



DON'T BE FOOLED BY... POLITICAL ARGUMENT: CLUES TO THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT POLITICS

The world is full of people who would like to sell us a bill of goods. Our only defense is our capacity to think critically about the conclusions they want us to accept. Make no mistake, critical thinking is hard work. It means not accepting the easy answer, because someone says so, or because that's what we've always been told is true. Critical thinking is challenging the conclusions of others, asking why or why not, turning the accepted wisdom upside down, and exploring alternative interpretations. Although hard work may not be very appealing, critical thinking can be a vital and enjoyable activity. When we are good at it, it empowers and liberates us. We are not at the mercy of others' conclusions and decisions. We can evaluate facts and arguments for ourselves, upending conventional wisdom and exploring the world of ideas with confidence.

The trick to learning how to think critically is to do it. It helps to have a model to follow, however, and we provide one in *The Big Picture* on pages 32–33. The focus of critical thinking here is understanding political argument. *Argument* in this case refers not to a confrontation or a fight, but rather to a political contention, based on a set of assumptions, supported by evidence, leading to a clear, well-developed conclusion with consequences for how we understand the world.

Critical thinking involves constantly asking questions about the arguments we read about: Who has created it, what is the basic case and what values underlie it, what evidence is used to back it up, what conclusions are drawn, and what difference does the whole thing make? To help you remember the questions to ask, we have used a mnemonic device that creates an acronym from the five major steps of critical thinking. Until asking these questions becomes second nature, thinking of them as **CLUES** to critical thinking about American politics will help you keep them in mind as you read.

This is what **CLUES** stands for:

Consider the source and the audience

Lay out the argument, the values, and the assumptions

Uncover the evidence

Evaluate the conclusion

Sort out the political implications

We'll investigate each of these steps in a little more depth.

Source: Adapted from the authors' "Preface to the Student," in Christine Barbour and Matthew J. Streb, eds., Clued in to Politics: A Critical Thinking Reader in American Government, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010).