

Making Critical Thinking Visible: Critical Thinking in the Literature Classroom



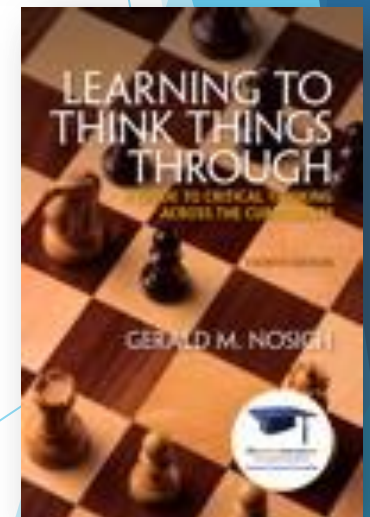
Amanda Hiner and John Bird
Department of English
Winthrop University



34th International Conference on Critical Thinking
and Educational Reform

Context

- ▶ We teach literature and critical thinking at Winthrop University, a public liberal arts university in South Carolina, and have taught introductory and advanced-level literature courses at the college and high school levels for decades.
- ▶ In 2003, our university began requiring that all students take a course in critical thinking; this course replaced the traditional Writing 102 course in argument.
- ▶ After careful deliberation, our Gen Ed Curriculum Committee chose to adopt and teach the Paul/Elder/Nosich model of critical thinking and to adopt Nosich's *Learning to Think Things Through* as the foundational required text in the course.



Some Results

- ▶ Since 2003, Winthrop students have received focused, semester-long instruction in critical thinking concepts and strategies:
 - ▶ The Elements of Reasoning
 - ▶ The Universal Standards of Critical Thinking
 - ▶ Metacognition; The Impediments to Critical Thinking
 - ▶ The Intellectual Character Traits
- ▶ Ongoing internal assessment measures have indicated that students' critical thinking and analytical skills have measurably improved.
- ▶ Most of our English Department instructors and professors have now been trained in and regularly teach the Paul/Elder model of critical thinking.

The Transformative Nature of Critical Thinking Instruction

- ▶ Teaching critical thinking *changed* us as teachers, resulting in:
 - ▶ Heightened levels of metacognition.
 - ▶ More awareness of our own intellectual reasoning and biases.
 - ▶ Deeper understanding of how critical thinking skills can enrich and improve literary analysis and argumentation.
 - ▶ Better ways to articulate what we had been doing, clarify course goals, and instruct students in strategies and expectations.

Central Premises

- ▶ Literary analysis offers teachers an ideal vehicle for modeling, practicing, and teaching critical thinking skills.
- ▶ College-level literary analysis is really a sophisticated, sustained form of critical thinking. Katherine O. Acheson, in *Writing Essays About Literature*, explains:
 - ▶ A literary essay is “a clearly written argument, based on evidence, about the meaning, power, or structure of the work or works” (4).
 - ▶ “The study of literature is based on evidence, and its findings are arguments based on that evidence. The arguments must account for all of the relevant evidence” and must culminate in a “compelling and convincing argument” (8).

Central Premises

- ▶ Because literature students must master the skills of analysis, reasoning, evaluation, and argumentation, they would benefit from **more explicit classroom instruction** in critical thinking concepts and practices.
- ▶ As Gerald Nosich asserts, “Learning content *is* learning to think. If I learn content, but I don’t learn to think in terms of that content, then it’s not *content* at all” (101).
- ▶ A more deliberate integration of -- and instruction in -- the **Elements of Reasoning** can greatly enhance literature students’ understanding and analysis of literary texts and their contexts.

Central Premises

- ▶ An integration of the **Standards of Critical Thinking** into course rubrics and assessment standards can help instructors to clarify expectations and course goals.
- ▶ Clarification of the concepts of **Metacognition** and the **Impediments to Critical Thinking** deepens readers' understanding of characterization, or the representation of psychological development or growth in characters.
- ▶ Clarifying the connections between literary analysis and critical thinking helps instructors and administrators to articulate the value of English studies.

In our Presentation, We Will

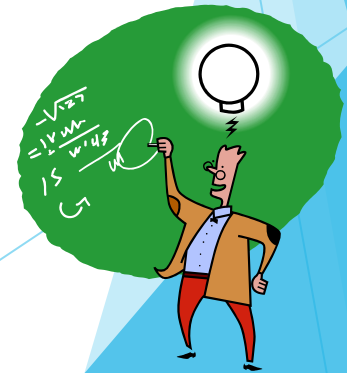
- ▶ Identify common **challenges** faced by literature instructors and students in literary analysis.
- ▶ Share some **strategies** for addressing and overcoming these challenges:
 1. Instructing students in **Critical Reading** strategies.
 2. Adding the **Elements of Reasoning** to the Elements of Fiction.
 3. Integrating the **Standards of Critical Thinking** into writing rubrics and peer assessments.
 4. Integrating critical thinking concepts and strategies into the **research paper** writing process.
- ▶ Provide an opportunity for you to apply and practice these strategies.

Challenges in Teaching Literary Analysis

- ▶ Students typically have little experience in critical reading and critical writing.
- ▶ Students are unaccustomed to annotating texts and to sustaining engaged, critical attention while reading long, challenging prose texts.
- ▶ Student's critical thinking skills may be inherently challenged by their constant and deep immersion in visual media.

Challenges in Teaching Literary Analysis

- ▶ Instruction often includes a heavy focus on the traditional “Elements of Fiction,” “Elements of Poetry,” and “Elements of Drama,” especially in high school and in introductory college literature courses.
- ▶ Students often see the “Elements of Fiction” as a simplistic formula that leads them quickly to a one-system “right answer.”



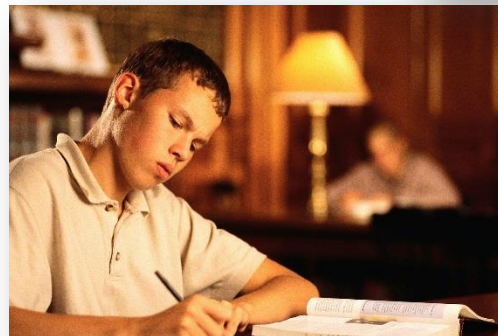
Some Common Results

- ▶ Students often demonstrate resistance to critical reading and annotation.
- ▶ Students struggle to identify implications and connect central ideas (concepts) throughout long prose texts.
- ▶ Students' verbal and written analyses can display lack of depth; lack of significance; and lack of metacognitive awareness about context, biases, alternatives, and implications.

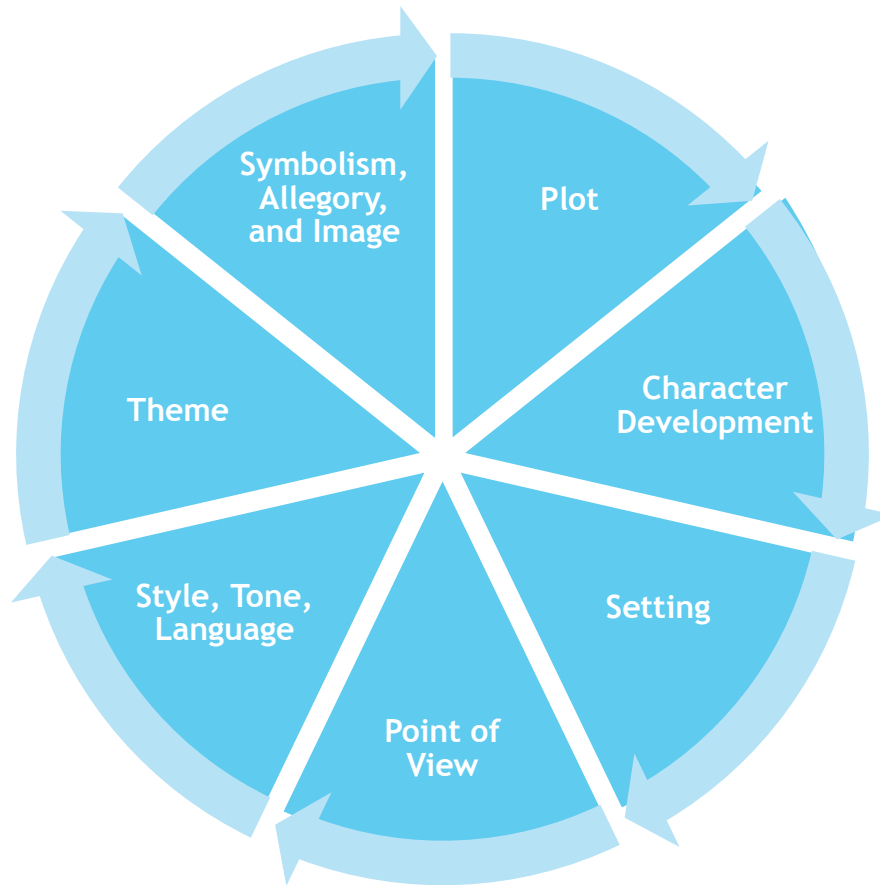


One Solution: Explicit Instruction in Critical Reading Techniques

- ▶ College students typically need explicit, repeated practice and instruction in **how to read critically.**
- ▶ Handouts:
 - ▶ “How to Read Critically”
 - ▶ “How to Read a Poem”
 - ▶ “How to Read a Novel”
 - ▶ Critical Reading Exercise

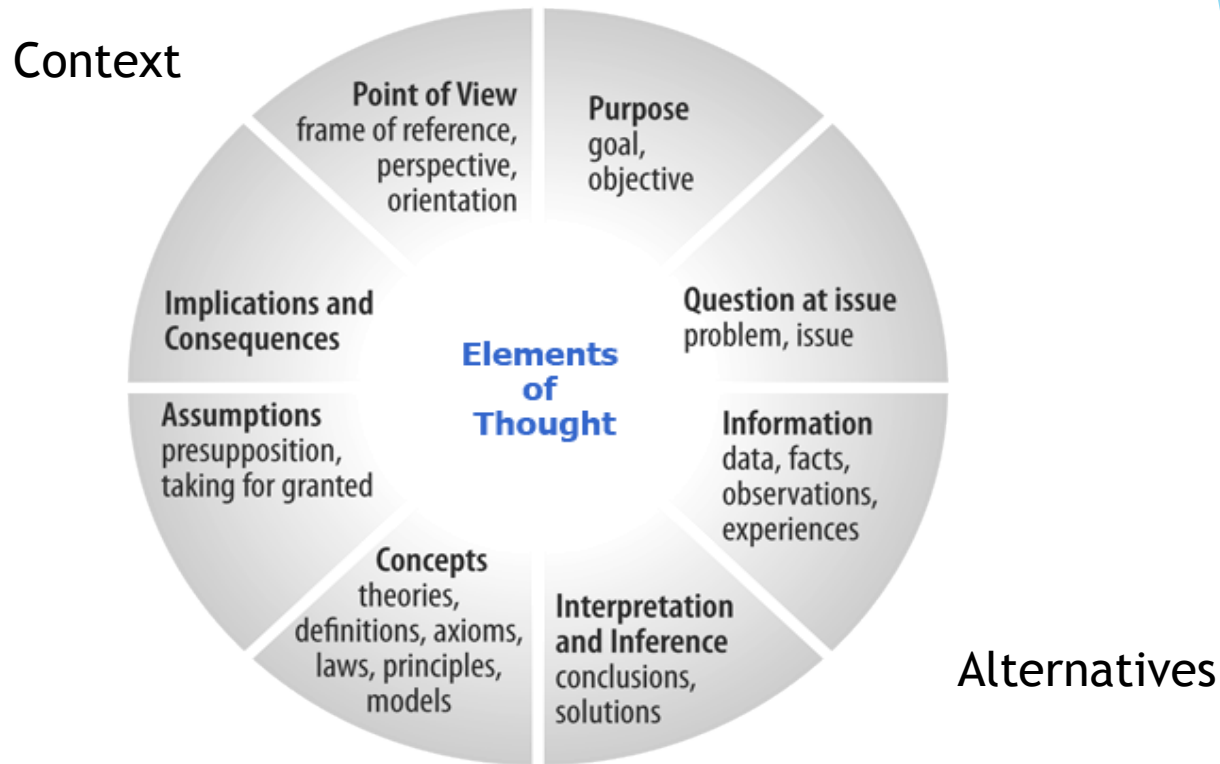


The Elements of Fiction



The **Elements of Fiction** are foundational and essential to literary analysis. However, students sometimes view this type of analysis as a quick, reductive fact-gathering mission, resulting in a lack of *depth* and *significance*.

The Elements of Reasoning



Emphasizing the **Elements of Reasoning** in literary analysis can push students toward *depth* and *significance* and encourage them to answer the crucial “So What?” questions about the text.

One Solution: *Adding* the “Elements of Reasoning” to an Analysis of the “Elements of Fiction”

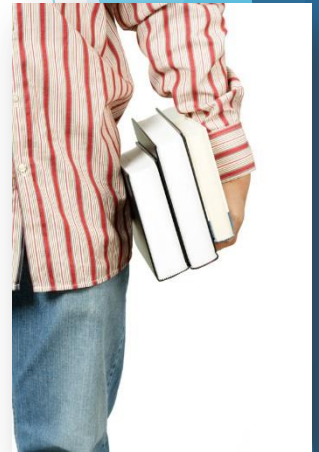
The Elements of Fiction

- ▶ Plot
- ▶ Setting
- ▶ Characterization (Character Development)
- ▶ Conflict
- ▶ Symbolism, Allegory, and Imagery
- ▶ Point of View
- ▶ Theme
- ▶ Style, Tone, and Language

These are fundamental and powerful concepts in literary analysis; the analysis of these concepts requires gathering information from the text.

Thinking about Literary Analysis in Terms of the Elements of Reasoning

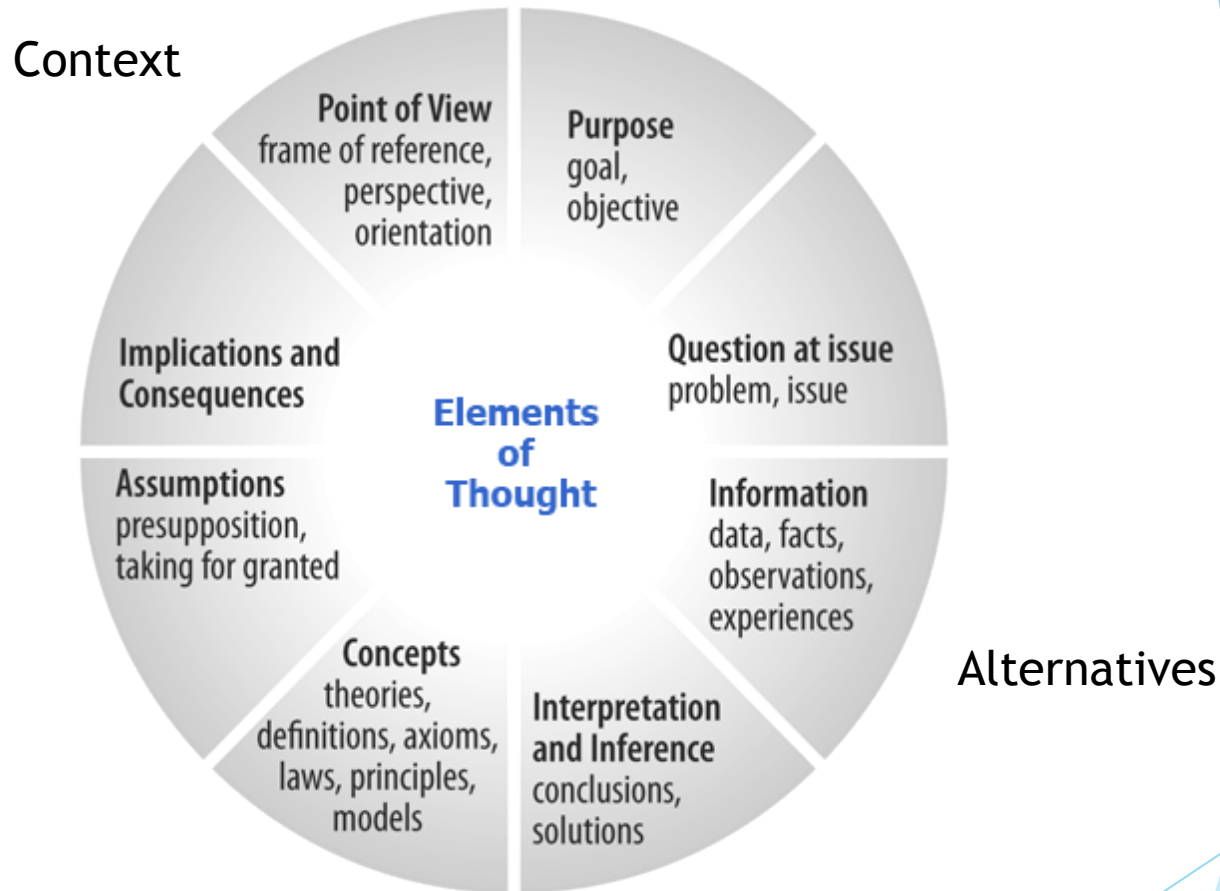
- ▶ All literature and literary analyses have a **purpose**
- ▶ All literary analyses attempt to settle some **question at issue**
- ▶ All narratives and literary analyses are influenced by and based on **assumptions**
- ▶ All narratives are conveyed from some **point of view**
- ▶ All literary analyses are based on **data, information, and evidence**
- ▶ All literature and literary analyses are expressed through, and shaped by, **concepts and ideas**
- ▶ All literary analyses lead to **conclusions** that give meaning to textual data
- ▶ The elements of fiction, and analyses of the elements of fiction, have **implications and consequences**
- ▶ All literature is created, set, and analyzed within certain **contexts**, and all literary interpretations have various **alternatives**.



Ernest Hemingway

“A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”

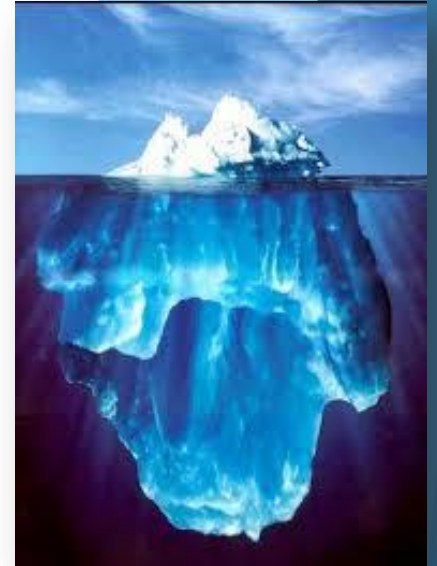
The Elements of Reasoning



Application:

- ▶ Now that we have blended the Elements of Fiction and the Elements of Reasoning, consider some of the following questions:
 1. What emerges from the literary text by focusing your analysis on the Elements of Reasoning?
 2. How might students respond to an analysis using the Elements of Reasoning along with the Elements of Fiction?
 3. How could these two sets of fundamental and powerful concepts be combined in literary analysis?
 4. Which of the Elements of Reasoning pose the greatest challenge to your students when teaching fiction or non-fiction prose texts? Why?
 5. Can you devise some innovative ways to integrate the Elements of Reasoning into your analysis of written texts in the classroom?

Teaching the Elements of Reasoning Results In Increased Levels of Depth of Analysis



- ▶ **Depth** is defined by Paul and Elder as analysis which:
 - ▶ Addresses **complexities**
 - ▶ Takes into account the **problems** in the question
 - ▶ Deals with the **most significant factors** in the issue or problem*
- ▶ By requiring students to consider the Elements of Reasoning, teachers insist that they
 1. Consider and articulate hidden **assumptions**
 2. Consider and articulate the **implications** of claims and beliefs
 3. Consider and articulate **consequences**
 4. Identify and articulate **key, significant concepts** and **organizing principles**
- ▶ In short, students must answer those crucial “So What?” and “What is the significance of that?” questions in their analysis.

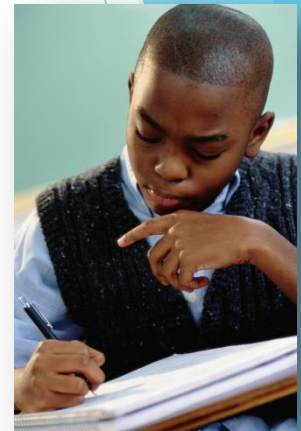
Teaching the Standards Improves Student Writing and Analysis

▶ Sample Thesis Sentences:

- ▶ “It is often believed that women have to look a certain way because they are held to certain standards in society.”
- ▶ “In these two poems, William Blake tackles the subject of children and chimney sweeping, forming a social critique that sheds light on this issue from both innocent and experienced viewpoints.”
- ▶ “This dramatic monologue employs themes and techniques that are fundamental in Browning’s writing.”
- ▶ **CLARITY:** *Could you elaborate further on that point? Could you express that point in another way? Could you give me an illustration? Could you give me an example?*
- ▶ **PRECISION:** *Could you give more details? Could you be more specific?*
- ▶ **DEPTH:** *How does your answer address the complexities in the question? How are you taking into account the problems in the question? Is that dealing with the most significant factors?**

One Solution: Incorporating The Standards of Critical Thinking into Student Assessment

- ▶ Consider incorporating the [Universal Intellectual Standards of Critical Thinking](#) into your assessment rubrics and peer review assessments.
- ▶ Handouts:
 - ▶ Peer Review Assessment Sheets
 - ▶ Writing Rubrics Incorporating the Standards
- ▶ Paul and Elder, [“Using Intellectual Standards to Assess Student Reasoning”](#)

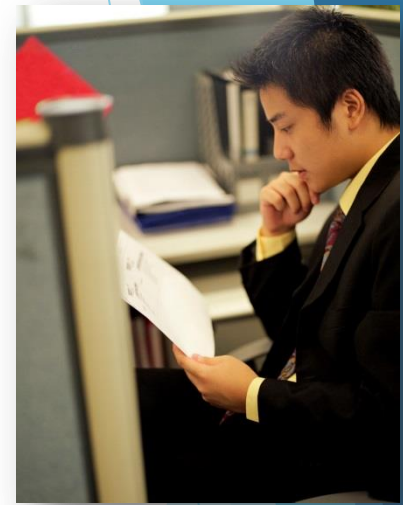


One Solution: Consider Teaching Researched Writing from a “Critical Thinking” Perspective

- ▶ Richard Paul and Linda Elder explain that “Content is Thinking, [and] Thinking is Content.”
- ▶ All academic or professional “content” involves concepts, takes place within a context, is framed by particular points of view, requires logical reasoning, leads to conclusions, involves information and data, and has implications.
- ▶ Teach students *how* the research writing process is really a sophisticated form of critical thinking requiring analysis and evaluation of evidence and leading to logical and supportable inferences and conclusions.
- ▶ Handout:
 - ▶ Critical Thinking and Research Writing Process

Further Conclusions and Implications

- ▶ Current research demonstrates that reading and analyzing fiction effectively develop Intellectual Character Traits, including intellectual empathy, intellectual humility, and fairmindedness.
- ▶ The inherent connection between critical thinking and literary analysis suggests the discipline's widespread value and application in academic and professional contexts.
- ▶ **Final Conclusion:** Instructors should teach critical thinking explicitly in literature courses and serve as advocates for the discipline of literary studies - a powerful vehicle for cultivating and developing valuable, transferable critical thinking skills!



Works Cited

Acheson, Katherine O. *Writing Essays About Literature: A Brief Guide for University and College Students*. Broadview: Ontario, 2011. Print.

Nosich, Gerald M. *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum*. 4th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2012. Print.

Paul, Richard, and Linda Elder. *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life*. 2nd ed. Pearson/Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ: 2006. Print.

The Elements Circle and basic information on the Elements of Reasoning and the Universal Intellectual Standards are taken from www.criticalthinking.org. An excellent overview of the Elements and Standards is available [here](#).

If you have questions, please contact us at hinera@winthrop.edu or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Helpful Resources

- ▶ Acheson, Katherine O. *Writing Essays About Literature: A Brief Guide for University and College Students*. Broadview: Ontario, 2011. Print.
- ▶ Brown, James S. and Scott D. Yarbrough. *A Practical Introduction to Literary Study*. Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ: 2005. Print.
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- ▶ Nosich, Gerald M. *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum*. 4th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2012. Print.
- ▶ Paul, Richard, and Linda Elder. *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life*. 2nd ed. Pearson/Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ: 2006. Print.
- ▶ All of the [Thinker’s Guides](http://www.criticalthinking.org) available at www.criticalthinking.org.