

Lesson 4

Becoming an Active Learner



Key Words

active
classify
creative
critical
objectivity
passive
predict
subjective
visualize

What You Will Learn to Do

- Determine the thinking/learning skills necessary for improving active learning

Linked Core Abilities

- Build your capacity for lifelong learning
- Apply critical thinking techniques

Skills and Knowledge You Will Gain Along the Way

- Identify the thinking types and related viewpoints necessary to address typical active learner questions
- Distinguish between traits and activities of critical and creative thinkers
- Describe the difference between objective and subjective thinking
- Distinguish between active learner and passive learner traits
- Define the key words contained in this lesson

Introduction

Active learners do not wait for learning to happen; they make it happen. You learned to crawl, stand up, walk, as well as other tasks because you wanted to learn them. This desire to learn made you ask the people around you for help. Active learning is an instinct with which you were born and will possess throughout your life. This lesson shows you how to become an active learner.

Active Learners

Active learners generally display specific traits and can

- **Identify personal goals and the steps necessary to achieve the goals**
- **Use resources to identify the people and tools available to aid in goal pursuit**
- **Learn how to solve almost any problem they ever have to face**
- **Look at situations objectively**
- **Ask the right questions**
- **Use time well because they are organized and set priorities**
- **Apply good reading, studying, and questioning skills to written materials**
- **Apply good listening skills in the classroom**
- **Find patterns and take effective notes to organize materials for studying**
- **Assess progress along the way and revise their plans**

You can probably think of additional traits that active learners possess. In contrast, **passive** learners may work hard, but they do not take charge of the learning processes. Table 1.4.1 compares the differences between active and passive learners.

Active Learners Are Self-Directed

Using active learning, you can solve problems, answer questions, formulate questions of your own, discuss, explain, debate, or brainstorm during class. **Creative** and **critical** thinking as well as the ability to view situations and problems objectively are common traits among those who are active learners.

Creative and Critical Thinking

Active learners think carefully. Thinking is a complex activity involving the brain's neurons (nerve cells) linking with other neurons as waves of impulses travel from neuron to neuron. Numerous skills comprise the act of thinking. As shown in Table 1.4.2, these skills can be grouped into two categories: creative and critical.

Key Note Term

active – characterized by action rather than contemplation or speculation

Key Note Terms

passive – acted on by an external agency; receptive to outside impressions or influences

creative – marked by the ability or power to create; given to creating

critical – of, relating to, or being a turning point or especially important juncture

Table 1.4.1: Comparing Active and Passive Learners

Active Learner Versus Passive Learner	
Passive Learner	Active Learner
Approaches learning as “remembering.”	Approaches learning as “thinking.”
Reads the textbook, takes some notes, and spends hours trying to memorize those notes.	Reads the textbook, takes some notes using a method that captures the concepts and details. Reviews the notes.
Wastes or misuses a lot of study time. Feels as if there isn’t enough time to “remember it all.”	Uses study time efficiently. Concentrates on remembering the major concepts and details.
May be able to recall information, but often has problems using this information in contexts other than the textbook’s scenario or the way he/she memorized the material.	Can recall information and transfer the information to many different contexts.
In tests, tends to get confused if the information is not presented in a manner similar to the way he/she memorized the information.	Can use the information to respond to different types of questions in tests.
Tends to see “words” on the page rather than ideas and concepts applicable to various situations.	Looks for the basic concepts and uses those concepts as a structure on which to build secondary concepts and details. Can apply the information to various situations when appropriate

Courtesy of CACI and the U.S. Army.

Table 1.4.2: Examples of Creative and Critical Thinking

Creative Thinking	Critical Thinking
brainstorming	analyzing
generalizing	comparing/contrasting
inventing	classifying
predicting	evaluating
visualizing	prioritizing

Key Note Terms

classify – to assign to a category

predict – to declare or indicate in advance; especially: foretell on the basis of observation, experience, or scientific reason

Note

For more information about neurons and brain function, see Chapter 2, Lesson 1, “Brain Structure and Function.”

Active learners use both critical and creative thinking; critical thinking to define a problem and creative thinking to solve it.

Critical thinkers tend to

- **Be honest with themselves**
- **Resist manipulation**
- **Figure out how to overcome a confusing situation**
- **Ask good questions**
- **Base judgments on facts and evidence**
- **Look for connections between subjects**
- **Be intellectually independent**

Aside from being honest with themselves and resisting manipulation, creative thinkers tend to

- **Use their imaginations**
- **Daydream**
- **Practice expansive thinking (think “outside of the box”)**

Active learners know when to use each type of thinking.

Objective Versus Subjective Viewpoint

As you grow and mature, you learn to shift from **visualizing** the world as being centered only around yourself (**subjective**) to seeing it in a way that many people can agree on what it means (**objective**). **Objectivity** allows you to communicate effectively and persuasively with others. Using objectivity helps you persuade other people and can gain you allies when working toward change.

To support critical thinking, you need an objective viewpoint. You can learn to distinguish between objective and subjective observations and reactions.

If you tell how an event affected you or how you reacted to an event, you are being subjective. For example, consider the following statements.

- **His criticism of me was totally unjust and it made me angry.**
- **That was the funniest movie I’ve ever seen.**

If you tell about an event or relate a fact as anyone might see it, you are being objective. For example, consider the following:

Key Note Terms

visualizing – the act of forming a mental image

subjective – of, relating to, or constituting a subject; relating to or characteristic of one that is a subject, especially in lack of freedom of action or in submissiveness

objectivity – expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations

- **It rained Saturday.**
- **Sick children need good medical care.**

Keep these subjective and objective viewpoints in mind when you are communicating with others. Both viewpoints are necessary in life, but learn to use them appropriately. Distinguishing between these viewpoints is especially important when you are asking questions, taking tests, or giving presentations. Table 1.4.3 shows examples of how critical, creative, objective, and subjective thinking are used.

Table 1.4.3: Using Critical, Creative, Objective, and Subjective Thinking

Three Question Types	Related Thinking Type	Related Viewpoint	Notes
What? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the facts? • What is the evidence or proof? 	Critical thinking	Objective	Facts form the basis of most of your studies.
So what? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do the facts mean? • What conclusion can I draw? • What else do I need to know? 	Creative thinking and Critical thinking	Subjective and Objective	Use the facts to form an opinion.
Now what? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can I do with the information now that I have the facts? • How do the facts link to other information I have? 	Creative thinking	Subjective	Use the information to form a pattern or structure on which to build other facts.

Courtesy of CACI and the U.S. Army.

Asking Questions

Active learners combine critical thinking and objectivity to ask good questions. They ask questions to get a complete picture and to expand their knowledge. You can't get anywhere without asking questions. To get specific facts, ask clear, concise questions requiring an objective answer. To learn opinions and feelings, ask subjective questions.

Form the habit of asking questions and learning from everyone you meet. You may be afraid to ask questions because you think people will feel you are not very smart. Don't be afraid. The only way to learn is to ask questions. And don't forget: The dumbest question is the one that's never asked.

Answering Questions

Active learners use both types of thinking—critical and creative—to give good answers to questions. You must recognize whether a question is asking you to be objective or subjective in your answer. Recognizing what type of question is being asked will help you identify whether your answer should be subjective or objective.

Answering questions is treated in more detail in the “Test-Taking Tips and Strategies” later in this textbook. For reading, study skills, and test taking, you apply the objective and subjective viewpoints, critical and creative thinking, and techniques for asking questions.

Conclusion

Active learning is a method that allows you to participate in class. It takes you beyond the role of passive listener and note taker and allows you to take some direction and initiative during the class. Active learning can encompass a variety of techniques that include small group discussion, role playing, hands-on projects, and teacher-driven questioning. The goal is to be part of the process of your own education.

This concludes Chapter 1, “Know Yourself—Socrates.” In the next chapter, “Learning to Learn,” you will see how the brain is structured and how it functions. Learning styles are also presented, and you will also learn about multiple intelligences.

Lesson Review

1. Compare active learners and passive learners. Which one are you?
2. Compare and contrast *creative thinking* and *critical thinking*.
3. How can a combination of creative and critical thinking help you solve problems?
4. Explain how you can change the way you think about a situation by using an objective or a subjective viewpoint.