing other people's questions change the way you thought about the topic?
  - Which of your group's questions could lead to the most meaningful conversation or decision?

5 Activity 4: The Question Web

- Read the directions out loud.
- Facilitate the activity by helping students get into small groups, if you are working with a classroom or multiple students.
- Give students time to create their questions.
- The question works well for a reflection or discussion question, if you have time.

Digging Deeper with Questions

Learning Goals for this lesson:
At the end of this lesson, I will be able to:

- Tell the difference between a simple question and a deeper question.
- Ask questions to better understand ideas, people, and problems.
- Notice when there might be hidden assumptions and explore them.
- Use curiosity to help me think more clearly and make better choices

Critical thinking starts with good questions.

But not all questions are the same. Some questions are surface questions—they give us quick facts, like "What page is the homework on?" or "When is the test?" These are helpful, but they don't tell the whole story.

Deeper questions push us to think harder and explore meaning. They help us understand why something happened, what if things were different, or how something connects to the bigger picture.

There are different kinds of deeper questions:

- **Clarifying Questions:** "What does that word mean?" or "Can you explain that in a different way?"
- **Probing Questions:** "Why do you think that's true?" or "What evidence supports that?"
- **Evaluative Questions:** "Is this fair?" or "Which choice makes the most sense in the long run?"

When we ask these types of questions, we don't just accept information—we test it, stretch it, and make it clearer.

Asking deeper questions also helps us notice assumptions—things people believe without checking. If someone says, "Everybody posts on social media," you might ask, "What if some people don't? Why do you think that?" This helps you see the difference between what's true and what's just assumed.

Digging Deeper with Questions

Being curious and asking strong questions isn't about having all the answers. It's about opening doors to new ideas, solving problems in smarter ways, and making choices you can be proud of. The more you practice, the stronger your critical thinking will become.

Think of a time when you asked a question that helped you understand something better. How did it help you?

Digging Deeper with Questions

Activity 1: Curiosity Chain

Asking meaningful questions is a way to learn more and explore your curiosity. In this activity, read each question below and rewrite it into a deeper question that helps you understand more. Then, create another question based on the one you just wrote. Keep going until you have a curiosity chain of questions (you can add more circles under each chain to keep your questions going).

Remember: deeper questions often start with why, how, or what if.

When is lunch?	What time does practice end?	How many planets are in our solar system?
Why do schools set certain lunch schedules?		
How do lunch schedules affect learning?		

Digging Deeper with Questions

What year did the Civil War start?

How many likes did this post get?

Who made this video?

Discussion Questions:

- Which of your curiosity chains went the farthest? What made it easy or hard to keep asking deeper questions?
- Did any of your deeper questions surprise you? How?
- How did your questions change as they went from surface to deeper—what words or ideas made them different?