



Beyond the Transcript: Empowering Students with Critical Thinking Skills

A guide for higher education institutions to help students develop the critical thinking skills needed for lifelong success.

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Introduction:

Why Critical Thinking Skills Matter for Career Success

Employers want individuals who can contribute on day one—professionals who can analyze, adapt, and solve problems in fast-changing environments. In an era defined by AI and constant disruption, it's the higher-order, human-centered skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, and communication, that set students apart.

This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for higher education institutions. The good news is that research shows that higher-order skills can be taught. By embedding critical thinking skill development into every program and giving students the tools to demonstrate their proficiency, institutions can help students stand out in hiring, accelerate their careers, and be prepared for lifelong success.

This guide offers strategies and activities to equip your students with the skills, experiences, and evidence they need to land the job, make an impact, and lead in an ever-changing world.

¹ Zahner, D., Gammenthaler, K., Dawber, T., & Cortellini, O. (2026). Measuring and Improving University Students' Critical Thinking Skills through Assessment and Instruction. *DIDAC*, (87), 8-26.

² Zahner, D., & Van Damme, D. (Eds.). (2022). *Does higher education teach students to think critically?* OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/cc9fa6aa-en>

Research Supports That Explicitly Teaching Critical Thinking Has An Impact...



4th-year students who had classroom instruction on critical thinking performed statistically significantly higher on the CLA+, a performance-based assessment of critical thinking and effective communication.¹



Higher education students who perform better on CLA+ are more likely to have positive post-graduation outcomes as measured by employment, salary, and graduate school enrollment. They are also more likely to have higher evaluations from their managers and advisors.²

Why Is Critical Thinking Important?

The nature of work is changing fast. AI, automation, and emerging technologies are transforming every industry, shifting the skills employers prioritize to keep pace. While technical expertise remains important, today's workforce demands individuals who can think critically, solve complex problems, and communicate effectively. These human-centered skills are the foundation for adaptability, innovation, and long-term career success.

Employers consistently rank these skills as most important:³



CRITICAL THINKING

What is it? The ability to analyze information, challenge assumptions, and make sound, strategic decisions.

Why does it matter? Students are will be prepared to think independently, solve complex problems, and approach challenges with clarity and confidence.



PROBLEM SOLVING

What is it? The process of identifying a problem, analyzing its causes, and designing solutions.

Why does it matter? Students are will be equipped to tackle problems, pivot when needed, and create solutions that move organizations ahead.



WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

What is it? The ability to convey ideas and information with clarity, credibility, and impact using text, data, and images.

Why does it matter? Students are will be able to express complex ideas with precision and professionalism, producing written work that informs, persuades, and drives impact.

From healthcare to high-tech, every career path relies on these competencies. Whether leading teams, interpreting data, or managing a crisis, these skills are the foundation for success across industries.

³ Finley, A.P. (2023). *The career-ready graduate: What employers say about the difference college makes*. Association of Colleges and Universities. <https://dgm81phvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Research/PDFs/AACU-2023-Employer-Report.pdf>

The Benefits of Building Students' Critical Thinking Skills

Strong critical thinking skills will help students:



Navigate Novel Situations

Students learn how to apply a framework to help them work through any critical thinking situation with confidence.



Articulate Competencies on Resumes

Students can provide evidence of their skills with results from performance-based assessments.



Prepare for Interviews

Students' critical thinking skills help them respond confidently to interview questions that require them to consider a real-life scenario.



Gain Practical Experience

Students practice applying their critical thinking skills in scenarios they may encounter in their careers using course-aligned performance tasks.



Reflect and Connect

As students learn how to be more effective critical thinkers and communicators, these skills are instantly applicable to their daily lives.

A Strategic Approach to Teaching and Measuring Critical Thinking Skills

Developing critical thinking skills requires intentional instruction, deliberate practice, regular measurement, and reinforcement across the learning experience. In the following pages you'll find strategies to improve students' critical thinking skills and connect learning to real-world application.



HOW TO EMBED CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS INTO COURSES

Structured approaches to integrate skills across disciplines.



IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS

Classroom activities and assignments that build critical thinking skills.

A Comprehensive Program to Build Future-Readiness

CAE offers higher education institutions a proven, flexible approach to integrate critical thinking skills development into existing courses. We provide training, instructional materials, and assessments to create a robust system for skill development and measurement.

CAE's Critical Thinking Skills Program will help you:

- Build faculty capacity to teach higher-order skills consistently.
- Provide students with a clear, practical framework for effective critical thinking.
- Track skill development with valid, reliable measures that go beyond multiple-choice tests.
- Demonstrate institutional impact with evidence of student learning outcomes and workforce readiness.



How to Embed Critical Thinking Skills into Courses

Preparing students for the workforce means teaching them the higher-order skills employers demand most. CAE's Critical Thinking Skills Program provides a structured and flexible way to build these competencies.

The Critical Thinking Skills Program includes four essential components that ensure faculty are equipped to teach critical thinking and that students don't just learn about critical thinking, but they also have opportunities to practice, apply, and demonstrate their skills.



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR FACULTY

Equip instructors with training and resources to confidently embed critical thinking skills instruction into their courses.



INTENTIONAL INSTRUCTION

Teach students the *Seven Steps for Effective Critical Thinking*, giving them a shared framework and repeated opportunities to apply the framework across the curriculum.



DELIBERATE PRACTICE

Through course-aligned performance tasks, provide opportunities for students to apply the framework across the curriculum



PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENT

Use authentic, scenario-based tasks to measure student growth in critical thinking, problem solving, and written communication, offering actionable insights for both students and institutions.



Implementation Options

To develop their higher-order skills, students need opportunities to apply and practice them in different contexts. But developing critical thinking skills isn't a one-time initiative; it's a long-term investment in student success. Faculty can embed critical thinking instruction into coursework using a variety of formats that fit naturally into existing assignments and activities.



WRITTEN ESSAY

Encourage students to organize ideas, build arguments, and support conclusions with evidence.



CLASSROOM DEBATE

Build analytical reasoning, active listening, and the ability to defend or refine a position when challenged.



QUIZ QUESTIONS

Check comprehension and encourage students to apply the critical thinking framework to specific scenarios.



SHORT-ANSWER RESPONSES

Promote clarity and precision by requiring students to distill complex thinking into concise explanations.



ORAL PRESENTATION

Strengthen students' ability to articulate their ideas to peers and instructors.



GUIDED DISCUSSION

Foster collaborative problem solving, peer learning, and real-time application of critical thinking steps.

By offering multiple ways to practice, institutions can reinforce critical thinking across disciplines, support different learning styles, and give students the confidence to transfer these skills into workplace settings.

Practice to Help Students Translate Skills into Career Assets

Employers want proof that students can apply critical thinking in real-world contexts. Traditional end-of-course exams don't measure this, but critical thinking performance tasks do. The authentic scenarios mirror workplace challenges and help students build both competence and confidence.

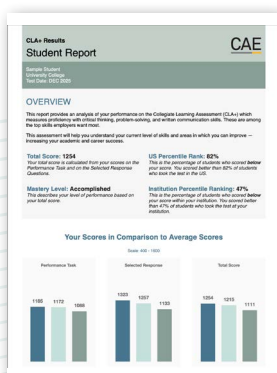
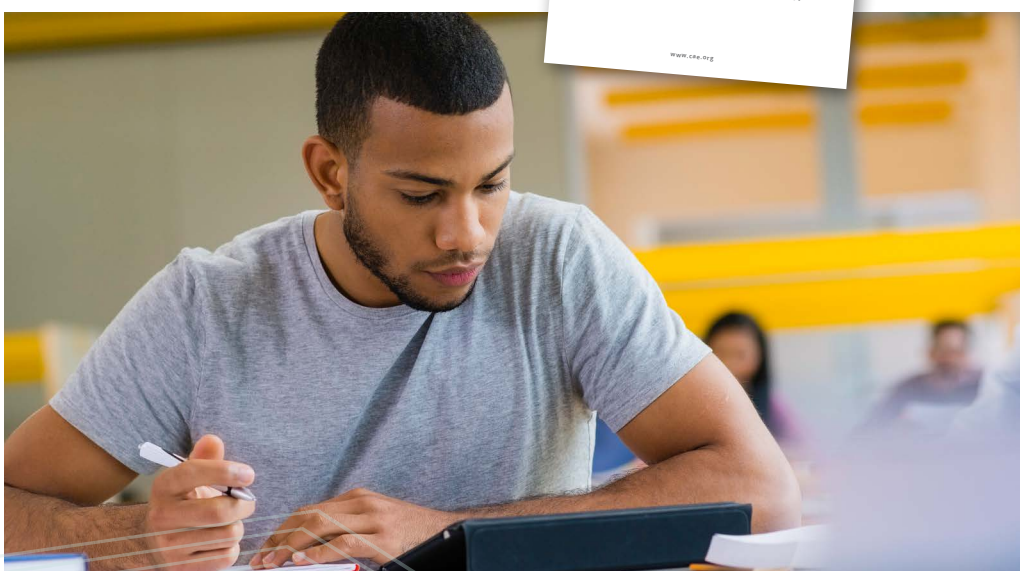
Sample Performance Tasks

CAE's performance tasks illustrate the kind of complex, multifaceted decision-making students will face in today's workforce and civic life. For instance, students may step into the role of a school board member, evaluating whether to require community service for high school graduation. To make their case, students must review a set of conflicting documents, analyze trade-offs, and build a well-reasoned, evidence-based argument for or against the proposal.



[Explore Sample Scenarios](#)

[Download a Sample Performance Task](#)



Evidence of Skill Development

CAE's performance-based assessments provide actionable data for institutions and personalized reports students can share with employers to demonstrate workforce readiness.

[View a Sample Student Report](#)

[View a Sample Institution Report](#)



Getting Started

This guide introduced how to embed critical thinking skill development into your courses, across the academic year. To put these ideas into action, your institution can leverage CAE's Critical Thinking Skills Program, an **evidence-based approach** that provides everything you need to integrate critical thinking, problem solving, and written communication into your existing curriculum.



Empower faculty with **professional development and support**.



Embed skills throughout courses with **instructional resources and student materials**.



Measure outcomes with **performance-based assessments**.

Partner with CAE to tailor a solution that works for your institution and sets students up for workforce success.

Visit [CAE.org](https://cae.org) to learn more or email us at info@cae.org to start a conversation.