

Selected Strategies to Stimulate Critical Thinking in your CivicTREK Classroom¹: Incorporating Critical Thinking into Student Essay Writing

Typically, we ask students to support their opinions with evidence they have collected through research. While this teaches the student to distinguish fact from opinion and provide reasons for beliefs, it does not necessarily encourage students to think more deeply – to evaluate opposing views, or strengthen their reasoning by identifying and altering unjustified beliefs.

Consider introducing one or more of the following critical thinking strategies to remodel this activity:

Developing One's Perspective² (creating or exploring beliefs, arguments, or theories)

Use a class discussion to introduce and clarify aspects of critical thought through the analysis and improvement of two opposing arguments selected as models. Encourage students to address the same issue from different perspectives, be fairly strong, but require some improvement. Use small group discussions to allow students to develop and clarify their positions on issues of their choice, and argue between opposing views.

For the essay, students could brainstorm issues of interest to them. Each group must share an issue about which group members disagree. Each student then picks an issue and writes an essay.

Thinking Precisely About Thinking (using critical vocabulary)

Encourage student use of critical vocabulary by having them rephrase the model arguments into explicit premises, assumptions, and conclusions. To have students identify the conclusion of each model, ask, "What is the conclusion? What is the point of the argument? What statement is this argument trying to convince you to believe? Is the conclusion stated or implied?" Then ask, "What reasons are given? Is the reasoning complete, or is there a hidden claim, or assumption?"

Exercising Fairmindedness (deliberate opposing points of view)

When assigning discussion groups, emphasize the importance of listening carefully and being open to considering other arguments. Suggest that students review opposing views in their essays. Discussion groups could note assumptions, pinpoint contradictions, and look for strengths and weaknesses in the arguments given. Each group could recap the main points of their discussion to the entire class. Encourage students to evaluate each other's presentations of their arguments, and consider rewriting, if appropriate.

¹ Selected from "Strategy List: 35 Dimensions of Critical Thought". *The Foundation for Critical Thinking*.
To view the complete list of 35 strategies, please see
<http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/strategy-list-35-dimensions-of-critical-thought/466#s24>

² (each strategy is more fully described in the linked resource)