



# LEAP Online

Learning Excellence Achievement Pathway Online Tutorial



## How to Strengthen Your Critical Thinking Skills

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## A Critical Thinking Riddle

Four cars approach a round-about. Not knowing who should proceed first, all four vehicles simultaneously drive away from the stop signs, but no accident occurs.

How is this possible?

So, how did the drivers proceed at the same time without running into one another?

The answer is: They all took a left turn. How'd you do? Did you come up with that answer or something different?



## Practice, Practice, Practice!



If you want to get better at chess, you have to practice chess. If you want to get better at long-distance running, you have to practice long-distance running. The same goes for critical thinking, if you want to get better at it, you must practice.

Riddles, like the one you read earlier, are a great way to flex your mental muscles. In fact, you can do a variety of simple things each day to improve your critical thinking skills. In this tutorial, you'll learn how you can strengthen critical thinking skills by implementing new habits, practicing key strategies, and even playing games.

### Why practicing critical thinking matters

Critical thinking helps us identify reasonable, evidence-based conclusions when deciding what to believe or what action to take. Becoming a skilled critical thinker conveys many benefits like:

- Promotes creativity and innovation
- Contributes to career success and advancement
- Improves decision-making skills
- Helps formulate more nuanced opinions, values, and beliefs

Critical thinking is not intuitive. Rather, it is a skill cultivated with effort and practice. Like our muscles, our brains need exercise to stay in shape. So, instead of waiting for a big decision or problem to flex your critical thinking skills, incorporate the practice into your daily life.

## How to Strengthen Your Critical Thinking Skills

Read through the information below to learn five strategies to start practicing your thinking skills.

### Strategy 1 – Play team building games

We're not talking cheesy icebreakers here. Playing critical thinking team-building activities is a fun and engaging way to improve problem-solving and increase camaraderie. Tons of critical thinking team-building activities are just a Google search away, but here's one that might work well for your next social gathering.

**Uncommon Uses** is an exercise that can help your team...

- Think beyond the first idea
- Look at things from a different perspective
- Flex their creativity

This activity prompts everyone to think about old things in a new way.

1. Assemble some common everyday items—dustpan, paperclip, hairbrush; it doesn't really matter.
2. Give at least one item to each participant or team, and ask: What else could this be?
3. Give participants five minutes to write down as many alternate uses for the item as they can and share their top results.

Tip: For an added challenge, direct participants to select one alternative use and write a commercial or design a marketing piece to "sell" the item from this new perspective.

### Strategy 2 – Explain it to a 5-year-old

When it comes to critical thinking, defining the problem is just as important—if not more so—than coming up with a solution. Critical thinkers must understand a situation to such a degree that they can convey it in simple, understandable terms. You can practice this by explaining it to a 5-year-old.

Tip: If there are no 5-year-olds readily available, an imaginary one or someone role-playing one works as well.

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This exercise practices breaking down complex ideas into a straightforward, coherent narrative. Next time you read a journal article, consider how you might explain it to a curious 5-year-old. In doing this, you will:

- Improve at using easy-to-understand analogies
- Learn to make complicated information more user-friendly
- Disregard extraneous or irrelevant information
- Focus on the key details

You can do this exercise with white papers, case studies, project scopes, or challenging situations. Eventually, you will become skilled in breaking things down to their essential components—which is the foundation of critical thinking.

### Strategy 3 – Ponder brain teasers

Pondering difficult-to-answer questions like brain teasers and ethical dilemmas is a great way to exercise critical thinking muscles. These types of questions force you to:

- Think “outside the box.”
- Effectively rationalise your conclusion
- Look at the problem from different angles
- Confront biases

In addition, they can be enjoyable! You can engage with these tricky questions alone or in a group. Here are some sample questions to get started.

#### **Example brain teaser**

You're standing outside a closed windowless room. Three switches on the outside correspond to three lightbulbs in the room, but they are not labelled. You can go into the room once to figure out which switch goes with which lightbulb. How will you do it?

#### **Example ethical dilemma**

A coach catches his star player breaking a rule right before the championship game. The player's behaviour should result in immediate suspension, which means missing the big game. What should the coach do?

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- Other ponderable questions
- Is honesty always the best policy?
- Can money buy happiness?
- How do you think life will be different 100 years from now? What about 1,000 years from now?

### Strategy 4 – Practice perspective taking

An important hallmark of critical thinkers is the ability to look at an issue from multiple viewpoints. Hone perspective-taking, or trying to understand something from another's point of view, through practice. Some ways to practice perspective-taking include:

- Reading about the same issue from multiple sources or points of view.
- Debating the opposite point of view to construct an argument in favour of one that opposes yours. Arguing from your opponent's perspective can help you better understand their argument and fortify your own.
- Connecting someone else's current situation to experiences you or someone you care about has faced.

### Strategy 5 – Balance your thinking

Underthinking a problem can end with an impulsive or irrational response, but overthinking it can leave you frozen in place and unable to take action. Instead, try practicing balanced thinking.

Great critical thinkers know it's important to transcend "gut feelings" and follow facts and evidence to find answers. But digging too deeply can send you down a time-wasting rabbit hole filled with irrelevant details.

If critical thinking is a road, underthinking and overthinking are deep ditches on either side, waiting for you to fall in. Strike a better balance in your thinking by using these strategies:

**Don't focus on what can go wrong.** Incessantly "what if-ing" a situation is a common sign of overthinking. Instead, if you catch yourself in a what-if loop, reframe your thinking to focus on what could go right. This line of questioning transforms your thinking from problem-focused to solution-oriented.

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**Keep it all in perspective.** Are you in the habit of making mountains out of molehills—or vice versa? If you find yourself over- or under-reacting to situations, ask yourself: Will this matter in one month? One year? Five years? This line of questioning will help put the situation into perspective.

**Don't let perfect be the enemy of good.** Overthinkers can be especially prone to perfectionism. But waiting for perfection takes a long time—if it ever comes. Keep pushing towards a solid, workable solution while reminding yourself there will be time to patch holes and shore up issues in the future.



## More tips to Improve Critical Thinking



Now that you've learned strategies to improve critical thinking, let's discuss some daily habits that can also support your goals.

**Seek out critical thinkers.** Join a club, forum, or professional group where you have opportunities for free-thinking and sharing ideas. Spark conversation and seek advice from people who you believe excel at critical thinking and ask them questions.

**Read more books.** Reading about how others solved complex problems or innovated new solutions can inspire your critical thinking journey, since it exposes you to new ideas and ways of thinking. Without it, you rely on just your knowledge and experience when tackling a challenge, but with it, you have others' wisdom and experience to draw from.

**Explore a question every day.** Critical thinkers follow their curiosity to discover more, and that starts with developing strong questioning habits. So, start asking yourself questions each day like, "Why did I choose this blue shirt?" or "Where did this apple I'm eating come from?" or "Why do some people like change and others feel uncomfortable with it?" Examining interesting questions, big or small, can develop the art of formulating questions and seeking answers.

### Summary

If you want to improve your critical thinking skills, find ways to incorporate the practice into your routine. Like any other skill, critical thinking takes work to cultivate, so remember these key takeaways as you work to improve.

- **Your brain is like a muscle.** If you want to strengthen your thinking skills, you have to exercise them. Practicing a little each day prepares you to use them in difficult situations.
- **Critical thinking comes with benefits.** Daily critical thinking comes with rewards like increased creativity, improved career success, and better decision-making skills.



**Find what works for you.** As you've seen, there are a variety of ways to engage in critical thinking every day. Find the ones that you enjoy and look forward to—they'll be easier to incorporate into your routine.