Critical Thinking involves careful, thorough, rational examination of existing information in order to create new knowledge, solve complex problems, and navigate new situations and contexts. It requires continuous re-examination of your own thinking and thought-processes so as to consciously improve them.

In fact, the history of public speaking goes hand-in-hand with the history of critical thinking, for it was Socrates who famously claimed that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” In preparing for and reflecting on your own oral presentations, and in listening carefully and critically others, you cultivate intellectual habits for a lifetime.

Below is a list of questions designed to facilitate critical thinking and encourage speakers and audience members to learn how to apply critical thinking in any situation. Use these questions to guide your speech writing process and to be a more discerning consumer of information.

What is the purpose of the message?
- What is the speech trying to achieve?
- Who is the audience? What are the best ways for the speaker to reach the audience?
- Is the purpose clear? Is it justifiable? Ethical?

What underlying question(s) is the speech trying to answer?
- Are there other ways to think about the question?
- Is there one right answer to the question?
- Can there be more than one reasonable answer?

What assumptions has the speech made?
- Are the assumptions justified?
- Which assumptions might be questioned?
- How might those assumptions lead to flawed reasoning?

What is the speaker’s point of view?
- What are the strengths of these viewpoints?
- What are the weaknesses of the viewpoints?
- How might the speaker’s point of view differ from that of audience members?

What type of information supports the argument?
- What are the facts and opinions surrounding the question or argument?
- How clear, accurate, and relevant is the information that supports the question or argument?
- Has the speaker gathered sufficient data to reach a reasonable conclusion?
What concepts and theories support the conclusion?
- What key concepts and theories guide the research?
- Is the use of concepts and theories clear and precise?
- Do concepts and theories support alternate explanations?
- Are any ideas distorted to push an agenda or show bias?

What conclusions and solutions are obvious based on available information?
- How did the speaker reach their conclusion?
- To what extent does data support the conclusion?
- What conclusions are logical?
- What conclusions are flawed and why?

What are the implications and consequences of the line of reasoning?
- How might the implications and consequences affect others?
- How might the audience respond to these implications and consequences?
- Does the speaker show a sensitivity to the implications and consequences?

It would not be possible to address all of these questions, nor are all of them relevant to your topic or speech criteria. Use these questions as a starting point to writing your speech or listening to others speak.

Critical Thinking & Self-Reflection

Your experiences become more meaningful when you take the time to reflect carefully on them, consider strengths and weaknesses, and make concrete plans about what to focus on in future situations. In addition to asking yourself the questions above, make sure that you always review criteria and feedback from instructors and peers.

Things to think about as you review your own speeches:
- Clarity and nuance of topic and purpose
- Appropriateness of speaking style to audience and occasion
- Effectiveness of introduction and conclusion
- Logical organization, presentation of ideas, and use of transitions; e.g., could someone easily follow along and take notes on the speech?
- Strength of sources and supporting material
- Quality of verbal and nonverbal delivery
- Effectiveness of visual aid

Remember, a speech is not an isolated event. It is one moment in your lifelong development as a critical thinker, effective communicator, and engaged citizen. Recognize your strengths, choose just a few specific things to practice for next time, and repeat.