

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

Behind the Words: Infusing Critical Thinking into ELA and Social Studies

Why Make Time for Critical Thinking

As educators, we often hear that we're preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist. It's a clever aphorism, but it doesn't quite capture the scope of our challenge. The truth is we are actually preparing students to solve unforeseen problems with unknown technology in yet-to-be-created careers. From my perspective, teaching our students to be critical thinkers is about the best thing we can offer them to send them off successfully into such an unknown future. In fact, according to the [World Economic Forum](#), six of the top 10 essential skills for careers in 2025 all involve some form of critical thinking. And besides, strong critical thinkers make better decisions, are more informed, have more career opportunities, and are generally better equipped to navigate the challenges of everyday life.

If you're looking for a little more immediate reason to incorporate critical thinking into your school's repertoire, think of how satisfying it is when a student gives a response to a prompt that delves below a surface answer and shows you that they brought depth of thought and insight to the subject. Those are the moments we live for! By explicitly teaching critical thinking and providing multiple opportunities for students to practice and grow, critical thinking can become a fixture in your school, something students know is valued and expected at all times.

“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write. It will be those who can not learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

— Alvin Toffler

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ELA and Social Studies Strategies

While it follows naturally to apply critical thinking to subjects like math and science, language arts and social studies can be a bit trickier. So, how can teachers integrate critical thinking into these subjects in a way that is memorable, meaningful, and fun? Here are a few ideas to share with your teachers...

- **Shallow and Deep:** Want students to compare and contrast? A Venn diagram works well, but if you want them to think more deeply, ask them to find shallow (obvious) similarities/differences and then deeper (not so obvious) ones. Here's a graphic organizer: [Shallow and Deep](#). Use it as is or make a copy and customize it to your liking!
- **Infograph It:** Want to develop critical and creative thinking skills at the same time? Ask students to evaluate and organize their thoughts in a visual way. They must think critically as they evaluate the validity of their facts and decide how to organize it. They must think creatively as they communicate their ideas in the form of a graph, drawing, or infographic. The more students exercise critical and creative thinking, the better problem-solvers they will be!
- **Personification:** Have students write letters from one inanimate object to another. For example, primary grade students may write a letter from the day of the week Monday to the day of the week Friday. Older students may write a letter from one character in a novel to another character. Or have a historical or literary figure write a critique of a contemporary song, show, or movie. What would Napoleon Bonaparte think of the latest Spiderman movie? How might Ann Frank review the latest song from Jay Z? Personification requires students to re-contextualize what they know about the subject(s) and apply their thinking in a novel way.
- **Concept Map (Revisited):** Create a concept web after a read-aloud or guided reading session, focusing on the reading and comprehension strategies. Then have students investigate related nonfiction content and have them revisit their concept web, adding expository information in a different color.

- **RAFT:** Use the RAFT strategy to differentiate instruction and to promote creative thinking. Assign (or have students choose) a **R**ole, an **A**udience, the **F**ormat, and the **T**opic. For example, you may have students present a Topic that is related to their reading, and students might choose to play the Role of a newscaster, present in the Format of a cartoon, and pretend their Audience are parents. To aid student choice, here's a [list of possibilities](#) for each part of the acronym.

Anytime Strategies

Critical thinking doesn't have to be aligned to a specific lesson or set of content. In order to establish a culture of critical thinking, encourage teachers to look for opportunities throughout the day to push students to think deeply and creatively. Here are a few ideas to share...

Challenges

- **Puzzle Piece Challenge:** Boost creative thinking by giving students a random puzzle piece (I get mine from the dollar store!) and ask them how their puzzle piece connects to something they just learned. Some answers may be obvious; some may be silly, but they all require creative thinking, and they usually lead to a few laughs as well!
- **5-word Challenge:** Challenge students to take what they are learning and convey it in a condensed form. For example, ask them to describe a particular concept in five words or less. Simplifying a message is one of the most sought-after skills in the workplace and requires both creative and critical thinking.

Things to Say

- **Think Alouds:** Model self-direction and metacognition by thinking aloud. You can share your rationale as you design an investigation plan so that students learn to emulate that thought process when they design their own investigation plans. You can share possible reasons for a particular result so students see what ongoing critical thinking looks like. Thinking aloud also supports a culture of risk-taking by modeling the communication of ideas freely and without judgment.

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- **Question Stems:** Use these prompts regularly in your classroom to promote deep thinking:
 - What would happen if...
 - What would it be like to...
 - What's another way to...
 - Where else can you...
 - Say more...
 - Can you restate...
 - Can you add to...
 - How does this connect to...

Games

- **Mystery Box:** Put an object that's connected to your content into a "mystery box." Start your class by having students ask yes/no questions to figure out what is in the box. Students have to analyze the ongoing information and think critically about what question will best help solve the mystery.
- **Zoom In:** Create a sense of intrigue and mystery in your classroom to boost student engagement and curiosity. Zoom in on a portion of a larger picture (or use a site such as [Zoomed in Answers](#)). Have students describe what they see and then make guesses as to what the larger picture may be. Have students support their guesses with evidence from their observation. Zoom out a little at a time and eventually affirm the curiosity of the class as they see the full picture. You can do this all in one setting, or you can use it as a motivator, showing the zoomed-in image at the beginning of a lesson and the reveal at the end of the lesson.

A Little Extra

- **Where, Not What:** When correcting student work, don't tell them what to fix; tell them where fixes are needed, and allow them to figure out what needs to be fixed. They can ask you for help, certainly — but with this strategy you subtly shift the emphasis away from yourself as the provider of knowledge, and onto the students as learners responsible for their own discoveries.
- **Information Literacy:** Try any of these 4 mini-lessons in [Information Nation: Developing Information Literacy Leaders](#) to help students hone their critical thinking when it comes to evaluating informational sources.
 - **Lesson 1: Do You Dare?** Teach students that while on their search for reliable information, first looks can be deceiving.
 - **Lesson 2: Is This Information CRAAP?** Have students use this acronym and their critical thinking skills to guide their information inquiries. Here's an [additional resource](#) students can use to apply the CRAAP protocol to their sources.
 - **Lesson 3: The Quest for Truth** Take students on an information literacy voyage through this interactive QR code activity.
 - **Lesson 4: Cases to Crack** Encourage students to exercise critical thinking as they use their information literacy skills to crack the case!

What Success Looks Like

Critical thinking reaches far beyond the subjects of math, science, ELA, and social studies, so look to find the fruits of this labor in the most unexpected places. As your teachers incorporate critical thinking exercises, watch as students start to look ahead and anticipate consequences, remain genuinely inquisitive, stay open to a variety of worldviews, and exhibit more confidence in their ability to reason. These are signs that your students' critical thinking skills are growing!



Infusing ELA and Social Studies with Project-Based Learning

If your teachers would like to try a project-based learning (PBL) unit that gets students thinking critically, take a look at the Blue Apple project, [Moments to Remember](#).

This project gets students thinking critically and creatively as they ponder the question, “How can we make a memory live on forever?” Through research, students will make friends with a resident of a retirement home. They will listen to the story of their new friend’s life, and craft a biography capturing the moments that made their life meaningful.



For information about this project, check out these resources:

- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson by lesson summary of this project.
- Check out [K-8 content standard connections](#) for this project.
- Check out the rich and diverse [Recommended Book List](#).
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).

**[Click here](#) if you would like to see a FREE 30-minute webinar of this content:
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START PBL TODAY WITH BLUE APPLE PROJECTS!

Each Blue Apple Project Includes:

- Engaging lessons designed to make learning memorable, meaningful, and fun
- Curated online resources to save you time searching for content
- In-person, virtual, and hybrid options for all learning environments
- Cross-curricular mini-lessons in English-Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, and Social-Emotional Learning
- Videos and contact info provided by real-world experts willing to meet with your students
- Collaboration opportunities with other classrooms
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For details, go to: www.blueappleteacher.org.



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creativity, and critical thinking thrive.**

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