CHAPTER 8

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is thinking about how you think. It is the process of asking and answering questions and trying to understand how and why you come to the conclusions that you do. This is an essential skill for debate because debaters need to plan what they will say, anticipate the other team's response, and think of an argument to counter the other team's arguments. Debate is not just a discussion between two sides. Rather, it is a contest in which each side is trying to win by presenting a better argument and making the other team's argument look less reasonable or weak.

This chapter describes the main parts of an argument and shows how critical thinking is necessary to create the strongest, most cohesive argument possible. The chapter also describes how to recognize flawed arguments and use your opponent's flaws to your advantage.

Critical thinking is not just something we should strive to use in debate; it should be part of everything we do. You can use many skills to become a better critical thinker:

1. Comparing the viewpoints of other people to your own way of thinking or your perspective;
2. Finding ways to ask questions that apply to many perspectives;
3. Understanding why some statements are correct and others are not, while still understanding the uncertainty of knowledge;
4. Researching through critical reading and evaluation;
5. Understanding how problem solving works;
6. Establishing criteria for making judgments;
7. Presenting arguments in a constructive way.

Many other skills are involved in developing critical thinking. When you learn to argue and defend your own position, you are a critical thinker. When you argue against another's position, you are a critical thinker. When you change your mind because of the arguments you hear, you are a critical thinker. When you understand that argumentation occurs whenever someone communicates to influence others to change their beliefs or behavior, you are a critical thinker.

Constructing an Argument

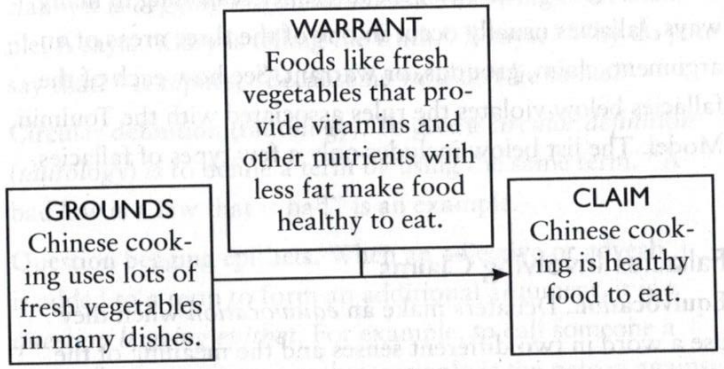
Arguments in debate must be well thought-out and have a line of reasoning that is relatively easy to follow. Therefore, you must use critical thinking when constructing an argument. *Argument construction* occurs when you are making an argument for or against a certain viewpoint. Do not

confuse this with having an argument with your friends over the best movie of all time.

According to Stephen Toulmin, a British philosopher, an argument is something made to support a position. It may be as simple as a single statement or it may be a chain of arguments used to answer a complex question. To understand an argument, we can use the *Toulmin Model*. This model divides an argument into three main parts called a *triad*.

1. **Claim.** Whenever you make a statement that you want others to accept, you are providing a *claim*. There are three types of claims: fact, value, and policy.
2. **Grounds.** When you make statements that provide facts to support the claim, you are giving the *grounds* for your claim. We usually call this *evidence*, but it also can be called proof, research, data, support, documentation, or substantiation.
3. **Warrant.** When you make statements to show how the facts are connected to the claim or provide the reasoning for your arguments, you are providing the *warrant*. This is also called *analysis*.

Here is an example of the three parts of an argument in a Toulmin Model:



As a novice debater, you might find the Toulmin Model a bit difficult to understand, but you should learn how to use it because it helps keep your argument linear and to the point. Many times, you will not actually need to say the warrant or analysis, but it must be implied in your arguments. Analysis that is not spoken is called an *implied warrant*. You can still have a complete argument if your warrant is implied. However, if you have not stated a warrant, the other team can attack your argument more easily.

Analyzing Arguments

In very basic terms, an argument must prove a claim. Whenever an argument does not, it is called a *fallacy*. One of the most difficult skills you must learn in debating is recognizing

fallacies. You need to use critical thinking to avoid them in your arguments and to alert the judge when your opponent uses them.

Although debaters can use improper reasoning in many ways, fallacies usually occur in one of the three areas of an argument: claim, grounds, or warrant. See how each of the fallacies below violates the rules associated with the Toulmin Model. The list below includes only a few types of fallacies.

Fallacies Involving Claims

Equivocation. Debaters make an *equivocation* when they use a word in two different senses and the meaning of the word is shifted during the argument. For example, let's say a debater argues that all men are created equal, but that Nancy is a woman, therefore she cannot be equal. In this case the use of the word men refers to people in a general sense of humans as a species, not specifically the male gender. Therefore, this is a shift in the meaning of the word "men."

Amphiboly. This fallacy arises when the grammar of a sentence makes it ambiguous. Here is an example of an *amphiboly*: if a debater says that the government will give $100 million to Chad and Congo, does this mean each country will get $100 million or that they will have to divide the money in some way?

Fallacies Involving Grounds

Begging the Question. Whenever an argument makes a claim and then provides evidence that is the same as the claim, it is *begging the question*. The following is an example. A says, "Gary is telling the truth." B says, "Why do you say that?" A replies, "Because he wouldn't lie to me."

Circular definition (tautology). To give a *circular definition* (*tautology*) is to define a term by using the same term. "A bad law is a law that is bad" is an example.

Question begging epithets. When an adjective or adverb is added to a term to form an additional argument, it is a *question begging epithet*. For example, to call someone a cowardly pacifist is to say that not only is the person against war, but is against war because of fear. In this case te term is making two arguments. Someone who is a pacifist may have a great deal of courage to hold that position, so we cannot assume that a pacifist is also a coward just because someone put the adjective "cowardly" in front of the noun "pacifist."

Straw argument (also straw man or straw person). Intentionally misinterpreting an opponent's argument and then defeating it is committing a straw person fallacy. For example, if Team A says air pollution is bad, and Team B argues that Team A is wrong because water pollution isn't that bad, Team B is creating a *straw argument* or *straw man*.

Red herring. To divert attention from the main argument to something insignificant is called using a *red herring*. For example, if the argument is about bad drinking water and the

other team asks questions about how swimming pools are filled, they are using a red herring.

Ad hominem attack. To attack the debater and not the argument is an *ad hominem attack*. Debaters also commit this fallacy when they attack someone for the group he belongs to. For example, if someone says "he doesn't know what he is talking about because he is too old," she has used an ad hominem attack.

Appeal to the people. To say that something is true because the majority of people support it is an *appeal to the people*. Popularity doesn't necessarily make something true. For example, saying that millions of people like to eat fast food, so it must be good for them is an appeal to the people.

Appeal to authority. When a debater says someone's opinion is final and that there can be no argument with it, he is making an *appeal to authority*. For example, if I say my expert is the most respected in her field, and so, no one can defeat her position, I am appealing to authority.

Hasty generalization. When we jump to conclusions by using too few examples or examples that are not typical of the group, we are using hasty generalizations. For example, if you meet two Americans who do not like hot dogs and you say that all Americans don't like hot dogs, you are giving a *hasty generalization*.

Accident. The opposite of a hasty generalization is when we think that something that is generally true applies to an entire group. For example, if you know that Americans love to drive cars and you conclude that John loves to drive a car, because he is from the United States, you have committed an *accident*. John may only ride a bicycle because it is good for the environment, and he may not like to drive.

Fallacies Involving Warrants or Unwarranted Assumptions

Non Sequitur. This is Latin for "does not follow." The term describes an argument in which the claim or conclusion does not follow from the reasoning or grounds provided. For example, Bill eats McDonald's hamburgers; therefore he supports globalization. This is a *non sequitur*.

False cause. There are many types of *false cause* fallacies. Two of the most common are post hoc fallacies and correlations.

1. **Post hoc.** This is Latin for "after the fact." Sometimes people will claim that because something came first, it caused something that came after it. This is called a *post hoc fallacy*. Here's an example: "Gary is from California, where it is sunny. Since he came to visit our school, there have only been sunny days. Therefore, he must have caused the good weather."
2. **Correlation.** In looking at two things that don't cause each other but are related to a third thing that causes both of them, we have a fallacy of *correlation*. For example, when someone says, "Increased ice cream sales causes increased murder." We know that ice cream doesn't cause murder but both increased ice cream sales and increased murder are a response to higher temperatures.

False analogy. Using a comparison, like a simile, may be a good literary device, but it is a weak argument and a *false analogy*. All analogies are false analogies. For example, "I hate this argument like a cat hates water" provides no grounds or warrants to support a claim.

Your job as a debater is to present the best arguments you can construct. At the same time you need to attack the arguments of the other side. As you get better at critical thinking, you will start to recognize faulty reasoning in others. Sometimes the fallacies will fit into neat little groups like the ones I listed above. Other times they will be complex. Regardless, you need to develop the ability to explain what is wrong with the thinking of others. And when they analyze your thinking, you need to defend your arguments and explain that you have good reasoning.

Cross-Examination

Cross-examination is a short period of time at the end of constructive speeches given to one team to ask questions of the other team. The purpose of the cross-examination is not to argue with the other team but to gather information to support your case. Critical thinking is key at this point because debaters must determine where they are going with their arguments in light of what the other team has said. The cross-examination period is the time when one team has the chance to question the other to highlight deficiencies in the opponent's case and build up support for its case. So you must think carefully—and strategically—about both your questions and answers.

When you are asking questions of the other team

1. Face the audience when speaking. Do not face your opponent. Stand next to the speaker and slightly behind him or her.
2. Ask simple questions that require "yes" or "no" answers as much as possible.
3. Do not allow the person to answer with a long, involved explanation.
4. Be polite when interrupting your opponent if her answers are too long.
5. Do not allow your opponent to ask you questions. Politely remind them, "This is my cross-examination period."
6. Do not make arguments during cross-examination.
7. Use your opponent's answers from the cross-examination during your next speech.

When you are answering questions from the other team

1. Face the audience.
2. If you need to explain your answer, tell your opponent you cannot answer "yes or no" and need to qualify your answer.
3. Do not try to ask questions unless it is to clarify a question.

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4. When the time is finished, you do not need to answer any more questions.
5. Think before you speak.

Points of information

Many types of debate permit a debater to interrupt the speaker and ask a simple clarifying question—if the speaker allows it. Points of information keep the speaker on task and allow the opposing team to point out inconsistencies in his argument. Thinking critically is vital when requesting points of information. Teams must use these strategically to point out flaws in the other teams' arguments while highlighting their own plan. Determining which questions will help your team, how to word the questions, and when to ask them involves a keen game plan. Randomly requesting points of information only serves to annoy the judges and audience and may hinder your case. But thinking and planning about how and when to ask the right questions are good debating techniques.

Asking points of information

1. Stand and wait to be recognized before interrupting the speaker.
2. If the speaker does not see you standing or allows you to stand unrecognized for more than five seconds, politely ask, "Point of information?"
3. Look at the audience when asking your questions.
4. Ask your question in less than 15 seconds and sit down after asking your question.
5. Do not ask questions during the first or last minute of the constructive speeches.
6. If the speaker does not want any more questions, do not interrupt the speech.
7. Be sure to ask at least one good question to prove to the judge that you know what is important.

Answering points of information

1. Look at the audience.
2. When your opponent stands for a point of information, either take the question or ask her to sit down. Do not leave her standing without some recognition.
3. When accepting a question say, "Your question, please?"
4. When not accepting a question say, "Not at this time."
5. Take at least a few point-of-information questions. If you do not take questions, the judge will think you are not being fair to the other team. The number of questions you should take is not fixed, but many in the United States think three is a reasonable number.
6. Provide good answers to the questions. If the question is about something you will discuss later, tell the questioner to be patient and that you will get to it. You do not have to answer the questions, but the judge may take that into consideration in coming to her decision.

When you ask and answer questions, you are trying to make the best impression you can on the judge. You want to appear fair, polite, and intelligent. You want to use each question as a way to get the judge to like you more.

IMPORTANT CONCEPTS IN CHAPTER 8

1. Critical thinking is central to arguing a position and attacking an opponent's position effectively.
2. Using the Toulmin Model enables a debater to make a sound argument that flows from grounds to claim.
3. A fallacy is an unsound argument and typically occurs in one of three areas of argument: claims, grounds, and warrants.
4. During cross-examination and by the strategic use of points of information, a team can strengthen its arguments and weaken its opponent's.

EXERCISES

1. Look for advertisements in magazines and newspapers. See if you can spot any fallacies.
2. Look at the cases you wrote for the last chapter. Write down some questions you must answer to help prove your point.
3. Think of some questions that the other team might ask you. Practice the answers you would give.

KEY WORDS

accident
ad hominem attack
amphiboly
analysis
appeal to authority
appeal to the people
argument construction
begging the question
circular definition
claim
correlation
critical thinking
cross-examination
equivocation
evidence
fallacy
false analogy
false cause
hasty generalization
grounds
implied warrant
non sequitur
post hoc fallacy
question begging epithet
red herring
straw argument
straw man
tautology
Toulmin Model
triad
warrant