



# CRITICAL THINKING FIGHT CLUB

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THE RULES

# 1

## Don't raise your voice. Improve your argument



Critical Thinking Fight Club is a joint initiative between Research First Ltd and The Marketing Association. It launched in 2020 in a world drowning in data and awash with bullshit; a time when critical thinking might just be the most important skill any of us need to survive. The first rule of Critical Thinking Fight Club borrows an idea from Desmond Tutu and teaches us that “the key is not to raise your voice but to improve your argument”.

# 2

## Don't **believe** everything you think



The second rule of Critical Thinking Fight Club is “don't believe everything you think”. It builds from a great idea from Thomas Gilovich and Lee Ross, that “many mistakes are made not because the right answer is too hard but because the wrong answer is too easy”. The notion of ‘processing fluency’ reminds us that our brains prefer ideas that are easy to process, even when they are wrong. Or, as Mark Twain put it “what gets us into trouble is not what we don't know—it's what we know for sure that just ain't so”.

# 3

## Maybe **you** are the one who is wrong?



The third rule of Critical Thinking Fight Club is “maybe you're the one who is wrong”. This is also known as the “don't fall for your own bullshit” rule. It abridges Richard Feynman's more elegant idea that “the first principle is that you must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool”. Your brain is wired to look for confirmation of your beliefs and to find ways to dismiss disconfirming evidence. Google ‘motivated reasoning’ to see how prevalent this tendency is. But as Agnes Callard so beautifully put it, “all of us are trapped within ideas we already have”. In Critical Thinking Fight Club bootcamp, we train hard to arrest this tendency.

# 4

## Focus on what's being said **not who's saying it**



The fourth rule of Critical Thinking Fight Club is “focus on what's being said, not who's saying it”. This rule reminds us that we're all wired to be social creatures and that we're more interested in being liked than being right. We're also often distracted by charisma, beauty, height, and other social cues. None of these qualities on their own should make an argument more compelling and yet you'll need to work very hard to remember that.

# 5

## Critical thinking takes practice



The fifth rule of Critical Thinking Fight Club is “critical thinking takes practice”. To borrow an idea from Atul Gawande, critical thinking is a commitment to a way of thinking; it isn’t a normal way of thinking. It is unnatural and counterintuitive. It has to be learned. To think critically you need to arrest things that seem ‘natural’ - the answers that emerge too easily, the ideas that everyone around you like, and the cherry-picked data to justify both. Critical thinking is a skill, but it’s much more like learning a language than learning to drive.

# 6

## Slow down. Your first idea or argument is rarely your best



The sixth rule of Critical Thinking Fight Club is “slow down”. Your first idea or argument is rarely your best. This rule takes its inspiration from skydiving, where the mantra is “slow is smooth, and smooth is fast”. It also reminds us that things that come to you easily need careful scrutiny (see Fight Club rules 2 and 3).

# 7

## Always start with the antithesis



The seventh rule of Critical Thinking Flight Club takes its inspiration from Roland Barthes’ plea to “start with the antithesis”. Rule 7 reminds us to start from the other side. Rather than thinking about what is right with your position, consider what is wrong with it. How would you know if it was a bad argument? What would it take to convince you that you’re wrong? Equally, when dealing with others, start by looking for what is right with their argument rather than where it falls down. Does it hold up logically? Does the evidence support it? If so, what does that say about the view you were going to argue for?

# 8

## Without evidence we’re just trading opinions



The eighth rule of Critical Thinking Flight Club builds from Christopher Hitchens’s dictum that “what can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence”. Or, without evidence, we’re just trading opinions. So consider the evidence carefully—how good is it? Is it compelling? An important part of being able to think critically is the ability to be able weigh the evidence for competing claims thoroughly.

# 9

## Be clear about what is missing



The ninth rule of Critical Thinking Fight Club takes its inspiration from Colin Powell, who used to tell his staff “tell me what you know and tell me what you don’t know... only then are you allowed to tell me what you think”. Whenever you’re making a decision or in a debate, think hard about what you don’t know, whose voices are missing, and where your evidence runs out. Always be on your guard for assumptions masquerading as conclusions.

# 10

## Foxes are smarter than hedgehogs



The tenth and final rule of Critical Thinking Fight Club channels Philip E. Tetlock (and before him Isaiah Berlin and the Greek poet Archilochus) and encourages you to think like a fox. This rule starts from the observation that “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing”. When it comes to thinking, foxes outperform hedgehogs because they are more comfortable with nuance and contradiction. Those people wedded to just one organising principle or big idea (aka the hedgehogs) might be more confident but they are also more likely to be wrong. The final rule of Critical Thinking Fight Club reminds us that certitude is no measure of certainty.



## Remember: if you can change minds, you can change **anything**

The ten rules of Critical Thinking Fight Club will make you a better thinker and a humbler one. Behind these rules sits the insight that “if you can change minds, you can change anything”. The key to making change in the world is in changing minds. In fact, nothing changes unless you change someone’s mind.

Especially when it’s your own.

## About Research First

Research First is one of the largest independent insights companies in New Zealand, with an enviable reputation for the quality of our work and the innovation of our approaches. But Research First is much more than just a traditional insights company. Our mission is ‘to make the complex simple’ and we see ourselves as working in partnership with our clients to make sense of their world (be that their customers, community, stakeholders, or markets). We can do that because our company combines great market research practice with deep social science understanding. This ensures our clients get useful and timely insights into what shapes attitudes and behaviours. We’re also committed to raising the standard of the industry through initiatives such as creating the Critical Thinking Fight Club

- “ 10 out of 10 – Research First give me consistently high-quality service and outputs, and they reliably deliver by due dates.
- “ Research First understood our brief, was efficient in their turnaround and provided a report that was easy to digest.
- “ We were just totally impressed with the service, advice and report we received. From initial meeting to final product.
- “ Professional, engaging and enthusiastic-presented the information very well, and had some really good questions and insights for us to think about.
- “ To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that we have really got the views of the silent majority down on paper.
- “ Anybody can do research, but few can interpret data and present it in a format that is relevant to me... (Research First) does that.



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