

# Insites

By Glen Cotten, Tony Fogarty & Jackie Hemingway

*This section highlights some useful learning and teaching websites that can help with planning, teaching and professional development. This time we look at critical thinking resources, and include a focus on critical literacy.*

## Mind Tools

<http://www.mindtools.com>



### Explore the Toolkit

The full Mind Tools toolkit contains more than 900 management, career and thinking skills. Use the buttons below to start exploring them.



At first glance mindtools.com may appear to be suited only to those interested in leadership or career development. However, this site reportedly contains over 900 management, career

and thinking tools, many of which can be readily adapted for teaching and learning in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The sheer breadth of topics covered makes this site a useful starting point for teachers in search of ideas for the classroom, such as adding interest to small-group activities, developing student project team dynamics and encouraging student creativity, critical thinking or self-management.

A useful point of entry is the site's "Toolkit" menu which links to a vast array of articles organized around 12 skill areas including problem solving, decision making, communication and learning. Thankfully, the menus are clearly labelled and structured around sub-menus, making for efficient browsing. The articles cover some theory, but mainly focus on practical applications likely to be of most interest to educators. For example, the "General Problem-Solving Tools" sub-menu provides step-by-step descriptions of approaches for encouraging groups to argue for and against options, draw good conclusions and identify the steps for solving a problem (means-end analysis). Given the site's range of personal development topics, students could also benefit by directly accessing materials on relevant study skills such as time management, stress management, and learning and memory techniques. Mindtools.com is a membership site, but provides free subscription to a newsletter, and many of the tools and articles on the website can be accessed free of charge.

Austhink

<http://www.austhink.com>

**AUSTHINK™**

## Critical Thinking On The Web

A directory of quality online resources

Home  
[Argument Mapping](#)  
[Art](#)  
[Assessing](#)  
[Bibliographies](#)  
[Blogs](#)  
[Cognitive Biases and Blindspots](#)  
[Critical Reading and Writing](#)  
[Definitions](#)  
[Email Lists and Newsletters](#)  
[The Enlightenment](#)  
[Experts and Expertise](#)  
[Fallacies](#)  
[General Resources](#)  
[Great Critical Thinkers](#)  
[Group Thinking](#)  
[Guides](#)  
[Health & Medicine](#)  
[Hoaxes, Scams and Urban Legends](#)  
[Institutes, Centers and Societies](#)  
[Intelligence \(military, etc.\)](#)  
[Language and Thought](#)  
[Logic](#)  
[Magazines & Journals](#)  
[The Media](#)  
[Miscellaneous & Fun](#)  
[Numeracy](#)  
[Nursing](#)  
[Podcasts](#)  
[Postmodernism and all that](#)  
[Political Correctness](#)  
[Skepticism](#)  
[Software](#)  
[Specialists](#)  
[Statistics & Probability](#)  
[Teaching](#)

### Top Ten

1. [Argument Mapping Tutorials](#). Six online tutorials in argument mapping, a core requirement for advanced critical thinking.
2. [The Skeptic's Dictionary](#) - over 400 definitions and essays.
3. [The Fallacy Files](#) by Gary Curtis. Best website on fallacies.
4. [Butterflies and Wheels](#). Excellent reading - news, articles, and much more.
5. [Critical Thinking: What It Is and Why It Counts](#) by Peter Facione. Good overview of the nature of critical thinking. (pdf file)
6. [Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion](#) by John Stuart Mill. Classic chapter, densely packed with wisdom about thinking.
7. [Chance](#) - best resource for helping students think critically about issues involving probability and statistics
8. [Psychology of Intelligence Analysis](#), by Richards Heuer. A good overview of how to improve thinking in the light of insights from cognitive psychology.
9. [A Handbook on Writing Argumentative and Interpretative Essays](#) by Ian Johnston
10. [Baloney Detection Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) - by Michael Shermer. 10 step guide.

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### What is critical thinking?

Nobody said it better than [Francis Bacon](#), back in 1605:

*For myself, I found that I was fitted for nothing so well as for the study of Truth; as having a mind nimble and versatile enough to catch the resemblances of things ... and at the same time steady enough to fix and distinguish their subtler differences; as being gifted by nature with desire to seek, patience to doubt, fondness to meditate, slowness to assert, readiness to consider, carefulness to dispose and set in order; and as being a man that neither affects what is new nor admires what is old, and that hates every kind of imposture.*

A shorter version is *the art of being right*.

Or, more prosaically: critical thinking is the skillful application of a repertoire of validated general techniques for deciding the level of confidence you should have in a proposition in the light of the available evidence.

[More definitions...](#)

Austhink is an organization which creates software for both educators and businesses to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. On their website they provide an extensive directory of online resources related to different aspects of critical thinking. Although the directory is not uniquely targeted at educators, many websites featured are designed for teachers and students. Therefore this directory can be a useful starting point for teachers looking to find critical thinking resources, both theoretical and for classroom application.

Relevant resources can be found relatively easily as the site is well-organized and divided into over forty categories. Some larger categories are further sub-divided by resource type, such as articles, tutorials, software and email lists. A brief description of each website helps users to choose the links most relevant to their needs.

Categories which might be particularly helpful to EAP teachers include argument mapping, critical reading and writing, group thinking,

language and thought, magazines and journals, and podcasts and teaching. Such a range of resources could be useful for teachers developing materials for key EAP skills, for example, argumentative writing, debate preparation, and assessing internet sources.

Using the directory can also save time since the resources appear to have been selectively chosen and come from credible sources, many of them universities. Different perspectives on critical thinking can also be found here as links are given to different theorists' approaches. Furthermore, most sites linked to are free to access.

One weakness is that the site does not appear to be regularly updated. Nevertheless, this comprehensive directory can still be useful for teachers interested in learning more about critical thinking and looking for inspiration to encourage critical thinking in their students.

## Critical Literacy

For EAP teachers interested in helping learners become critical thinkers, helping them critically read not only the academic and other written texts they encounter, but also the cultural-social-political contexts of these texts, two resources on critical literacy provide a good starting point.

### Literacy GAINS

[http://edugains.ca/resourcesLIT/CoreResources/Critical\\_Literacy\\_Guide.pdf](http://edugains.ca/resourcesLIT/CoreResources/Critical_Literacy_Guide.pdf)

What is critical literacy, you may ask? A clear and concise answer to this question can be found on the website of Literacy GAINS (2009). Quoting a number of prominent educational theorists, this brief guide explains how teaching critical literacy provides students “with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society” (Kretovics, 1985, as cited in Shor, 1999). Such approaches to literacy education aim to teach learners to “read the word” in order to “read the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987), to analyze “how and to what degree the text maintains the status quo or perpetuates inequities”, to consider “multiple perspectives and possibilities”, especially of “those that are absent or silenced”, and to appreciate that there is no “single or ‘correct’ interpretation of any text”. In this way, proponents of critical literacy seek to promote critical consciousness and, ultimately, social change (Literacy GAINS, 2009 p. 1).

Not only does this guide summarize key points of the theory of critical literacy, it also provides a practical list of ‘strategies’ for teaching critical literacy. These include:

- Juxtaposing texts
- Testing texts against predictions
- Examining or creating alternative endings
- Using examples of texts from everyday life
- Posing, and teaching students to pose, questions that problematize text and text, evoke thinking about issues of language, and power
- Helping students understand that they can act with and/or against a text
- Modeling a think-aloud that questions what the author is saying

- “Providing opportunities for students to reflect ... and explore the implications of ideas for themselves and others” (Literacy GAINS, 2009, p. 2).

### Critical literacy in the 21st Century

<http://thinkcritically.weebly.com/index.html>

### Critical Literacy in the 21st Century



<a href="#">Home</a>	<b>Welcome!</b>
<a href="#">Critical Literacy</a>	Thank you for visiting my website focusing on critical literacy in the 21st century. My name is Rachel Forstat. I am a senior in the <a href="#">College of Education at Michigan State University</a> , and I will be graduating in May of 2010 with a teaching major in Elementary Education and a teaching minor in language arts.
<a href="#">21st Century</a>	
<a href="#">Technology and Reciprocal Learning</a>	
<a href="#">Theory into Practice</a>	
<a href="#">Sample Lesson Plans</a>	I have created this site as a means to express my thoughts and feelings in regards to teaching critical literacy in the 21st century. Here, I will document my journey towards discovering: what it means to be <i>critically literate</i> , why critical literacy is an important concept for the 21st century, and how I can empower my future students to use literacy as a means to challenge the injustices and inequities present in the global community.
<a href="#">Cultural Connections &amp; Writing for Change</a>	
<a href="#">Helpful Links</a>	
<a href="#">Children's Literature Resources</a>	
<a href="#">References</a>	
<a href="#">Feedback</a>	

**My Goal:**

One goal of mine is to give students the tools to critique ideas that encourages or legitimizes social inequality...every idea that teaches them they are incapable of imagining and building a fundamentally equal and just society[x].

The website reviewed here was developed by a university student at Michigan State University’s College of Education, Rachel Forstat with the aim of giving students “the tools to critique ideas that encourages or legitimizes [sic] social inequality” (Forstat, n.d.). It is included in this review for its very practical suggestions for learning strategies and lesson plans. Forstat’s website provides not only brief overviews of critical literacy and its vital importance in the 21st Century, but also five detailed lesson plans. While intended for use with middle school students, the activities and approaches suggested could nevertheless be adapted to any educational setting including university EAP classes.

## References

Forstat, R. (n.d.). *Critical Literacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Retrieved June 19, 2014 from <http://thinkcritically.weebly.com/index.html>

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Shor, I. (1999). What is critical literacy? *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism & Practice*, 4(1), Cambridge, Massachusetts: Lesley College. Retrieved from <http://www.lesley.edu/journals/jppp/4/index.html>

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