

CRITICAL THINKING RUBRIC

Use this rubric to evaluate how well a curriculum develops critical thinking skills.

Begin with the general questions, which can apply to lessons in any subject. Then complete the subject-specific section for the lesson you are reviewing: language arts, science, or social studies/history.

Assign each element a score of 0, 5, or 10 points. A score of 0 means the curriculum provides little or no opportunity for this type of critical thinking. A score of 5 would mean the curriculum occasionally provides opportunities for this type of critical thinking. A score of 10 means the curriculum provides strong, consistent opportunities for students to practice this type of thinking.

	Score (0, 5, 10)
GENERAL QUESTIONS	
1. Are there open-ended questions?	
2. Are students asked to investigate problems, questions, or ideas?	
3. Are students asked to explain their thinking?	
4. Do students consider multiple perspectives, viewpoints, or opinions?	
5. Do students draw connections between multiple subjects?	
6. Are students asked to apply what they are learning?	
7. Are students asked to recognize patterns and relationships between ideas?	
LANGUAGE ARTS SPECIFIC	
8. Are students invited to discuss and interpret a text?	
9. Does a student's writing require them to clarify, refine, develop, and defend their thinking?	
SCIENCE SPECIFIC	
10. Does the curriculum encourage scientific thinking and experimentation? Do students ask questions? Do they form hypotheses? Do they evaluate results?	
11. Are students asked to investigate natural phenomena, or do they just read about them?	
SOCIAL STUDIES / HISTORY SPECIFIC	
12. Do students evaluate how historical decisions affected the path of nations and people?	
13. Do students analyze causes more than memorize dates?	
14. Do students analyze how geography has influenced culture and history?	
TOTAL	

Notes on General Questions:**1. Are there open-ended questions?**

Open-ended questions are questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. They also cannot be answered by simply finding one right answer in the text.

These kinds of questions ask students to think, explain, compare, give reasons, provide opinions, or make judgments.

However, not every open-ended question builds critical thinking. For example:

- a. “What was your favorite part of the story?”
- b. “Which character made the most responsible decision? Why?”

The first question asks for a personal preference, but it does not require much reasoning. The second question supports critical thinking because the student must make a judgment and explain the reasons behind it.

Example

Our Language Arts lessons include open-ended questions throughout the program. For example, in the Age 7-9 level, students read *Poppy*, a story about a mouse named Poppy and an owl named Mr. Ocax, who controls the mice by making them afraid.

After students read the first two chapters, they are asked questions such as:

- Why does Mr. Ocax want the mice to fear him?
- How are Ragweed and Poppy different from each other?
- Are you more similar to Ragweed or Poppy? Why?
- Ragweed tells Poppy that her father talks about Mr. Ocax just to scare her and keep her under control. Do you think that is the reason? Why or why not?
- Why was Mr. Ocax not entirely disappointed that Poppy escaped?
- Poppy tells Ragweed that “being careless is stupid.” Is it? Why or why not?
- Is death an appropriate consequence for not asking permission from Mr. Ocax to go certain places? Why or why not?

These questions go beyond checking whether a student remembers the story. They ask students to think about motives, consider themes, compare characters, form opinions, and explain their reasoning.

2. Are students asked to investigate problems, questions, or ideas?

Students should do more than read information or learn about ideas. They should be asked to interact and write about what they are learning.

This may include:

- Asking questions
- Writing about what they read
- Noticing problems
- Thinking through possible solutions
- Discussing what they are learning

This helps show how deeply a child is being asked to think. Are students simply asked to remember facts and fill in blanks, or are they asked to understand ideas more deeply?

Example

In the Age 9-11 level, students read *Tuck Everlasting*. In the story, there is a spring that gives immortality to anyone who drinks from it. Some characters have already drunk from the spring, while others are deciding whether they should.

For the final project, students think carefully about whether drinking from the spring would be a good or bad choice. They consider the pros and cons, gather quotes and examples from the book, record positive and negative consequences, ask other people for their opinions, choose a side, prepare arguments, ask debate questions, and respond to an opposing view.

Students are not just remembering facts from the book. They are wrestling with a big question and learning how to support their thinking with evidence and reasons.

3. Are students asked to explain their thinking?

Giving an answer is only the first step. Students should regularly be asked follow-up questions such as:

- Why?
- Why not?
- How do you know?

They should be asked to explain their answers, give evidence, or share the reasoning behind their ideas.

When students explain their thinking, they do more than show that they know something. They show that they understand it well enough to use it, support it, and connect it to what they are learning.

Example

You will see this throughout the Beyond the Page curriculum.

- In the literature unit for *The Cay*, students are asked to explain what they think the theme of the book is and support their idea with evidence from the text.
- In the Age 7-9 level, students create a merit badge for the dog in the story *Tornado*. They decide what the dog must do to earn the badge, and then they explain why they chose those requirements.

In both examples, students are not just giving answers. They are explaining how they reached those answers.

4. Do students consider multiple perspectives, viewpoints, or opinions?

Students should be asked to think about more than one side of an issue. This may include looking at different perspectives, recognizing the difference between facts and opinions, or understanding why people may disagree.

Sometimes students may even be asked to examine a viewpoint they do not agree with. This does not mean they are being taught to accept that viewpoint. It means they are learning to understand an argument, evaluate it carefully, and explain their own position more clearly.

Example

One clear way students consider multiple perspectives is by preparing arguments for both sides of a debate.

For example, in the Age 10-12 social studies unit *Slavery and the Civil War*, students examine the historical debate over whether slavery should expand into new territories. The purpose is not to defend or excuse slavery. The purpose is to help students understand the historical context, recognize the moral seriousness of the issue, and become better able to explain and defend a principled position.

In literature units, students may consider multiple perspectives by writing from a character's point of view, analyzing a character's motives, or identifying the difference between fact and opinion.

5. Do students draw connections between multiple subjects?

Students should have chances to connect what they are learning in one subject with ideas from other subjects. They should also be encouraged to explore related topics, because real-world ideas and problems do not usually fit neatly into just one school subject.

Beyond the Page supports this kind of learning in two main ways.

First, our subjects are connected by theme. For example, when students study a topic in language arts, they may also study a related topic in science or social studies. When students study weather in science, they read a book in which a tornado changes the plot of the story. When they study sound, they read a biography about Helen Keller to learn about life without sound. This helps ideas build on each other across the curriculum.

Second, we also include subject connections inside individual lessons. When a science or social studies topic naturally comes up in a literature unit, we use that moment to explore it.

For example, in the literature unit for *The Cay*, a shark plays an important role in one chapter. That moment becomes an opportunity for students to begin a science study about sharks of the Caribbean, right inside the literature unit.

This helps students see that literature, history, science, and real-world issues are connected, not completely separate areas of learning.

6. Are students asked to apply what they are learning?

Students should do more than remember information or identify the correct answer. They should use what they are learning to solve problems, create something, conduct an investigation, or demonstrate a skill.

A basic approach may ask students to:

- Fill in blanks
- Answer multiple-choice questions
- Match terms with definitions
- Label a diagram
- Answer questions that only require recalling information

This doesn't mean that these types of activities shouldn't exist. Recall questions are important, but a curriculum that develops critical thinking shouldn't stop with these types of questions. The curriculum should also show whether students understand and can use that knowledge.

A stronger approach ensures that students fully understand and can apply what they are learning. For example:

- If students are learning about voice in language arts, they write a story, letter, or speech with a clear and intentional voice.
- If students are learning about evaporation, they conduct an investigation, record observations, and use the results to explain how evaporation works.
- If students are learning about government, they evaluate a public issue, consider possible solutions, and defend a position.

Hands-on activities are another way that students can apply what they are learning -- especially in science and other subjects that naturally lend themselves to investigation and creation. Rather than saving hands-on work for one special activity each week, a strong curriculum gives students frequent opportunities—often several times a week or almost every day—to experiment, build, model, write, design, or create as they learn.

Not every hands-on activity develops critical thinking, and not every activity needs to. Students should regularly engage in hands-on learning that goes beyond cutting, coloring, and pasting. Strong hands-on activities ask students to think, reason, solve problems, apply what they have learned, and make meaningful decisions.

The hands-on activity should require more than simply following directions. Students should make decisions, apply a concept, examine results, make original work, or explain the meaning behind the activity.

In *Beyond the Page*, students apply their learning throughout each unit. Lessons regularly ask them to write, build, experiment, investigate, design, and create. Every three weeks, students also complete a Final Project that brings together what they have learned and asks them to use it in a meaningful way.

The central question is not simply, “Did the student complete the activity?” It is, “Did the activity require the student to show understanding and demonstrate what they learned?”

7. Are students asked to recognize patterns and relationships between ideas?

Students should be asked to notice how ideas connect to one another. This may include recognizing cause and effect, comparing how things are alike or different, identifying repeated themes, or explaining how one idea influences another.

This kind of thinking helps students see that information is not isolated. Ideas, subjects, events, people, and natural systems often affect one another.

Example

In science, energy is not just something that turns on a light. It is also connected to movement, sunlight, food webs, diet, heat, ocean currents, weather, and many other topics.

In language arts, students are also asked to recognize patterns and relationships between ideas.

- In the Age 6-8 level, students evaluate Cinderella stories from around the world. They recognize that patterns and themes are seen across cultures. They compare how the stories align. They discover how the themes and characters are similar and different.
- In *The View from Saturday*, students analyze how relationships influence and change characters over time. They also map the connections among the members of The Souls and their families.
- In *A Wrinkle in Time*, students identify the recurring theme of good versus evil and explain how that theme develops throughout the story.

These activities help students see that ideas, characters, events, and natural systems are connected rather than separate pieces of information.