

## **Getting Started with Critical Thinking: Clarifying with SEE-I**

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In general, a good way to begin any critical thinking process is by *clarifying*, by making things clearer.

A very useful process for clarifying almost anything is called SEE-I. The letters stand for four steps that help make whatever you are working on clearer:

S: State it

E: Elaborate (explain it more fully, in your own words)

E: Exemplify (give a good example)

I: Illustrate (give an illustration: maybe a metaphor, a simile, and analogy, a diagram, concept map, etc.)

### **STATEMENT**

To state something is, essentially, to say it briefly, clearly, and as precisely as possible. Sometimes it means constructing a good definition, but it also includes, for instance, stating the thesis of a chapter by trying to capture the heart of what the chapter is saying in a single, clear, well-formed sentence.

### **ELABORATION**

To elaborate on something is to expand on it, to explain it in your own words, at greater length, so the reader gets more of the fullness of what is meant. For instance, I can state the law of conservation of energy; I can then elaborate on it, explaining it in

more depth, in greater detail, spelling out what it is saying. You can begin your elaboration by saying, “In other words. . .”

### **EXEMPLIFICATION**

Here, the goal is to give a good example – not just any example, but a well-chosen one, one that will clarify for yourself, or for a reader, what you mean. Usually, it should be your own original example, not one from the book or the teacher, and it should fit well with your statement and elaboration. Thus I might try to clarify the concept of falling in love: First I would try to state in a sentence what falling in love is; then I would elaborate on it; and then I would give a good example of falling in love, one that the reader can connect with. (Romeo and Juliet come to mind, but it could be a personal example as well.) You can begin your exemplification by saying, “For example. . .”

### **ILLUSTRATION**

An illustration is literally a picture (as in “an illustrated book”). To clarify something, it helps to give readers something they can picture in their minds. Sometimes, it can be an actual picture. It can also be a graph, a diagram, or a concept map. More usually, your illustration will be a picture in words: an analogy, a simile, or metaphor that captures the meaning. For instance, Rush Cosgrove was clarifying the concept of civil disobedience. He stated his definition of it in a sentence; then he elaborated on it; and then he gave a good example of civil disobedience. (His example was Rosa Parks refusing to sit in the back of the bus.) Then he gave an illustration: He said that civil disobedience was like being a cliff at the edge of the ocean – the waves crash against it, but the cliff remains there. To me, that illustration captures vividly what Cosgrove means by civil disobedience. You can begin your word illustration by saying, “It’s like. . .”

There are two aspects to clarifying something. The first is getting clear in your own mind; the second is communicating clearly to others, communicating so they understand you well. SEE-I works well for both. You can improve your writing in a major way by taking each main idea and developing it in your paper with a SEE-I. SEE-I is a way of testing your understanding of what you learn.

#### Critical Thinking Template: Suggestions for Mastery

Learning to think critically is a process and takes practice. A good way to learn is to collaborate with others who also want to learn to think things through:

- Find four or five other people who are also trying to think critically about an area.
- Figure out the most central organizing concepts or ideas that underlie the area (or chapter).
- Begin with writing a SEE-I: state, elaborate, exemplify, and illustrate each of the concepts.
- Next, write a paragraph or so explaining how the concepts fit together, how they operate in the world, in your life, in the subject matter. Duplicate both pieces of writing so that everyone has a copy. (It is important your responses be written, even if they are just jotted down. Written responses are concrete and allow you to confront your thoughts in black and white.)
- Critique one another's thinking. (Remember that critiquing is not the same as criticizing or finding fault.) In the critique.
  - Focus on the elements of thinking (you will find these on your bookmark handed out in class). Does the writer specify the purpose behind the concepts? Identify key assumptions? Look for consequences, for alternatives? and so on.

- Focus on the standards (also found on the bookmark). Are the ideas clear? Are they accurate? Do they explain what is most important?

In any discipline you study, there are ways of thinking that lie at the heart of the discipline. These include fundamental and powerful concepts and central questions of the discipline. Disciplines are not bits and pieces of information, nor are they simply an assemblage of facts. Instead, there is a logic to thinking in each discipline. For example, *social patterns* is an example of a fundamental and powerful concept in sociology.

**Instructor's Comment:** Our goal, this semester, is to learn and be able to utilize sociological concepts in order to improve our understanding of our own and other's behaviors. Allow yourself to participate fully and have fun with the process. However, you must be willing to do the intellectual work. If you are actively engaged in the process of "thinking things through," the promise of developing a sociological imagination, then, is to improve the quality of your life and the lives of others. In essence, *that* is the process of becoming educated.

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