Some Thoughts on Thinking
by Dr. Phyllis Rand

The A Beka Book® Approach to Critical-Thinking Skills
Some observers of problems in American education have diagnosed education’s essential illness as the failure to teach students to think. There is, indeed, plenty of observable evidence that attests to weak scholarship, illogical conclusions, bad decisions, rejection of traditional values, and lack of innovation—just overall mindlessness.

The recommended ways for education to cure this problem are many and varied. For example, Romantics and progressives have always believed that natural, hands-on learning and collaborative problem solving create the freest and best thinkers. More recently, Howard Gardner asserts that there has been too much attention given to thinking as scholastic and linguistic intelligence; instead, classroom lessons should accommodate other forms of intelligence such as spatial and musical thinking. Postmodernists argue that we must legitimize all thought or be accused of destroying self-esteem and teaching what to think. Classicists stress the contribution of studying logic and, from a young age, an inflected language such as Latin. Machen makes a point of the importance of first learning information; “we cannot think in a vacuum,” he says. Psychologists continue to recommend new cognitive learning theories and ways to improve learning outcomes.

In general, as Knight observes, more emphasis is put on new techniques and innovations (the how) than on evaluation and actual needs (the why). The tried and true must be reformed and the reforms tried out on the students.

As publishers of educational materials, we at A Beka Book ask ourselves if it should be a goal of Christian education to teach children to be thinkers. The answer is assuredly yes. Much in life depends on the quality of our thoughts. The next questions are how do we define thinking and how do we set out to help students be good thinkers?

Our first step is always to go back to our stated purpose: The God-given ministry of Christian schools is to lead young people to Christ and train them in the Bible, Christian character, language, and traditional subject matter. Today’s students need to be taught the accumulated wisdom of the past from God’s point of view and trained in the way they should go (Prov. 22:6) so they will have a firm foundation from which to evaluate the present and make proper decisions for the future. Staying true to that purpose
makes it easy to reject some of the
cures suggested above. Our research
must begin with the most original
source and only true foundation of
true scholarship in any form of hu-
man endeavor—God’s Word.

The most often used label for the
kind of thinking lacking in young
people is critical thinking. The
objective of critical thinking, like
all other academic objectives, can-
not be separated from our biblical
metaphysics (what is true about the
world, about God, about man?),
epistemology (can we know truth, is
it relative or absolute, is it indepen-
dent of experience?) and axiology
(what is good and beautiful and the
best way to live?).

Only the Bible truly accounts for the
ability of man to think and verbalize
thought. The Bible even addresses
critical thinking. For example, the
Proverbs are far more than a col-
duction of human wisdom gained by
experience. They embody the phi-
osophy of heaven for the benefit of
people on earth. In the first chapter,
Solomon lists his objectives:

• to know wisdom and instruction
• to perceive the words of under-
standing
• to receive instruction of wis-
dom, justice, judgment, and
equity
• to give subtilty to the simple
• to give the young man knowl-
edge and discretion
• to understand and interpret a
proverb

Sounds like a good critical thinking
manual, doesn’t it!

God’s view is to teach students
godly thinking. It can be said that
the basis of critical thinking is the
ability to come to well-reasoned
judgments supported by biblical
principles. Only then can we ex-
amine, analyze, synthesize, evalu-
ate—in short, make wise decisions.
Critical thinking does not mean sub-
jectively constructing “new truth”
relative to times and situations.

It is helpful to realize that tradition-
al, Christian education develops
understanding and thinking; it imparts
the necessary foundation of knowl-
edge as well as skills and attributes
needed for critical thinking.

Sternberg’s model for what he calls
“developing expertise” is helpful.
He names five elements in this de-
velopment process, all of which
have curriculum implications for
teaching how to think:

Metacognitive skills—the
skills that refer to a student’s under-
standing of how to think about and
accomplish academic tasks. What is
the writing process? What are the
steps to solving a word problem?
What questions do I ask first?

Learning skills—the skills
that teachers demonstrate when they
explain new learning in light of what
has already been learned, when they
explain what is relevant and what is
not, or when they teach good study
habits and note taking. Learning
skills can be taught explicitly and even picked up implicitly from good teaching.

**Thinking skills**—the skills which Sternberg divides into critical (analytical) thinking, creative (imaginative) thinking, and practical (applying, using, practicing) thinking.

**Knowledge**—knowledge of facts, concepts, principles, laws, and procedures.

**Motivation**—what keeps students wanting to learn.4

Sternberg’s description of critical thinking as only one of the components in the measurement of effective education mirrors the goal of a general but broad traditional education. Emphasizing one skill to the neglect of another in the overall curriculum does not take advantage of the way that learning skills and thinking skills, etc., all influence one another directly and indirectly. That neglect is often seen in well-meaning reforms made in reaction to perceived weak areas when it is really the whole curriculum which has been weakened.

By recognizing the importance of the classroom teacher in developing a student’s “expertise,” particularly his thinking and learning skills, how does A Beka Book help?

1. **By providing quality curriculum and materials that emphasize basic but wide knowledge of subject content as noted above.** It is true that we need something in our heads to think with, as well as to inspire and to provide a foundation of new knowledge and new ideas. (See more in afterword, p. 6).

2. **By emphasizing the intellectual skills once called the liberal arts—the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and the mathematical and scientific skills of observing, measuring, calculating, estimating.** These skills train the mind. The current lack of skills instruction in favor of a more holistic approach has negatively affected intellectual development and good thinking.

3. **By writing materials from a Christian perspective in order to teach ideas and values and learn wisdom, which begins with the fear of the Lord.** For years, America enjoyed the blessing of citizens whose common sense was biblical. Today, however, we have used up that capital, and that kind of sense is not so common. No lessons in how to think will bring it back. Secular education teaches children to think humanistically—to construct thoughts and opinions and answers irrespective of God’s. Teachers often hear that we must teach children to think, not what to think. But just learning to think, without Bible principles at the center of our thoughts, is not enough. In fact, it opens up the mind to all kinds of delusion.

4. **By providing a Bible curriculum for daily Bible teaching.** Bible
class gives students the foundation of all wisdom. By means of teacher-directed Bible lessons rather than workbook-directed lessons, we ensure that learning takes place in the affective as well as the cognitive domain. The Bible gives us the universal truths which are necessary for all thinking. Thinking that does not begin with the fear of the Lord is foolishness.

5. **By providing content and methods with a traditional emphasis on character development.** The traditional, teacher-directed approach has the wonderful side benefit of helping form godly character in students. Critical thinking requires such intellectual traits or virtues as focus or discipline, attention, perseverance, integrity, accuracy, fairness, mindedness, courage. Every subject area, every teaching method, every attitude, every action of student or teacher is a means of training in these vital intellectual traits. The teacher who maintains an orderly, structured classroom and expects the students to work hard to learn, whether they feel like it or not, is teaching them to
   1. respect authority,
   2. pay attention,
   3. obey willingly and immediately,
   4. apply themselves to the task at hand,
   5. learn rules and apply them,
   6. do their best,
   7. learn to love hard work,
   8. understand how things work together,
   9. finish the job,
   10. do right because it's right to do right,
   11. work hard to get the right answer,
   12. know that there is a right answer,
   13. love wisdom,
   14. choose things that are excellent, and
   15. develop habits of orderliness, carefulness, alertness, obedience, persistence, honesty, accomplishment, cooperation, faithfulness, accuracy, industry, perseverance, self-control, attentiveness, fairness, thoroughness, confidence, responsibility, decisiveness, effort, steadfastness, discipline, endurance, helpfulness, reasonableness, neatness, patience, judgment, loyalty, and respect.

6. **By providing professional development opportunities that promote quality teaching throughout the school day.** The *A Beka Book* in-service seminars, clinics, and Professional Development Online are available throughout the year and have helped to train thousands of teachers.

In summary, we want our customers to know that the development of good thinking is an important component of the *A Beka Book* curriculums and textbooks. From the earliest grades, the materials logically work together to produce thought and knowledge. As students progress through the grades, expectations and opportunities increase as subject content and work becomes more complex.
American children who score poorly on tests of knowledge probably have not been trained in the other skills. Take, for example, the many ways that thinking is developed hand in hand with knowledge. Look at these examples from *A Beka* curriculum:

**Intensive phonics** training, in contrast to the rote-memorization, sight-word method of beginning reading, trains students in analytical thinking. Rather than being told that *c-a-t* spells *cat*, they are taught why *c-a-t* spells *cat*. They are given the rules and taught how to apply them to figure out words for themselves.

**Reading** lessons in the *A Beka Book* program are able to place emphasis on reading for meaning because reading builds on the decoding skill of phonics. Students are expected to read every day, and they are held accountable for what they read by means of teacher questions and quizzes that require students to recall facts, see relationships, draw inferences, and make evaluations. Workbooks are seldom used, because they take too much time away from reading and tend to bore students with busy work.

**Grammar** requires students to figure out how the parts of a sentence go together to form a whole, how the parts are related to each other, and how the main ideas can be distinguished from supporting details. This analysis effectually teaches students to think.

**Vocabulary** training further sharpens students’ thinking skills as they deal with the precise meanings of words and the history of their formation. The more words students know and use, the better equipped they are to think.

**Literature** helps students to fill their minds with thoughts from some of the world’s greatest writers so that they may think great thoughts and learn to express them to others. It gets them in tune with the best. The questions at the end of the selections in the *A Beka Book* literature anthologies involve students in all levels of thinking.

**Composition** is thinking. When students are regularly required to work on a thesis sentence until its subject and predicate express *exactly* what the composition will attempt to prove, the students are getting some of the finest practice on thinking that they can get. The development and ordering of ideas required by excellent writing cannot be accomplished by sloppy thinkers.

**History** teaches students what man has done with the time God has given him, and what have been the consequences of man’s thoughts
and actions. It thus enables the students to make reasonable decisions for their own lives and times. Most history books ignore the history of ideas. We believe that the events of history are the products of ideas (“As he thinketh in his heart, so is he”—Prov. 23:7) and that high school students are capable of grasping and evaluating some of the important ideas that have shaped history. If students are not given, at the appropriate level, a chance to understand such ideas as determinism, pragmatism, humanism, existentialism, and rationalism, they are likely to be taken in by these ideas. A history lesson, properly taught, can give students invaluable lessons in how to think.

Science taught in Christian perspective helps students to think God’s thoughts after Him. It opens their minds to the wonders of creation and shows them how man can subdue the physical creation for the glory of God and the benefit of mankind. Observing demonstrations, performing experiments, and completing science projects train them in the use of the scientific method.

Traditional mathematics trains students to think clearly, precisely, mathematically. It leads them to analyze problems, see connections, and work for solutions. Learning the multiplication tables frees them to use arithmetic for solving daily problems. Learning higher mathematics trains them in logic.

Dr. Phyllis Rand’s over 40 years of service in Christian education has ranged from being a sixth grade teacher to graduate and post-graduate faculty, and from elementary administrator to Chair of Education for Pensacola Christian College in Pensacola, FL. She has also written language arts textbooks and developed curriculum for A Beka Book.


