Open Road Films (II)/Photofest

CHAPTER 2

CRITICAL THINKING

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Understand the basic tenets of critical thinking and how they affect journalism.
- Assess the quality of your own thinking by applying the crucial aspects of critical thought.
- Apply critical-thinking skills to analyze stories for signs of "fake news" and other erroneous elements.
- Enhance your reporting through stronger analysis of your approach to content gathering and news writing.
- Demonstrate proactive and reactive skills during the process of reporting.
- Apply critical thought in analyzing content in terms of relevance and value to your audience.

Thinking Ahead: How to Fully "Get" a Story

As a reporter, you always need to get the story. However, the definition of "getting" the story differs from reporter to reporter. The central theme of this book is that getting the story means more than picking up facts and quotes as if they were items on a grocery list that you simply toss into your cart. Because you are the one "cooking the meal," so to speak, you need to understand how those items work to form the larger whole.

Getting the story means fully understanding your story and making sure that you can explain what is going on to your audience. It entails a lot of research beforehand, concentration during the entire reporting process and follow-up work once you begin writing. You have to understand how what you ask can lead to what your audience will know. You must be able to balance the perspective of your readers and viewers with that of the sources you will seek. In the end, you need to be both self-aware and aware of others as you attempt to put together your work as a journalist.

Learning how to think critically will make you a better journalist and help you not only get the story but also understand the story as you pursue it. **Critical thinking** often gets lost amid the time pressure of a 24/7 news-on-demand world. Unfortunately, with the deluge of information that comes at you in rapid-fire fashion and from the endless sea of "publishers" on the internet, understanding how to think critically has never been more important.

Critical thinking is a skill you can develop over time. Some people are naturally curious and have an intuitive sense of exactly what questions they need to ask. Others need time to come to grips with what they learned and make it part of the bigger picture. If you are the latter, don't worry. It doesn't mean you aren't or will never be a critical thinker. What it does mean is that you will likely need to practice critical-thinking skills a bit more in order to become better at it. The remainder of this chapter is geared toward helping you understand how to do that.

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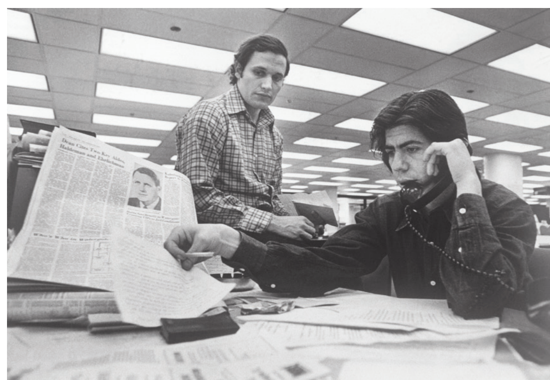

Bob Woodward (left) and Carl Bernstein, Washington Post staff writers who investigated the Watergate case, at their desk in the Post. As the reporters followed this difficult story, they relied on critical thinking as they determined what they could accurately report and what needed more work.

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HOW DO WE THINK?

In their book "How Do Journalists Think," Holly Stocking and Paget Gross lay out a cognitive process by which journalists react to stimuli in their environment. The reporters then match those stimuli with previously understood categories they developed in their minds over time. In doing so, the journalists can use the old information stored in those categories to inform them about the new situation in front of them.

Perhaps this is a better way to look at it: Imagine your mind as a giant filing cabinet with millions of pieces of categorized information stored inside. When a term comes up, like "musician," you flip through your files quickly and see what you've categorized inside those files that fits that term. For some, it's country and western singers like Dolly Parton and Jason Aldean. For others, it's Post Malone and Halsey. For still others, it's the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. You then pull all the information from that file and use it to assess the current person being dubbed a "musician." Was there ever a time when your parents told you, "That's not music. That's garbage" when you were listening to something they didn't like? Their rationale comes from their own sense of what music is and is not.

Stocking and Gross note that the way journalists think and categorize and report is "fraught with bias." They argue that journalists need to do more to understand the process of how they categorize information and what the implications are for those cognitive shortcuts their minds take.[1] One good way to do this is to engage in a critical-thinking perspective. Because it's not possible to rewrite the way in which you think, instead this chapter will offer you suggestions on ways to think about how you think from a critical-thinking perspective. While this chapter is all about critical thinking, it is not here alone that we will engage in this process. This approach to thinking will be woven into each chapter of the book.

Defining Critical Thinking

The Foundation for Critical Thinking defines critical thinking as the art of analyzing and evaluating thought with a view to improving it. It is an ongoing process that provides individuals with the ability not only to examine a topic but also to reflect on how they come to understand it. In other words, it is a process, not a goal, that will perpetually provide individuals with the opportunity to see what they are doing, question why they are doing it and grow through that process.

In his essay on critical thinking, scholar Richard Paul writes that critical thinkers seek to improve thinking by analyzing their approach to thought and then using that process to upgrade their thinking. Unfortunately, Paul says, students at most colleges and universities do not get the chance to learn this way in the classroom. He notes that 97% of faculty who responded to a nationwide survey as far back as 1972 agreed that critical thinking was an important part of education. However, Paul also notes that education is still provided primarily by a series of lectures that

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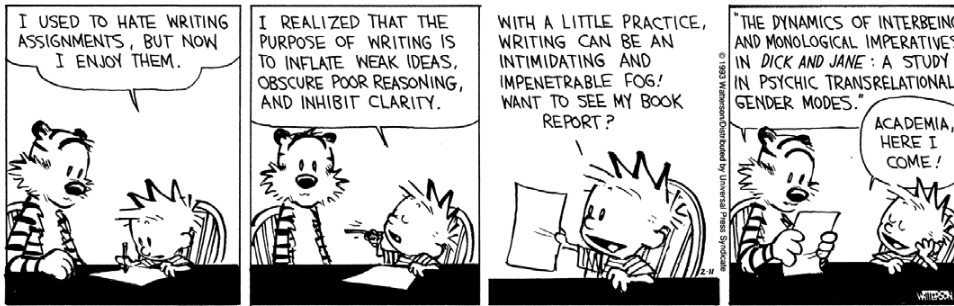

Don't try to snow your readers. The use of weak ideas and overblown jargon isn't helping anyone.

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focus on the rote memorization of specific facts and the ability to regurgitate those facts when called upon.[2] While this is a bad thing for all education, it is particularly disturbing for those of us who teach in journalism, where thinking on the fly is crucial and the answers aren't on a Scantron sheet.

Learning How to Think

In his book "Thinking," Robert Boostrom outlines several cases in which students were accomplishing learning tasks but weren't thinking. One such case involved a conversation between Boostrom and his son, a middle school student. The boy was explaining that he needed to identify Thomas Jefferson in order to complete an assignment. When Boostrom suggested a few possibilities (signer of the Declaration of Independence, former president of the United States), his son explained that those answers were not correct. The boy then said that Jefferson was properly identified as the vice president under John Adams. When Boostrom asked how the boy came to this conclusion, his son explained that all he had to do was look through his textbook until he found Jefferson's name in bold and then copy down the phrase that followed.[3]

This example makes it clear that learning something is not the same as thinking, let alone engaging in critical thinking. Instead of examining why the "vice president" answer was the best answer, the boy simply knew that if he wanted to get credit for his homework, he needed to write it down. Many of the classroom experiences you have had to this point were likely similar in nature to what this boy experienced. You were told to memorize the states and their capitals. You were tested on whether you could remember the names or actions of characters in a play or novel. You had to complete timed tests based on applying specific mathematical formulas to a set of equations. While all of these activities give you knowledge, they don't make you think.

Memorization is not the enemy of thinking, but rather a complement to it in many ways. However, if you wish to succeed in journalism, you need to go beyond memorization and learn how to think critically about what you are doing, how you will go about doing it and why you are doing it in the first place.

THE REQUIREMENTS OF CRITICAL THOUGHT

In their volume on critical thinking, Joe Kinchloe and Danny Weil argue that critical thinkers possess "a radical humility" in which they are aware of the complex nature of life. They don't allow themselves to be limited by what they think

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To become good at critical thinking, you need to practice it on a daily basis.
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they know. Instead, they examine each situation as if it is a "great wide open" of possibilities.[4] Journalists who are good at what they do often approach their job this way and thus far exceed their less complex colleagues.

The question then becomes, how does one engage in critical thought and see these larger ideas in more comprehensive ways? Linda Elder and Richard Paul of the Foundation for Critical Thinking state that critical thought comes from reasoning. It is one thing to assert something, but it is quite another to be able to develop a logical framework from which one can make a clear and coherent point that can be defended against contradictory arguments. This approach to thinking comes from a well-trained mind, developed through practice and honed by challenge.

In other words, you learn how to do this through practice. Don't worry so much if you don't have a complete mastery of critical thinking right off the bat. Nothing you've ever done in life has come without some level of trial and error. For example, think all the way back to the first time you successfully tied your shoelaces. Whether you tried the "bunny ears" technique or the "loop, swoop and pull" method, you likely didn't get it right the first dozen times you tried. Then, finally, you found just enough loop and barely enough swoop that when you pulled, you got a partial knot that was hanging there by a thread. Still, you did it. The knots eventually improved until the point where tying your shoes became second nature. Chances are, you don't even remember the last time you did it or what you were thinking about at the time.

Critical thinking will eventually come to you as well, as long as you practice it.

HOW TO APPROACH A STORY AS A CRITICAL THINKER

A journalist zooms in on the action as part of a story that includes photography and writing. What the core of the story is and how best to tell it will be part of the critical-thinking process this reporter uses during the writing.
Iya Forbes/Moment/Getty Images

Researchers Susan Fiske and Shelly Taylor once noted that humans are cognitive misers; we like to expend as little energy as possible when we are asked to think. To conserve that mental energy, we draw on previous experiences, break things down to the simplest way to look at them and find

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ways around hard thinking.[5] Even now, in your classes, it is likely that you're sitting back listening to a professor lecture. The professor is pouring information out and you are picking it up in dribs and drabs like a sponge. It is easy, it is simple and it is not what journalism is about.

Elder and Paul argue that critical thinking is the ability to ensure that you are using the best possible thinking measures in any situation in which you find yourself.[6] You want to figure out "the lay of the land" or better understand the entire puzzle. To do this, you need as much information as possible as you reason out how to approach a problem, such as how to write on a given topic or how to tell a specific story.

Perhaps a better way of explaining this is to understand what makes certain people good at a game like chess. Great chess players understand the moves each piece can make and understand what strengths and weaknesses are inherent to those pieces. In addition, they can see the whole board, much like how a conductor sees a whole orchestra or a quarterback sees the whole playing field. The great chess player not only can see what is happening, but understands what is likely to happen. Great players can see a few moves ahead and anticipate what they will see next.

Inferior players obsess about the pieces or become fixated on one portion of the board. They don't understand the entirety of the game well enough to make rational choices as to what to do several moves down the road and thus are stuck making simple decisions without looking ahead.

Good journalists are both proactive and reactive as they survey the chessboard that is their story. Rather than looking at the story as a single incident, good journalists look for patterns in behavior. They see what has happened before this moment in time and what ripples will continue to move outward in the future from this moment. To become good at critical thinking, you need to be prepared for what is likely to come next, adapt to changes that occur during the process and synthesize all of the incoming information into an overarching understanding of what is going on and why it matters.

A deeper look at content and questioning what you are told are both trademarks of good critical thinkers. In addition, the critical thinker:

- Raises vital questions and problems by coming to grips with the topic.
- Gathers and assesses relevant information.
- Thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing as need be their assumptions, implications and practical consequences.
- Communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

Let's consider each of those items in turn.

Raising Vital Questions by Coming to Grips With the Topic

Fully immersing yourself in a specific topic or area is one of the best ways to fully understand the stories on which you'll be asked to report. Some of the best bloggers are folks who focus on one issue: health care, politics or safety. Newspapers

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often have beat reporters who cover a specific topic or geographic location. Beats for public safety, education, city government, religion, finance and sports are common in newspapers. If you examine some newspapers' bylines closely, you will notice that specific individuals tend to cover the same types of stories. Television stations, while often using the general assignment approach with their reporters, have journalists who cover specific time slots and certain parts of the coverage area. The media outlets do this because it gives the reporter a chance to develop relationships with sources through repeated contact.

One of the risks of this focus is that journalists can fall into patterns of coverage that allow them to create stories that look like they come off of an assembly line, each the same as the previous one with a comfortable narrative baked into each piece. The problem associated with this is when reporters fall into a rut with their work and don't question what it is that they are writing or why they aren't looking beyond the basic day-in, day-out coverage to inform their readers. Even when reporters find bigger-picture stories by seeing the individual stories that come out of a beat over time, it doesn't necessarily follow that they are engaging in high-level critical thought.

For example, let's look at the case of a school district that wants to build a high school. To get the money needed to construct the school, the district must put a referendum on the ballot and ask the public to approve the borrowing of $20 million. The referendum has failed three times before, and the current school continues to fall into disrepair. Each time, the vote is approximately 60/40 against the project.

A solid reporter can look at the issue and note that it's been up three times before and failed all three times. It is a simple case of reviewing previous stories, talking to the school board members and interviewing district citizens about the plan. The story is important, but the author is failing to come to grips with the topic.

What makes the people vote against the project? Is there a particular aspect of the plan that people think is not worth the cost? Is that Olympic-class swimming pool that adds $2 million to the price tag a real thorn in the side of people who voted it down? How about the $3 million sports complex for the football program? Are people dissatisfied with the costs of things they don't believe are tied to academics?

A story that digs into the people and groups that opposed the project could reveal if there is one key thing, like the pool or the sports complex, that led to the referendum's failure. On the other hand, it might be something else entirely that nobody was looking at, such as a collection of people on fixed incomes who did not believe they could afford to pay any additional taxes. It might be a group of people who live in town, but send their children to a private school and fear improvements at the public high school could undermine enrollment in their educational academy.

A data-driven story would compare the costs of this referendum with those put forth by other nearby towns and cities. Showing readers what they will get for the cost of the new school compared with other approaches might improve their opinion of the project ahead of the next petition for funding. Conversely, it might reveal that the costs of the proposed project are too high compared with other similar school districts, thus forcing the school board to rethink its approach to the funding proposal.

On the other hand, who is voting for the plan? What do they see as the benefits of the new school? Will it provide better overall education and improve the

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community, or will it give students something they can't get right now? Is it cheaper to build than to renovate the existing school?

A story on who these people are could create a sense of understanding between the two sides, perhaps persuading people who voted against the proposal to back it. Or, it could showcase something about the proposal that will diminish support for it, as those who voted for it now understand an ulterior motive of those who drove the proposal forward. Again, a data-driven story could showcase to what degree school improvements lead to better towns, smarter kids or higher property values. Conversely, the story might show that money spent in this fashion is as fiscally responsible as throwing gold down a toilet.

Gathering and Assessing Relevant Information

Usually, journalists are pretty good at gathering information. We go back through previous stories on a topic, read relevant documents on the topic, ask questions of sources and get as much information as we can about the upcoming event.

In his book "Newsthinking," Bob Baker notes that skilled reporters have a sense of what they will see when they attend a meeting, cover a fire or interview a politician. They have a sense about what makes the story newsworthy, and that sense helps them break down the story into simple pieces. They then develop a checklist of sorts, which helps them determine what information they have and what they need to make the story complete.[7]

However, gathering information is only half of the job. Assessing the information is the other half, and it matters more. In assessing the information, we allow ourselves to think about the story and what it is really going to tell people. Even more, it gives us a chance to see if what we have gathered makes sense.

Fairness and balance are two important aspects of journalism, but they should not prevent you from thinking critically about the story at hand. A quote often attributed to journalism educators at the University of Sheffield captures this perfectly: "If someone says it's raining outside and another person says it's dry, it's not your job to quote them both. Your job is to look out the window and find out which one is true." In other words, don't just take what everyone tells you as gospel and pour it all into your story. Think about what you were told, determine what makes the most sense and get to the heart of the story.

Let's say you're doing a story on a city council's decision to increase taxes to fund a public park. You've got a direct split on the issue, with five council members voting each way on it. When you start to question people about their position, chances are, most of them have a pretty polished answer as to why they support or don't support the tax

Gathering information requires you to research your topic and interview key sources. How you do this will determine the overall quality of your work.

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increase. For those who support it, they might say, "Our children are our most precious resource. They need to be able to experience things that this park can provide." For those against the tax, they could tell you something along the lines of "This tax places an undue financial burden on the citizens of this city."

Good reporters know they need to get quotes from both groups on this. An even better reporter would talk to folks who aren't on the council about their feelings on these issues. However, a reporter who engages in critical thinking breaks out of the mold and questions the underlying assumptions in this story. What is an "undue burden" in the minds of those people? How much will this tax increase really cost citizens? How many kids will this park likely serve? Even if the cost is low, if no one uses it, does the park have value? What happened the last time a city built a park or raised a tax? Did the citizenry end up in the poorhouse?

There are dozens of other questions that could come up through this process of analysis, but the big thing to keep in mind is that you need to look beyond the simple aspects of the well-polished answers and get some bigger questions on the table. Sometimes, the end result is that the story is very simple: some people like the park, others don't. However, you won't know that until you start asking more complex questions.

Thinking Open-Mindedly

It is a good idea to come to a meeting, a speech or a news conference with some sort of idea as to what is likely to happen and what it will mean. That's what pre-reporting does for you. That said, you need to think for yourself and adapt to the situation. In "Newsthinking," Baker notes that good journalists tailor their approach to the circumstances surrounding the story. Journalists need to improvise and adapt to what is going on so they can make it mean something to the audience.

When we take on stories, journalists often ask, "What do I want to tell the readers?" If you really want to do quality work, you need to realize that your story isn't all about you or what you want. Instead, you need to ask yourself, "What would I want to know most if I were reading this?" or "What would my readers need to know for this story to have value to them?" This means reacting to changes that occur in front of you, reassessing the value of the information you gather as you continue to report and keeping an eye on the best possible story at all times.

If you attend a meeting and you plan to write a story on how the city council will approve a plan to build a skating rink, you obviously need to know all you can about that area, the plan, the cost, the council's feelings on the plan and so forth. However, you also can't get tunnel vision and focus solely on that idea. If someone takes the podium and expresses disgust at the way in which a developer has polluted the city's rivers or if a council member resigns in protest over a proposal to ban smoking from local restaurants, you can't just stay focused on the skating rink. You've got to think fast and get on these other developments.

Communicating Effectively With Others

As we noted earlier, good journalists always want to tell stories that matter to their audience members. The ability to do so goes beyond finding the stories that

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Helpful Hints → The Topeka Test

An editor at the Wisconsin State Journal first introduced me to this concept more than 20 years ago, and it might go back even further than that. The **Topeka test** is a way to examine your story to assess whether you've done your job educating your readers about the story they are reading and how it fits into a larger picture.

Imagine a salesman catching a flight from Topeka, Kansas, to a faraway city (New York, Los Angeles, London, etc.). He has a brief layover in your town, so he grabs a copy of your paper before he catches a connecting flight. The salesman then reads your article on the second leg of the flight. Is there enough background in the story that the salesman can fully understand your story? If not, you've failed the Topeka test, and you need to go back and take another pass at your story.

Let's take a look at a story that doesn't quite pass the test:

> New York Gov. Elliot Spitzer resigned Wednesday, amid allegations he had purchased the services of high-priced prostitutes and been subsequently caught by a federal probe into the call-girl service.
>
> "I cannot allow my private failings to disrupt the people's work," Spitzer said at a press conference held at his Midtown office.
>
> Spitzer's resignation will be effective Monday at noon and push Lt. Gov. David Paterson into the role of governor. The resignation takes place approximately 14 months after he took office.

While the story tells the 5W's and 1H to some degree, we don't really get a full picture of this incident. Is it rare for a governor to resign in this fashion? What makes Spitzer's case particularly shocking or different? Who is Spitzer? Who is Paterson? By answering more of these types of questions, you can have a much better feel for the value of the story, and you'll be closer to passing the Topeka test. Let's try this instead:

> New York Gov. Elliot Spitzer, who built a reputation as a fierce opponent of corruption and crime, resigned Wednesday after revelations that he patronized a high-priced prostitution service.
>
> "I cannot allow my private failings to disrupt the people's work," Spitzer said at a press conference held at his Midtown office less than 48 hours after his name came up in a federal probe into the call-girl ring.
>
> Spitzer's resignation will be effective Monday at noon and will make him the first New York governor to leave office amid scandal in nearly a century. His replacement, Lt. Gov. David Paterson, is a 22-year veteran of the state legislature.

While neither approach will win a Pulitzer, you'll notice how the second version offers more information with a few bits of context. We find out that Spitzer was an opponent of illegal activities, only to be caught in one himself. We figure out who Paterson is and why his new job will be significant. We find out how rare this event is and why it matters. In short, we get more information. All of this, mind you, is the product of critical thinking. By seeking broader layers of context, the reporter in the second case gave us a better sense of the importance of the story.

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matter and requires that you write the story in way that the audience members can understand.

When you write, you must explain unfamiliar elements of the story to your audience. If you don't know what a tax-increment finance district is, do you really think your readers do? Don't pass the buck and force them to do the research you should have done. Even more, you want to explain what it does and how it

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will matter to them if the city approves or denies the implementation of a TIF. Whether you write this phrase or merely think it as you write, you want to tell your readers, “Here is how and why this matters to you.”

You must provide enough context for your readers to firmly grasp not only this story, but the entire topic you are covering. If the audience missed previous stories on this topic, will they fully understand what is going on? Even daily stories on the incremental progress of infamous trials, the impeachment of presidents and the 9/11 terrorist attacks provided readers with enough background to keep them up to speed. Stories that fail to give people enough information to fully understand them are of little use to the audience.

Use words you think your audience will understand. Don’t be afraid to look things up and explain them to the audience. Give the audience members a sense as to how the story can affect their lives.

HOW TO THINK YOUR WAY PAST FAKE NEWS

As we discussed in Chapter 1, fake news has become a prevalent part of people’s daily media consumption, and it shows no sign of slowing down any time soon. The opportunity for people to make money from splashy, fraudulent headlines and slanted, fake stories ensures that journalists will continue to face an uphill battle as we try to inform people and keep them from being snowed.

The New York Times reported on one such situation, in which an Austin, Texas, businessman with a handful of Twitter followers sparked a viral fervor in about 48 hours.[8] The day after the 2016 presidential election, Eric Tucker posted several photos of buses gathered near a hotel and stated that, “Anti-Trump protestors in Austin today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses (sic) they came in.”

Tucker turned out to be wrong, as the buses were connected to a software company that held a conference in town that week. However, the tweet was shared more than 16,000 times, leading to coverage on multiple blogs and websites. Even the president-elect tweeted about how “unfair” the busing in of protesters was.

Local news outlets began poking at the story to find out what was going on. Coach USA, the company that owned the buses, had to put out a statement that its fleet had no connection to any anti-Trump protests. Tableau, the software company that hired the buses, also made a statement to local media outlets to claim credit for the buses. Snopes, an internet fact-checking site, stated that the claim that protesters had been bused in was untrue. However, the tweet continued to generate a massive amount of attention. Tucker eventually found out he was wrong and labeled his work as such, but the spread of the falsehood far exceeded anything a correction could hope to refute. In the middle of this mess, Tucker received multiple inquiries about how he knew the buses carried anti-Trump protesters and how he verified his information. In the Times article, he was quoted as saying, “I’m also a very busy businessman and I don’t have time to fact-check everything that I put out there, especially when I don’t think it’s going out there for wide consumption.”

As journalists, our job is to avoid getting duped but also to help other people see the importance of being right before they share information. As part of her work

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with the Power Shift Project for the Freedom Forum Institute, critical-thinking expert Jill Geissler (whom you will meet later in this chapter) has developed a list of things critical thinkers do. Here are a few of those items that will help you avoid the snares of fake news and help teach others how to keep themselves out of trouble:

- **Check for biases, including your own:** We talked about this a bit in Chapter 1 when we discussed the idea of self-confirming biases and how they can lead people to believe things that aren't accurate. It is this predisposition to being biased in favor of something (or against something else) that leads us to want to find things that support our own way of thinking. To avoid adding to the chorus of inaccuracy, stop and think about how bias may play a role in your likelihood to believe in something.
- **Dig beneath the surface:** This is where journalists tend to separate themselves from private citizens in terms of critical thought. The aphorism "If your mother says she loves you, go check it out," perfectly captures our desire to find the root of all information and its accuracy. Digging into something can be as simple as finding the key source of a statement like Tucker's, or it can be as complex as building data sets to refute a politician's statement about who donated to his campaign. The goal of digging is to make sure that when you do decide to share information or publish articles (or even retweet something), you feel as confident as you can that the information is accurate.
- **Identify stakeholders:** Journalists have a long tradition of figuring out what side A thinks and why and what side B thinks and why. To identify stakeholders in today's era of fake news, you must go beyond that and dig deeper. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the stakeholders of fake-news farms have a simple reason for creating false news: money. The people who share and reshare the content on certain websites can also be driven by financial desires, but in some cases, it's about gaining popularity. In the wake of the 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas, a Twitter user posted a photo of a man and a plea to help find his missing dad. When the tweet was found to be a hoax, a journalist asked him why he would do such a thing. His response: "I think you know why. For the retweets."[9] When you dig into a topic, you want to identify a wide variety of potential stakeholders, including people who are directly involved with making something happen. That said, always keep an eye on those folks who have a way of benefiting or losing from the actions of others.
- **Consider alternatives:** One of the questions someone asked Tucker after his tweet went viral was whether there could be another explanation for the buses' being in Austin. His response was that he considered that briefly but discarded it quickly. As journalists, we want to do more than skip past plausible explanations for things that don't support our presuppositions. The goal each time we ply our trade is to tell the audience an accurate story, so in many cases, we need to pick through plausible alternatives to what we are telling them and figure out to what degree they could be accurate. Seeing the buses, a critical thinker would wonder why they were there. It was plausible that they ferried in protesters from out of state, but it could be equally plausible that they brought in participants

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for a multilevel-marketing company's rally or a Coach USA convention to which everyone brought their own bus. A quick call to the bus company or the hotels nearby would have helped cut this guesswork off at the pass.

CRITICAL THOUGHT AND THE VALUE OF YOUR QUESTIONS

One of the things you'll note about the material above is that it involves a great many questions. While this sounds a little too obvious, questions are meant to elicit responses from a person who has information to better inform the questioner. It is not an obvious thing, however, as it pertains to journalism, because far too often, journalists ask questions for completely different reasons.

Asking Questions to Get Quotes or Soundbites

One of the key aspects of the journalism business, whether print, broadcast or online, is the importance of having people issue their own thoughts in their own words. Whether it's the fire chief on TV explaining how the fire got started or the mayor in the newspaper laying out his budget, the story loses something if these people can't speak for themselves.

That said, quotes shouldn't be the main reason for asking a question. Instead, they should be a byproduct of good questions meant to help the journalist better understand the subject's position on a given topic. Quite often, we view the best quotes as those that are glib and slick rather than informative and thought provoking. Comedian John Oliver often pokes fun at the way in which television news programs like "60 Minutes" will feed sources quotes by asking specifically worded questions, such as, "So, you don't hear the call?" The source then responds with "You don't hear the call," providing that perfect soundbite.

Although journalists do a great deal of research on a topic, they are not the experts. A source has more experience on a given topic and can provide a more nuanced view of what is happening if given the opportunity. The questions should prompt responses that lead to quality quotes or soundbites, but make sure to let the source do the talking, as well as the thinking.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson meets with journalists to discuss an upcoming event. Quotability of content is always a big concern for public officials. Although journalists ask questions to get quotes, it is important to make sure to dig deeper than the preplanned glossy statements.
Ben Stansall/AFP/Getty Images

Asking Questions to Catch Up

One bad example of this was an exchange between a firefighter and a television reporter. The firefighter was accused of several acts of insubordination and was in front of the Police and Fire Commission, which would decide whether to fire him. The

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Thoughts From a Pro → Jill Geisler, Bill Plante Chair of Leadership and Media Integrity, Loyola University Chicago

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Jill Geisler understands the importance of merging journalistic endeavors and critical-thinking skills. Geisler holds the Bill Plante Chair in Leadership and Media Integrity at Loyola University Chicago and has written widely about leadership, management and critical thinking for the Poynter Institute and the Columbia Journalism Review.

Geisler said that journalists often know they need critical-thinking skills, but are often at odds in terms of exactly what those skills should include.

"My biggest concern (with professionals) was making sure that when editors and news directors said they wanted staffers to use 'critical thinking skills' that they really understood what that term meant," she said. "For some, it just meant the ability to read the boss's mind and see the potential story as they did."

To help her pupils better understand how critical thinking should work, Geisler developed exercises to help showcase what journalists traditionally do and how they can do it from a more thoughtful perspective.

"My simple example of critical thinking skills in a newsroom environment is this: A reporter, in checking out some activity that seems questionable (let's say, a tax break or a business practice), returns to the editor and says, 'I found out that it's perfectly legal. There's no story.' Wait. There may be a terrific story. Why is it legal? Is it legal elsewhere? Who is responsible, if anyone, for the legal status? What stakeholders have we considered?"

Geisler said that one of the biggest issues regarding critical thinking is trying to break out of the mold in which only two sides of a story exist.

"I think the essential challenge of journalistic critical thinking can be heard whenever someone talks about getting 'both sides of a story,'" she said. "How many issues have only two sides? Journalists are often drawn to conflict—and that's not a bad thing on its surface. But when we reduce complex ideas and issues to two sides, we often edge to the extremes. We talk to absolutists . . . and we miss the many layers and nuance that could be explored."

Many great stories and better perspectives exist in those layers, Geisler said.

"Even when we understand the guiding principles of journalism: truth telling, independence, minimizing harm and transparency, we need to be vigilant about our own human frailty when it comes to decision-making," she said. "Not only will it help keep us on the right path in our reasoning, from framing of stories to use of language, it will increase our ability to identify logical holes and biases embedded in the issues, decisions, debates and people we cover. Just think of how that can improve our journalism!"

One Last Thing

Q: If you could tell the students reading this book anything you think is important, what would it be?

A: "The days of single-skilled journalists are long gone. Today's most valuable journalists are Swiss Army knives—equipped with the tools to research and report, to capture images and sound, to design and edit—and to do it all with an ethical compass that guides their work."

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story had been going on for more than six months, and the meeting that night was supposed to be a key one in deciding whether to terminate the firefighter. The reporter began her interview by asking the firefighter what had happened to this point and what he had done. The firefighter snapped at her, “You really don’t know what’s going on, do you?” She snapped right back, “My job isn’t to understand the story. My job is to get the story.”

As strange as it seems, these two people were irritated by the same basic problem: the reporter’s failure to research before coming to the meeting. There is nothing wrong with knowing something about the topic. In fact, the more prepared you are, the better able you are to ask questions and write the story. You never want to waste a source’s time with questions based on things you should already know through research.

However, you need to keep your eye on what is important here. Why are you asking this question? Is it really crucial to what you’re doing, or are you just trying to show off? Is this helping your audience? The point of your doing this story is to help inform your readers or viewers. Is this question furthering that goal? There is a wide array of questions between asking a source what’s going on and asking a source something about the 87th footnote in a position paper she wrote five years ago. You’ll be better served to aim for that middle ground.

Don’t Let Your Ego Get in the Way

This point brings to bear one of the main things that can counter critical thinking: egocentrism. Richard Paul and Linda Elder of the Foundation for Critical Thinking note that humans are the “self-deceived animal.” They argue that people often think that their understanding of a situation is the one that matters, that their beliefs and desires are in some way superior to others. While we think about other people, we tend to think about how they relate to us and what we need to do about them. In short, it’s all about us.

Journalism requires that we broaden our field of view. We should not be writing for us, but for those around us. While most news people deride advertising practitioners as slick-haired, sharp-tongued pitchmen, ad folks understand our job almost better than we do. They understand the importance of getting people to pay attention to their message. They know the message needs to be clear, simple and audience-centric. The reason, of course, is that advertisers rely on audience members who will purchase a product. For journalists, we are removed from that aspect of message conveyance, and thus we tend to forget about the people who are at home reading our stories or watching our newscasts. (To be fair, the ratings aspects of television news give TV journalists a little better understanding of this than their print colleagues.)

In many cases, egotism gets in the way. We tell the story the way we want to because we think it’s important or, worse yet, because it’s easier. Why bother doing a story on something important if your audience isn’t going to get anything out of it? That’s like preparing for weeks to give a speech to an arena filled with people and then delivering it without a microphone.

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Consider This → Learn to Ask "How?" and "Why?" More Often

Anyone who has spent any amount of time with a 4-year-old knows the favorite question of that child's age group: "Why?" Even the most patient parents, educators or caregivers eventually tire of the repeated inquisition, as every answer they give to the child seems only to spark additional "Why?" questions.

The goal of the 4-year-old is an admirable one, although it's likely we don't think so when we're trying to get something done and we have to stop every five seconds to justify our actions to this diminutive annoyance in Nikes. The child wants to comprehend not just what we are trying to accomplish, but also seeks a deeper sense of our end goal and purpose. In short, it's not enough to know what is happening; the child wants to know what compelled you to act and for what purpose.

Somewhere along the way, we lose that sense of wonder that drives our need to understand why things operate the way they do. It might be because we start to figure out how and why things operate the way they do, or we come to understand that asking "Why?" every few seconds can be annoying to the point of distraction. (On the other hand, a parent might have threatened punishment or a classmate might have engaged in mockery to shut us up.) When this happens, it's a shame, because questions related to how something happens or why we are undertaking an endeavor relate directly to the concept of critical thinking.

Although going back to the age of 4 and questioning every source's every action with "Why?" would be a bit much, good reporters need to ask those deeper questions more often. Standard reporting always taps into the who, the what, the when and the where elements of a story. The why and the how are more complex and often require detailed explanations. Asking those questions, some reporters fear, will make a source think they are stupid or that they just want to "start trouble."

As hard as it can be to push for those answers, don't be afraid to consider asking "How?" and "Why?" more often when sources tell you things. You don't have to assume that just because a source says something is going to happen, it naturally follows that it will. A question like "How will you get that project developed when the governor says he won't fund it?" can demonstrate your desire to understand the source's plans and can more clearly help your readers see the machinations of the process.

When a source issues a blanket statement like "We shouldn't spend the taxpayers' hard-earned money on this project," the simple inquiry "Why shouldn't we?" can force the source away from the well-worn talking points and into a deeper look at the issue. Continued use of "Why?" questions can force that source to either put up or shut up on the topic.

If you can tap back into your inherent sense of wonder, those "How?" and "Why?" questions can do wonders for your reporting and can give your readers more vital information.

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Avoid Self-Importance

In the age of self-publishing, everyone is an instant expert. People who get the most attention are those who say or do outlandish things. Or, as comedian George Carlin once noted about being a class clown, "That's the name of this game: dig me!" While having an opinion on a topic can be good, it can also get you into a lot of trouble. TV star Roseanne Barr's racist tweet[10] and Mount St. Mary's University

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President Simon Newman's statement that some freshmen are like bunnies and "you just have to drown the bunnies"[11] are just two examples of people opening their mouths and rapidly inserting their feet.

Aside from those incidents, however, we've got a nation of self-important journalists who think what they think is important. It's egocentrism in its purest form, and it's not always good for journalism. The idea of doing quality journalism is that you are attempting to act as a conduit between the individuals making decisions and the people who are affected by those decisions. Your job is to gather pieces of information, make sense of them and present them to the audience in a way that allows your readers to make rational decisions about the material they've read.

Think about it this way: the journalist's job is to help display the information so that others can see it. Much like a frame does for a painting (as opposed to the media theory of framing), the journalist helps display stories. It makes little sense that the frame should overshadow the artwork. No one comes back from the Louvre and says, "Wow, was the frame on the 'Mona Lisa' beautiful!" If you do your job as a journalist, you'll be unnoticed, but your work will be appreciated and valued.

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/// THE BIG THREE

Here are the three key things you should take away from this chapter:

1. **Critical thinking starts with preparation:** The more research you do at the beginning of a story, the less likely you will be at the mercy of sources during your coverage of that story. This will help you find ways to ask critical questions of these individuals and obtain important information. It will also help you better adapt to your surroundings when things change and you need to shift your focus or come up with an entirely different story.
2. **Critical thinking helps you serve your readers:** As Jill Geisler says, the story is often in the layers and the nuance, and it can be found only through careful digging and sifting. If you find out exactly how a story affects your audience members, you can write a story that conveys those important details to them in a way they'll understand. This will give your readers a stronger sense of value, and they will thank you for it.
3. **Critical thinking takes time and practice:** Approaching journalism in this way takes extra effort and some deep thinking on your part. However, it will provide you with better opportunities to do good work that has value, which makes the effort worth your while. And remember, it's a skill that will take time to develop. However, just like any other skill, practice makes perfect.

/// KEY TERMS

critical thinking 27

Topeka test 35

/// DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How critically do you feel you and your peers think when it comes to topics that interest you? To what degree do you think your approach to content is critical enough, and where do you feel you fall short?

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2. In the age of social media and digital communication, do you feel critical thinking is undercut by this overwhelming abundance of media? How and why? Are some media more detrimental than others when it comes to this issue? Also, is there anything you think could help improve critical thinking in this day and age?
3. How difficult is it for you to think open-mindedly about a variety of topics? What makes it easier or harder for you to consider outside information and viewpoints that may contradict your own? Which topics are most and least likely to consider with an open mind? Why?

/// WRITE NOW!

1. Review the four trademarks of a critical thinker outlined in the chapter. Assess your own thinking process as it relates to news you read or topics upon which you wish to report by applying each of these four items. Then, write a short essay in which you analyze your thought process through the filter of these four items. How critically do you think when it comes to your news-processing and news-gathering efforts?
2. Find a news article on a topic of interest to you and analyze it for the four trademarks of critical thinking. Write an essay in which you apply each of the four trademarks to the content and determine the degree to which each applies. Also, outline the ways in which this piece could be improved with more critical thought.
3. Select a story on a topic about which you know very little and apply the Topeka test. Is there enough background in it to help you fully understand the story? What do you feel is missing? Do some research online to help you better understand the story. Then, rewrite the first three to six paragraphs in a way that will improve the overall understanding of the piece as well as incorporate the background you feel is missing. Finally, write a few paragraphs that explain what you did and why you think your version is an improvement.

/// BEST OF THE BLOG

The author maintains an active digital media presence at the "Dynamics of Writing" website, where he posts reactions to the news, helpful hints on media writing and additional exercises for readers. Here is one post that captures the essence of this chapter, with a few minor edits for context and clarification. For the original version of this post and others like it, visit www.DynamicsOfWriting.com.

Can you learn to be nosy? (and four tips to help your journalism students, regardless of the answer) (Published June 12, 2019)

I offered to help a class of high school journalism students learn anything they wanted to know about the field. The requests they made were fairly standard, so much so that I already had lectures built on them: How to be a good leader. How to edit and coach writers. How to write tighter sentences.

The one request I had trouble with, however, came from the teacher of the class:

"Can you teach my students how to be nosy?"

Her plea came from a place of journalistic angst. To find stories, students needed to be more aware of their surroundings. They needed to become curious about what was going on, how things worked and why things were the way they were. Instead, her students had fallen into the rut of many young journalists, covering standard events, profiling the people they knew and generally telling the same stories over and over again.

If I could teach them to be nosy, she seemed to be saying, I could help them find better stories, poke their noses into deeper issues and generally serve as more dutiful watchdogs at the school.

My problem is that I always told students that I could teach them almost anything, but I couldn't teach them to "wanna" when it came to doing the work, and I couldn't teach them to be nosy. Those intrinsic elements were theirs alone to control, I explained.

During the drive home from that class, I started really wondering if I was right or wrong about the nosy factor.

I know that, for better or worse, I have the nosiness trait in spades. It's why I often get distracted during meetings

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with my various bosses and attempt to read the stuff on their desk. (Reading things upside down was a skill I garnered many years ago and one that has served me well.) It's why I pick up broken lawnmowers, vacuum cleaners and other appliances I see on the side of the road and take them home to fix them. I have no need for the item, but I really want to know what broke and if it can be fixed.

It's also why my first response to a lot of things is, "OK, fine. If you don't want to tell me, I'll just FOIA it." I also find myself sucked into clickbait stories that tell me I'll "never believe" what happened to Former Child Star X. (Spoiler alert: I could believe it.) Even with all of these ups and downs, I realized that "nosy" made me a really engaged reporter who saw stories in almost anything and it left me flabbergasted when other people didn't.

I vividly remember a young woman in one of my writing classes at Missouri bitterly complaining about not knowing ANYONE who was interesting enough to be a personality profile subject. She ended up profiling a friend who went down to Florida with her for spring break. The profile was horrible, so I asked who else they met down there to see if I could show her some better ways to look at the assignment.

It turned out, they stayed with the friend's boyfriend and his roommate, who was a "pubic stylist," a term I wish I could forget.

This guy would do all sorts of "coifing" for people in that area. One such person was a woman who had just received a frog tattoo south of her hip and had asked for her pubic hair to be dyed green and shaped into a lily pad.

And this wasn't even the weirdest styling this guy had done during that week of spring break.

"How the hell did you not see a story in that guy?" I asked with a level of incredulity I had never before reached.

She shrugged. "I dunno. I didn't really think about it . . ."

I often tell students that we are all born with some level of wonder, which is why a 4-year-old's favorite question is "Why?" Somewhere along the line, that sense of wonder gets lost or beaten out of us to the point that we stop asking "Why?" every six seconds. However, the curiosity within that inner child is only part of what makes for a nosy person (and thus a pretty tough reporter). If I had to define it, I would say "nosy" is made up of a mix of insatiable curiosity, a lack of patience, a thirst for knowledge and a healthy dash of weaseldom.

I asked some journalists and educators I know what they thought about the ability to teach "nosy" to journalism students and the degree to which I was right about it. Consider some of the answers:

> "If I look at this through behavior analytic lenses (because c'mon I can't turn it off) I see being nosy as either automatically reinforcing to someone or not. It could be a conditioned behavior but I feel like you are either motivated/reinforced by being nosy or you aren't."

> "I am not a journalism teacher, so take this with a grain of salt. I worked as a high school counselor for 16 years, as a user support rep for a data processing center in the 80s, and as a banker. I think there are some people who are just naturally curious, and want to know and understand things, and some people who just want to know enough to get them through whatever it is."

> "I chose not to go into reporting one day after a couple deaths at a fraternity on campus. You wanted me to simply walk over there and knock on the door and be a reporter and I couldn't do it. I cried in your office. Someone went in my place, but I knew at that moment that being "nosy" was not in my DNA. I'll challenge power structures and I'll interview musicians, but I refuse to intrude on people's personal lives. I admire those who can. It's an important skill to have, and it's the reason journalists are important. It can probably be taught, I'm sure my refusal was partly lack of experience, but I also believe some people are just born reporters."

> "Funny thing is that now that I'm a crisis worker I talk to people all night about their personal problems and ask totally invasive questions to get them to open up and calm down. So, maybe I had the skill but was using it in the wrong setting."

> "Some of us are curious by nature, others are not. The curious ones make the best journalists."

That said, perhaps the best perspective came from our departmental program assistant, a self-confessed fellow nosy individual. Her point was that inherent in all of us is curiosity, but the degree to which we use that for specific interests is what distinguishes us. Some people want to know things because they just want to know. Others see knowledge as an opportunity to gossip or pass along information. Still others want to know something but don't care enough to ask about it. Curiosity is there, but perhaps the other elements don't exist, or maybe they don't exist in the

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optimum blend to create nosiness, especially the kind necessary for journalism.

With all of that in mind, here are a few observations that might help folks wondering about the nosy factor:

- **It's all about cultivation:** The discussion with our PA had me realize that nosiness is a lot like horticulture. You can buy a fully grown apple tree and transplant it into your yard to get apples. You can buy a sapling and nurture it along until it becomes a fruit-bearing tree. You can also buy a seed and grow the tree from scratch. The amount of cultivation it takes to bring that tree along starts with how developed that plant is when you get it. At the very least, however, you need a seed. You can't grow an apple tree with an empty bucket, a handful of dirt and some wishful thinking.
- **Rebuild curiosity:** Nosy requires curiosity, which many of us lose along the way. People don't want to look dumb, so they fake it. They don't want to look ignorant, so they ignore it. That seed is likely there, so if we can bring it back to life a bit, we can help them reengage their sense of wonder. The other elements of the recipe for nosy can get added later, but this one should be present and easy enough to tap.
- **Show them the benefits of nosy:** As educators, we can reinvigorate that curiosity if we can help the students see why "Why?" still matters. This isn't so much about pushing them to see things the way we do (assuming we're nosy), but rather helping them to see how nosy can benefit them. One of the biggest things I think students miss in terms of being nosy is seeing how the things they could be nosy about impact them or others who matter to them. In short, they don't capture the "this matters because" element in a personal way. If you told me that cutting out Diet Coke had all sorts of positive social and environmental benefits, I'd politely listen before buying another case. However, if you told me, "Here's science that says no one who ever drank as much of this crap as you do has lived past the age of 50," I'd pay serious attention. Just like everything else in journalism, audience centricity matters in the realm of nosiness.
- **Nosy isn't everything:** As much as nosy could very well be a "nature" element, we can at the very least provide them with enough of the tools to make something good out of whatever they can nurture along. I think of it like what happened to my wife, Amy, when she was a little girl and wanted to learn how to ice skate. The instructor took one look at her and said, "You don't know how to glide. I can't teach you that. You'll never be great at this." Well, aside from being a dink who crushed the soul of an 8-year-old, this idiot essentially made my wife turn away from ice skating entirely. Could she have been the next Peggy Fleming or Dorothy Hamill? No, but that's not the point. The point is that if he had nurtured what was there, she could have developed some acumen in this area and found an enjoyable pastime. The same is true here. Find things that can help the students become more functional journalists, work to pique curiosity and see what you can do to help them find areas of engagement that could lead to a good career. Even if they're not nosy, they'll do pretty well for themselves.

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