How to Think Critically and Make Well-Reasoned Decisions

Philosophy and Religion · about 23 minutes · 2026-11-06

Slow down snap judgments with a repeatable reasoning process. These 20 steps show how to frame a question, reconstruct arguments, assess evidence, test alternatives, consider stakeholders, and review a decision without confusing luck with good reasoning.

Things you will need

- Paper notebook or a digital reasoning template
- One clearly framed claim or decision
- Primary sources and a way to save full context
- Separate columns for evidence, objections, and value judgments
- A decision log with confidence levels and review dates

Framing the Question and Reconstructing the Argument

1. **Turn a vague topic into one focused question**
   Write one belief or decision as a focused question.
2. **Define ambiguous terms and the discussion's scope**
   Define ambiguous terms and the scope of the discussion.
3. **Split observations from interpretations and values**
   Separate observations, interpretations, and value judgments.
4. **Reconstruct the argument as numbered premises**
   State the conclusion and the reasons offered for it.
5. **Surface hidden assumptions and possible defeaters**
   Expose hidden assumptions and possible defeaters.

Gathering and Evaluating Relevant Evidence

6. **Read the original source in full context**
   Consult primary sources and read the surrounding context.
7. **Judge each source's expertise, method, and incentives**
   Assess the source's expertise, method, and incentives.
8. **Weigh evidence by quality instead of volume**
   Grade evidence by relevance and reliability rather than volume.
9. **Scrutinize samples, baselines, and statistics**
   Inspect samples, comparisons, and alternative explanations.
10. **Search for evidence against your first answer**
    Search deliberately for evidence that challenges your first answer.

Testing the Reasoning and the Strongest Alternatives

11. **Test whether the conclusion follows from the premises**
    Test whether the conclusion follows from the premises.

12. Explain the faulty step instead of labeling it

Check for fallacies without using labels as a shortcut.

13. Build counterexamples that target the real claim

Construct counterexamples and edge cases for broad claims.

14. Rewrite the opposing case at its strongest

Steelman the strongest reasonable opposing position.

15. Probe remaining gaps with Socratic questions

Use Socratic questions to test what remains unclear.

Choosing an Action and Reviewing the Reasoning

16. Map everyone affected by the decision

Map the people, duties, and consequences affected by the decision.

17. Generate genuinely different options before choosing

Generate several genuinely different options before choosing.

18. Compare options against explicit criteria

Compare the options with explicit criteria and uncertainty.

19. Record the decision with reasons and a review date

Record the decision, supporting reasons, and a review date.

20. Grade the process separately from the outcome

Review the quality of the process separately from the outcome.

Sources

1. Critical Thinking — abilities, dispositions, and goal-directed reflection
   https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-thinking/
2. Informal Logic — reconstructing and assessing everyday arguments
   https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-informal/
3. Evidence — justification, total evidence, and reasonable belief
   https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evidence/
4. Fallacies — taxonomy and analysis of defective reasoning
   https://iep.utm.edu/fallacy/
5. Practical Reason — deliberation about what one ought to do
   https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/practical-reason/

Written as a checklist from https://www.howcompass.com/how-to/Think-Critically-and-Make-Well-Reasoned-Decisions. Corrections: https://www