CRITICAL THINKING

A Casebook

MADELEINE PICCIOTTO

CRITICAL THINKING: A CASEBOOK

Madeleine Picciotto

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NOTE: The characters, location, and episodes depicted in the following cases are entirely fictitious. Any relationship to actual people, places, or events is completely coincidental.

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Note to Readers

The fifteen fully-developed cases and eight mini-cases that constitute *Critical Thinking: A Casebook* depict the goings-on during a single semester at Cromwell College, a fictitious institution of higher learning. Cromwell is a small, selective liberal arts college somewhere in the United States, but the events that occur there are not unlike those that occur at many real-life colleges and universities across the country. Although many of the cases focus on Cromwell's first-year students, most of whom are the traditional college age of eighteen, many of the dilemmas confronted and the issues raised—including racism, rape, cheating, childbearing, cults, and computer fraud—should be of interest to students of any age at any college.

Cromwell may or may not resemble your own educational institution. It is, after all, a fictional construct; the setting and the cases themselves are partially drawn from existing realities, but they are not real. Cromwell is a particular type of college that may be very different from the one you are attending, and it attracts a student population that may be very different from the students you see on your own campus. You may wish to think about the similarities and differences between your own realities as a college student and the "realities" faced by the unique group of individuals at Cromwell.

To assist you in investigating the cases and the issues they raise, an introductory chapter ("Thinking Critically") presents basic techniques for taking an active approach to the text. More important than remembering the name of every logical fallacy, however, is acquiring the general habit of inspecting every situation you encounter carefully, thoughtfully, and critically.

As you read through the cases, imagine yourself in the situations presented and try to figure out how you would deal with the moral, ethical, political, social, and spiritual dilemmas that Cromwell's students encounter. Each of the fully-developed cases includes "Some Questions to Consider" that invite you to explore your own thoughts as you analyze the cases. Try to articulate for yourself *why* you think the way you do. There is no right answer to these questions; what is more important than any individual response is the ability to provide a convincing and coherent explanation of your point of view. "Thinking Critically" exercises encourage you to apply the critical thinking strategies discussed in the introductory chapter.

"Connecting the Cases" questions invite you to investigate the ways in which the various cases might relate to one another. Exploring the connections and examining the similarities and differences in the ways that particular issues are presented will help you to synthesize the various perspectives offered and come to some larger conclusions of your own. "Bringing It Home" questions encourage you to make a further connection—to your own institution.

"Suggestions for Writing" enable you to use various written formats, from informal journal entries to business memos to research-based essays, to express your thoughts. The "Out Loud" suggestion at the end of each case provides an opportunity to use presentations, role-plays, or debates for further development of your ideas.

It is the author's hope that this text will provide an engaging vehicle for the thoughtful exploration of significant issues, and that by further pursuing this exploration orally and in writing, you will learn to present your views clearly, coherently, and convincingly.

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Introduction

Thinking Critically

The alarm clock goes off. Tanya, a first-year student at Cromwell College, is immediately confronted with the need to make a decision. Possibilities abound: Should she turn off the alarm and go back to sleep, missing her 8:00 A.M. class? Should she let the alarm buzz for awhile, thereby ensuring that she is fully awake but perhaps, in the meantime, awakening her roommate who was up late studying and who has no reason to rise for another hour? Should she vent her frustration at her continual lack of sleep by hurling the clock against the wall? Should she turn the alarm off immediately and, by sheer strength of will, bound out of bed?

This is just the first of many decision-making moments Tanya will face in her day. Indeed, at every minute she will encounter the need to make decisions: some trivial (whether to wear the black socks or the brown ones) and some significant (whether to cheat on her chemistry exam). What does she need to do to make conscious, well-reasoned decisions? What kind of questions should she ask as she assesses the situations facing her?

Tanya needs to be a critical thinker. She needs to evaluate the situations she encounters carefully and thoughtfully. She needs to become familiar with a set of techniques and approaches that will enable her to examine critically not only the texts she reads in her classes, but the everyday events of college life.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

One of the first questions Tanya should ask as she works through an assigned reading or as she launches into a debate with her best friend is, "What's the point?" In other words, what is the central **issue** under discussion? Once she figures this out, she can then investigate the thesis or **conclusion** being offered concerning the issue at hand. The

conclusion is the message being conveyed; it is what an author or speaker is trying to prove.

Let's say Tanya's friend Kevin presents her with the following statement:

> My persnickety sociology professor takes attendance every day, and if you miss a certain number of class meetings, then he takes points off your grade. He's always whining about how ditching classes shows a careless attitude, and he claims that you can't do well if you don't show up. He seems to want to control student behavior like professors decades ago who required college students to attend chapel services. But we're living in a different age now, and the faculty can't exert that kind of control anymore. And anyway, I don't think he's taking a just approach to grading, because he isn't dealing with us fairly. In my opinion, as long as you do the work, showing up for class should be irrelevant.
>
> The point is, why should attendance have any impact on our grades? Students like us know we should be able to choose for ourselves whether or not to go to class. We're smart; we know what we're doing. We're in college now, and we're mature enough to be responsible. Sure, a few people may skip too many classes and end up not learning the material, but that's just a small minority. And if we don't get a chance to make mistakes, how will we ever learn to stand on our own two feet? Professors need to either leave the choice of attending classes to us or admit that they don't want to treat us like adults.
>
> You know, some people may not need to come to class every day—they may be familiar with the subject matter already, or they may be able to learn it just by doing the reading or talking to their classmates. If they can get the papers done, pass the tests, and so on, I don't see why attendance should have anything to do with their grades. After all, three students missed the review session our sociology professor held in the class meeting before our last exam, and these three students all got A's on the exam. It looks like missing class can actually help your course performance!
>
> I've done pretty well on all the written course work so far, too, even though I've been unable to attend at least seven classes. Maybe the professor resents that—I guess it makes him look bad if students can do okay without actually having to be in the same room with him all the time. I have a hunch that's why he's threatening to drastically lower my grade. He's just being malicious and trying to get back at me. It's no surprise that he has such low teaching evaluations. My friend Susan, who's a senior sociology major, says she heard he's really insecure. That makes sense to me, because if he was secure in himself, he wouldn't be so concerned about us showing up.
>
> Actually, lots of Cromwell faculty members agree with me about the attendance issue. Of the four courses I'm taking this semester, the professor takes attendance in only one of them; three out of four just don't see the point of doing it. My roommate Quentin, who's an education major, just did a study for a term paper that shows that most

> education professors don't take attendance either and that there isn't any difference in grade distributions between the professors who do take attendance and the ones who don't. My sociology professor is just out of step.
>
> Using attendance as a factor in grading is like judging people's artistic talent by how much time they spend in the studio. It's narrow and neurotic. Next thing you know, they'll start asking how long it takes us to do the assigned reading and give higher grades to people who take longer!

Tanya should be able to identify the issue at stake here: Should class attendance in itself have an impact on a student's course grade? Kevin, after all, makes it fairly easy for her to locate the main issue by highlighting it at the beginning of the second paragraph with the key phrase "The point is. . . . "

Tanya should also be able to identify Kevin's conclusion concerning the issue: Showing up for class—or not showing up for class—should have no bearing on the grading process ("as long as you do the work, showing up for class should be irrelevant"). Again, he gives her a tip-off phrase ("In my opinion . . . ") that serves as a handy signpost. Even without such indicators, however, Tanya—if she is to approach Kevin's presentation critically—must be able to locate his conclusion before she can proceed to evaluate the reasoning he uses to support it.

SO WHAT?

Before she invests too much time in discussing the issue with Kevin, however, Tanya needs to ask another set of questions: Is this a **significant** issue? Is the matter at hand really meaningful to her? Is it worth her time and energy? Is it just Kevin's pet peeve, or does it have larger importance? Could engaging in this discussion bring her to any new realizations? Could she learn something?

All right, Kevin's sociology professor takes attendance into account when assigning course grades—so what? Why should Tanya care? If she can't think of any reasons why she *should* care, then maybe she needs to change the subject. If, upon reflection, she decides that the issue does have some importance for her, then she can continue to examine Kevin's statement.

IS THAT A FACT?

Kevin's conclusion is supported by a set of **reasons** that explain *why* he believes in his conclusion. The conclusion and the reasons supporting

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it work together to constitute Kevin's **argument.** Throughout his argument, Kevin makes a number of **claims** or assertions about the way things are or the way they ought to be. Tanya needs to assess the truth of Kevin's claims; one way to begin doing this is to determine whether they are factually based.

For example, Kevin says that one reason why class attendance should be irrelevant in grading is because "we're mature enough to be responsible." Is that a fact? A **fact** is something that is known to be true, something that has been verified. A **tentative truth** is something that *may* be true, but that needs verification. An **opinion** is something that may be *believed* to be true, but that is questionable or debatable. Where, among these possibilities, does Kevin's claim fall?

Tanya needs to determine the extent to which Kevin is going beyond logical, factually-based reasoning and using strategies simply to affect her feelings. For instance, Tanya, like Kevin, is a student; he may be trying to use their shared position as students ("we're in college now") in order to engage her support for his cause. She needs to remain critically aware of such techniques in Kevin's argument.

PROVE IT!

Tanya can gain a clearer sense of the validity of Kevin's argument by assessing the **evidence** he provides in support of his claims. If Kevin wants one of his assertions to be convincing, he needs to prove it—to back it up with credible, or believable, evidence. What kind of evidence does he provide, and how credible is it?

In fact, Kevin offers various types of evidence, including personal experience and individual example, intuition, appeal to authority, and a research study. Tanya must evaluate *all* forms of evidence in Kevin's argument to determine its credibility.

To begin with, Kevin provides his own **personal experience** to support his case: he has "done pretty well" in his course work even though he has missed a number of classes. Tanya needs to consider whether Kevin's view of his own experience is really an objective one—*he* may think he has "done pretty well," but would his professor agree? She also must think about whether Kevin's experience is necessarily representative or typical of the experience of all students. Whenever someone offers a specific **example** or **case study** of a single individual's experience (whether it is their own experience or the experience of another), the question of whether or not the experience is representative must be addressed.

After Kevin asserts that he does not need to attend all his classes in order to complete the course work successfully, he goes on to claim, "Maybe the professor resents that—I guess it makes him look bad if

students can do okay without actually having to be in the same room with him all the time." Expressions such as "maybe," "I guess," and "I have a hunch" in Kevin's remarks suggest that he does not know *for a fact* that the professor feels this way; he merely infers it based on his **intuition.**

Kevin appeals to external **authority** when he cites the information provided by his friend Susan, a senior sociology major: "she heard he's really insecure." Although her presence in the sociology department may give Susan some acquaintance with its faculty members, does it really endow her with enough **expertise** (special knowledge about the subject) to determine that Kevin's professor is insecure? In fact, Kevin himself notes that this is just something that Susan has "heard"—a point which may do even more to call her credibility into question.

Kevin appeals to another sort of authority when he brings up his roommate Quentin's term paper, a **research study** that he offers as evidence to corroborate his reasoning. Tanya should consider a number of factors in reference to this study. First of all, she may wonder about the qualifications and expertise of the researcher, as well as his neutrality. Is a college senior necessarily the most authoritative source on this subject? She may also wonder about the credibility of a single, rather limited research study. Is the **sample** (the selection of people studied) large, broad, and representative enough? Has this study been replicated by other researchers? Have other studies demonstrated the same findings?

Of course Tanya must not forget to assess the relevance of this study to the matter at hand. Kevin mentions that Quentin's study determined that "there doesn't seem to be any difference in grade distributions between the professors who do take attendance and the ones who don't." What bearing does this have on the issue of whether or not attendance *should* play a part in course grading? Tanya must be alert to any confusion between a **descriptive** issue (one that involves what *does* occur) and a **prescriptive** issue (one that involves what *should* occur).

CHECK THE NUMBERS!

Tanya also needs to take a closer look at the **statistics** Kevin offers in support of his argument; specifically, the statistical evidence ("three out of four professors") in the fifth paragraph. Is this figure a convincing component of Kevin's reasoning? Is Kevin's sample (the four professors he happens to have this semester) too limited to be persuasive?

Does it even matter how many professors do or do not take attendance? If what we are trying to evaluate is whether or not attendance

should be a component in professors' grading criteria, is it really relevant to assess to what extent it *is* a component? Once again, we may have a confusion between the descriptive and the prescriptive.

WHO SAYS?

No matter how much evidence Kevin provides, Tanya needs to make sure that the sources of his evidence are reliable. We have already seen that there may be questions about the credibility of Susan and Quentin as authoritative, dependable sources. In fact, Kevin's own credibility could be called into question as well. He admits, in the fourth paragraph, that his sociology professor is threatening to lower Kevin's grade because of repeated absences. Is it possible that this threat has affected Kevin's perspective on the issue of attendance as a component of grading? Tanya should be alert to the possibility of **bias** in the sources of Kevin's evidence, and in his own approach to the subject.

WHERE ARE YOU COMING FROM?

Kevin's approach to the subject may be governed by the unspoken thoughts he brings to his argument. In order to determine where Kevin is coming from, Tanya needs to explore what Kevin does *not* explicitly express: the **assumptions** he takes for granted about how the world is or should be.

For example, Kevin asserts that "as long as you do the work, showing up for class should be irrelevant." There are a number of unspoken assumptions underlying this claim. One of the most significant is that "the work" of a course is what is done outside of regular class meetings—papers, exams, problem sets, lab reports, and other out-of-class assignments. Kevin's reasoning can proceed only by conceiving "course work" as something that is not undertaken in class. If we were to consider participation in class discussion or taking notes on a lecture as part of the work of a course, then it would be more difficult to reach the conclusion that "showing up for class should be irrelevant." Kevin's **descriptive assumption** concerning what course work *is* governs his entire argument.

Kevin also makes a number of **prescriptive** or **value assumptions** about how things *ought* to be, and these, too, govern his argument. For instance, Kevin asks this question: "And if we don't get a chance to make mistakes, how will we ever learn to stand on our own two feet?" Here he presupposes that learning "to stand on our own two feet" is a valuable component of a college education. If we do not agree

that this is part of what we *should* be learning, then we will be unconvinced by Kevin's reasoning.

SAY WHAT?

Because of the assumptions he makes and the biases he brings to the issue at hand, Kevin's language may not always be as neutral or precise as it could be. Tanya would be well advised to look closely at Kevin's choice of specific words and phrases.

Some of the terms Kevin uses are obviously slanted. For instance, he refers at the beginning of his argument to his "persnickety" professor's "whining," and he uses the word "neurotic" at the very end. In other cases, the slanting of terminology is a bit more subtle. For example, Kevin says that his professor "claims that you can't do well if you don't show up." By using a word such as "claims" (rather than, say, "states"), Kevin conveys a sense of questionability, suggesting that what the professor says is opinion rather than fact.

In some cases, Kevin's use of loaded language can be characterized as **euphemism** or **dysphemism.** A euphemism is a gentle or positive-sounding word or phrase that may be used to soften a harsh or negative meaning; for example, when speaking of the sociology classes he has missed, Kevin refers to them as classes he has "been unable to attend." Dysphemism—the opposite of euphemism, and so the use of harsh or negative language—can be seen when Kevin reports on his professor's attitude towards students "ditching" classes.

In all cases, whether the loaded language is subtle or overt, Tanya must think critically about the effects of Kevin's specific terminology, looking beyond the mere **denotation** of a word (its explicit meaning or definition) and taking into account its potential **connotations** (the meanings associated with or suggested by it).

Tanya should also be aware that many of the words Kevin uses are **ambiguous**—they may have multiple meanings, or they may simply be vague and undefined. For example, in his second paragraph he says college students are "mature enough to be responsible." What exactly do words such as "mature" and "responsible" mean here? Could they have different meanings for different people? What about words like "just" and "fairly," which Kevin uses in the first paragraph? How might such ambiguity affect Kevin's overall argument?

RUN THAT BY ME AGAIN!

So far Tanya has come across a number of areas in which Kevin's argument could bear further examination. As she investigates possible

weaknesses in his reasoning, she may want to run through a checklist of common logical **fallacies**—flaws in reasoning that can seriously undermine the credibility of an argument.

1. Emotive language: As we have already seen, Kevin has a tendency to depend on emotional appeals and emotion-laden language. Specific logical fallacies that fall under the category of emotive language include appeals to fear, appeals to pity, flattery, and peer pressure. For example, Kevin uses flattery when he says, "We're smart; we know what we're doing." He appeals to the vanity of his student audience in order to draw them into his argument.

2. False dilemma: Sometimes called the "either-or" fallacy, this describes the strategy of presenting only two extreme alternatives and excluding any middle ground. Kevin does this when he says, "Professors need to either leave the choice of attending classes to us or admit that they don't want to treat us like adults." Are those really the only available options?

3. Slippery slope: Often presented in the form of an "if-then" or "the next thing you know" statement, this fallacy suggests that if one thing happens, something else will necessarily follow. This may also be familiar as the "domino theory" or "ripple effect." We can see Kevin making use of this approach at the end of his argument: "Next thing you know, they'll start asking how long it takes us to do the assigned reading and give higher grades to people who take longer!" The problem is that we have no logical reason to believe that the first thing (using attendance to determine grades) will necessarily lead to the second (using length of reading time).

4. Circular reasoning: Sometimes described as a form of "begging the question" (that is, avoiding the issue), circular reasoning moves—as you might guess—in a circle. In other words, the justification of a claim is simply a restatement of the claim itself in a slightly altered form. When Kevin says, "I don't think he's taking a just approach to grading, because he isn't dealing with us fairly," his explanation simply proceeds by the use of near-synonyms: the approach isn't just because it isn't fair. Has he really explained anything?

5. Ad hominem: From the Latin phrase meaning "to the person," this fallacy uses a personal attack on an individual as a substitute for a reasoned critique of the individual's position. When Kevin refers to his sociology professor as "persnickety" and "insecure," and when he says, "He's just being malicious and trying to get back at me," he is engaging in ad hominem attacks.

6. Ad populum: From the Latin phrase meaning "to the people," this fallacy makes an appeal to the shared values or beliefs of the audience, playing on people's natural desire to be part of a group. Kevin uses this strategy in his second paragraph when he refers to what "students like us know."

7. Common practice: Here the appeal is not to popular beliefs, but to popular behavior—an "everyone is doing it" or "bandwagon" approach. When Kevin argues that three of his four professors do not take attendance and that, according to Quentin's study, most education professors do not take attendance either, he seems to suggest that the majority behavior is the norm, and that his sociology professor's policy is an aberration which should be rectified.

8. Red herring: This fallacy is a classic example of distraction—using an unrelated point to distract the audience's attention from the real issue at hand. Its name derives from the old practice of using a dead fish to distract dogs from the scent of their prey. One "dead fish" in Kevin's argument can be found when he refers in his fourth paragraph to his sociology professor's "low teaching evaluations." What does this point have to do with the issue of using attendance as a factor in grading?

9. Straw man: When the arguments of the opposition are exaggerated or distorted and then attacked, we end up with a "straw man" that is easily knocked down. In his opening paragraph, Kevin says that his sociology professor "seems to want to control student behavior like professors decades ago who required college students to attend chapel services." He then continues, "But we're living in a different age now, and the faculty can't exert that kind of control anymore." Is Kevin necessarily giving an accurate portrayal of his professor's position when he talks about what his professor "seems to want"? When he makes the point that "we're living in a different age now," is he rebutting his professor's actual position, or merely an imaginary position that Kevin himself has created?

10. Generalizations: Frequently signaled by such words as "all," "every," "always," "never," and "none," **broad generalizations** or **overstatements** are unqualified statements about all members of a category or group. Stereotyping is one form of overstatement. A conclusion based on a limited or unrepresentative sample is a **hasty generalization.** We see Kevin falling into this fallacy when he provides the "three out of four professors" statistic and draws the conclusion that "lots of Cromwell faculty members agree with me about the attendance issue." Based on his sample of only four professors, can he legitimately draw a conclusion about the views of "lots of Cromwell faculty members"?

11. False analogy: An **analogy** is a comparison that highlights the resemblance or similarity between two different things. When evaluating the soundness of an analogy, we need to examine how similar the two things being compared actually are and how significant the similarities may be. In his final paragraph Kevin says, "Using attendance as a factor in grading is like judging people's artistic talent by how much time they spend in the studio." Is grading a student in a particular course really comparable to judging artistic ability? Is attending class really comparable to spending time in an art studio?

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