

Making Critical Thinking Click: Practical Strategies for First-Generation Students

Why it matters: First-generation students are just as capable of critical thinking as their peers, but they often haven't had the academic process made explicit. They benefit from seeing *how* to think through a problem, not just being told to 'analyze' or 'decide'.

The Critical Thinking Steps

1. Identify the Problem/Question- What exactly needs to be solved or decided? Why does this matter?
2. Gather & Consider Information- What information do we already have? What else do we need to know? Where can we find it?
3. Evaluate Possible Options- What are the potential solutions or choices? What are the pros and cons of each? What evidence supports each option?
4. Make a Decision & Justify It- Which option is best and why? How would you explain your reasoning to someone else?
5. Reflect on the Process- What worked well in your approach? How might you handle a similar problem in the future?

Teaching Tips for First-Gen Students

- Model your thinking by narrating your own steps ('First, I asked myself...').
- Give guiding questions for each step until students internalize the process.
- Use real-life, low-stakes examples before moving into discipline-specific cases.
- Validate multiple approaches if they are well-reasoned- critical thinking is not always about one 'right' answer.
- Tie abstract concepts to situations they've encountered (family decisions, budgeting, workplace choices, community issues).
- Use short, no-grade activities where students can experiment with reasoning without fear of failure. Example: Ask, "What's one other way this could be approached?" during class discussions.
- Encourage questions — and validate them. Normalize asking "why" or "how" in class.
- Emphasize evaluating how people argue their case, not just what they believe.

- Ask students to explain not just what they concluded, but why they reached that conclusion and what they might do differently next time.
- First-gen students might not know the unspoken academic norms for debate, questioning, or analysis.
- Explicitly explain expectations for participation, challenging ideas respectfully, and supporting claims with evidence.

Example Critical Thinking Scenarios

Example 1 – The Conflicting Sources

A student is researching the history of a local landmark for a class project. They find:

A blog post by a local historian claiming the landmark was built in 1890.

A government archive record stating it was built in 1902.

They must decide which date to use in their paper.

Questions for the group:

- What's the main problem here?
- What information do you still need?
- How would you decide which source is more credible?
- How would you explain your reasoning to someone else?

Example 2 – The Incomplete Lab Data

A student is running an experiment that measures plant growth under different light conditions.

On the final day, a mishap causes one plant's data to be lost. The project is due tomorrow.

They must decide how to handle the missing data.

Questions for the group:

- What are the possible options for dealing with the missing data?
- What's the potential impact of each option?
- Which option is most justifiable — and why?

Example 3 – The Tight Budget Decision

A student group has \$200 to promote their club. They have three options:

- Print 500 flyers for \$100 and host a \$100 pizza party.
- Run a social media ad for \$200.
- Buy \$200 worth of T-shirts to give away.

They must decide how to best spend the money to attract the most new members.

Questions for the group:

- What's the goal of the spending?
- What information would help you predict which option is best?
- Which option would you choose — and why?

Example 4 – The Group Project Tension

A group of four students is working on a final presentation. Two of them feel they are doing all the work, while the other two contribute very little. One of the frustrated students wants to tell the professor immediately, but another suggests they should first try to talk to the group.

Questions for discussion:

- What information should they gather before going to the professor?
- How might they approach the conversation to avoid escalating conflict?
- What potential biases might affect how each member views the situation?

Example 5 – The Internship Offer

A junior receives an internship offer at a start-up company with great networking potential, but the position is unpaid and would require them to reduce their hours at a paying part-time job.

Questions for discussion:

- What factors should they consider before accepting?
- How might they assess whether the unpaid experience is worth the financial strain?
- Are there creative compromises they could explore?