



How to Think More Effectively

A guide to greater productivity, insight and creativity

By The School of Life

12-minute read

Synopsis

How to Think More Effectively (2020) is a simple guide to improving the way you think. Drawing lessons from sources as diverse as the feeling of envy and the prose of Proust, it lays out the characteristics of effective thoughts – and shows how you can start cultivating them.

Who is it for?

- Reflective types who want to up their cognitive game
- Creatives trying to release their inner potential
- Anyone who'd like to feel a little bit smarter

About the author

The School of Life is an organization devoted to helping people lead richer, more fulfilling lives. It believes that the humanities can help us develop emotional intelligence, wisdom, empathy, communication skills, and much more. With premises in cities like London, Amsterdam, and Seoul, the School of Life offers educational films and books, classes, and therapy sessions.

What's in it for me? Improve your ability to think.

There are a few bodily processes that happen automatically: your hair grows and you breathe, for instance, without a thought crossing your mind. But pretty much everything else you do in daily life requires thinking.

You rely on thought to formulate ideas at work, evaluate your relationships, be creative, and hold interesting conversations. So how much time do you spend trying to improve the way you think? If you're anything like most people, probably not much.

Here's the good news: these blinks can help. They lay out the key steps that can turn run-of-the-mill thinking into something creative, precise, and profound.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- why envy can be productive;
- why we have good ideas in the shower; and
- why we should all think about death.

Devote more time to evaluating your ideas, values, and goals.

How good are you at prioritizing?

Most of us believe we're first-rate. As rational people, we like to think we attend to the most important things in life first, and only then turn our attention to less pressing tasks. In other words, we think our priorities are pretty much in order.

But are they really? Look closely. Many people's priorities are actually mixed up. We spend little time engaging with serious, important questions about the value of our goals – and instead jump straight to trying to make those goals happen.

Do you ask yourself whether more money will really make you happy? Or do you just thoughtlessly pursue a greater income? And have you ever asked yourself whether you'd be better off single, or do you grudgingly plod on in familiar but unhappy relationships?

Things don't have to be that way.

The key message here is: Devote more time to evaluating your ideas, values, and goals.

It's easy to *say* you'll start evaluating your goals more thoroughly, but actually following through can be tricky: that's why you need a plan. The first step is to become aware of how much time you devote to *executing* your plans, and how much time you spend evaluating and strategizing in a more reflective manner. If you currently only evaluate and strategize about 5 percent of the time, try upping that figure to 15 or 20 percent.

The next step is to try and get over your discomfort. Fundamental, first-order questions are tricky – contemplating purpose and value can often make us feel uneasy. There's no quick fix for that: the solution is simply to practice.

Before you jump straight to the execution of an idea that enters your head, try to spend more time actually interrogating it. Ask yourself searching questions about what you're doing and what you plan to do – questions about value, purpose, and ultimate significance.

Dare to subject your aims to probing words like “why,” “to what end,” and “of what importance.” It may sound like a recipe for stagnation and inaction, but, well, the alternative isn't pretty either: a life spent in the pursuit of accolades you don't desire, money you don't need, and relationships – both romantic and platonic – that ultimately leave you cold.

However long it takes, this shift from impulsive action to a more discriminating, evaluative disposition will make your thinking richer, subtler, and more effective.

Accept that ideas develop in fits and starts.

When you read a book, listen to a speech, or watch a presentation, it's easy to imagine that the person who composed it came across their ideas and the corresponding words in a straightforward, almost effortless way. Because the words seem to flow together seamlessly, you might think the creative process was breezy and painless.

This is a delusion. The brain is a fitful instrument: it doesn't chug along at full power for hours at a time. It proceeds in fits and starts – kicking into life briefly, making a sudden leap forward or an interesting new connection, and then lapsing into idleness again for a prolonged stretch.

But this shouldn't dispirit us. In fact, one of the greatest novelists of the twentieth century thought in exactly the same way.

Here's the key message: Accept that ideas develop in fits and starts.

The French writer Marcel Proust is world-famous for his multivolume novel, *In Search of Lost Time* – a work he penned in prose smoother and more free-flowing than anything his readers had ever encountered before.

This literary style won Proust many fans and much praise – and yet, for all of the sophistication of his style, it would be a mistake to imagine that Proust's seamless prose came easily to him. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

Proust's manuscripts are full of additions, deletions, remarks, and any type of revision you can think of. He tinkered endlessly with his writing, progressing bit by bit toward his goal. This fitful style of composition

wasn't a failing; on the contrary, it was at the heart of Proust's creative method.

We could do well to learn from him. Instead of berating ourselves because our ideas proceed by dribs and drabs, we should simply accept our natural human limitations. They can't be changed – but they can be worked with.

The most important thing you can do to help the process is buy a notebook and record your ideas in it. By committing your thoughts to paper, you're allowing yourself to revisit them at a later stage – and giving otherwise transient ideas a real chance to develop and come to full fruition.

Distracting your mind can help you catch elusive ideas.

It would be nice to imagine that the more valuable a thought is, the more likely it is to lodge itself clearly and securely in your mind. Unfortunately, it's usually the opposite. All too often, your most insightful thoughts are the most elusive – like rare and hard-to-capture butterflies.

That image of thoughts as butterflies might sound familiar to you. Many great thinkers have compared insights to the airborne creatures. Vladimir Nabokov, the famous Russian-American novelist, compared writing to butterfly hunting: just like a butterfly hunter, the writer has to coax flitting ideas and sensations into the nets of language and conscious awareness.

Catching a butterfly isn't easy – but it is possible. One surprising way of capturing your most elusive thoughts is to put down your net and think about something else.

The key message here is: Distracting your mind can help you catch elusive ideas.

Strange though it sounds, some types of low-level distraction can help you catch insightful, flighty thoughts – distractions like shampooing your hair in the shower, or staring out the window of a train.

It may sound counterintuitive to say that your best ideas often come when your mind is already half-occupied. Surely we don't do our best thinking while we're scrolling through Instagram – right?

But actually, you've probably even noticed this phenomenon yourself. How often have great ideas struck you when you're scrubbing your shoulder in the bath? Or when you're cruising down the highway to work, seemingly on autopilot mode?

The reason these unexpected insights occur when you're gently distracted is that a half-occupied mind is more inclined to accept new and unsettling ideas than a vigilant mind on high alert. Truly novel ideas are likely to be shocking; they'll disrupt the status quo. They might alienate you from the people you care about. They might even make you reevaluate your life.

That's why these valuable thoughts so often prove elusive. They startle you and, in your shock, you unintentionally scare off a rare and precious butterfly. But when your mind is just a little bit distracted, even the most exotic thought can find a branch to sit on – for long enough so you can take a look.

Envy can help you identify your true desires.

Envy – it's an emotion we all feel from time to time, but it's not one we often like to acknowledge. We're told that it's wrong to envy others' successes and talents and luck. Good people, after all, are happy to see others doing well.

But what if envy has something important to teach you? What if, instead of repressing the envious thoughts that occurred to you, you examined them and teased out their implications?

The value of envy lies in the way it reveals your true ambitions. You feel envy when you identify in others something that *you* desire and lack. By tracing each envious feeling back to its source, you can come a few steps closer to discovering what it is you truly want from life.

The key message is: Envy can help you identify your true desires.

Each time you feel envy, it's like you're being given a piece of a giant jigsaw puzzle – and if you could assemble it in full, you'd find you'd mapped out the details of your ideal life. The partner you want, the job you desire, even the house you want to live in: each stab of envy you feel can help spell these things out more clearly.

Instead of shying away from these feelings, it's important to examine them and understand what they can teach you. The potential problem with envy is that it can cloud your judgment – it convinces you that you'll never be satisfied until you have exactly what the person you envy possesses. But that's a lie; as you start to look deeper, the true value of envy will become clear.

When you analyze envious feelings rather than repress them, you can discover what you want in finer detail. In other words, if you want to learn from envy, it's important to be precise. It's not enough to say Yvonne from work makes you feel envious – you need to zero in on exactly what Yvonne possesses that you want.

Is it her wealth? Her career achievements? Her in-depth knowledge of artisanal coffee? Either way, it's important to do some analysis. If you don't, things will remain too vague and muddled to yield any insights – and you'll never discover what envy can teach you about your desires.

Thinking about death puts life into perspective.

If you were decorating a study or library at home, what would you put in it? Pretty paperweights? Dark leather sofas? Or maybe antique prints in gilt frames?

A few hundred years ago, one object was pretty common: a real human skull, complete with a gaping jaw and cavernous eye sockets. Pretty gruesome – but that's kind of the point.

The skull was intended to remind whoever came across it that they, too, were merely mortal – destined, in time, to amount to nothing more than a few dusty bones. In short, the skull's aim was to make you reevaluate your life by reflecting on its inevitable end.

The key message here is: Thinking about death puts life into perspective.

It sounds odd, but thinking about death has two seemingly opposite effects on people's attitudes toward life. One is to make everything seem very weighty and serious; the other is to make everything seem trivial and unimportant. How come?

First, thinking about death makes things seem serious because it reminds us our time on Earth is finite. We often live our lives as though they'll never end: we procrastinate, pussyfoot, and endure intolerable jobs and stifling relationships.

But thinking about death shows us how absurd it is to act like that. The fact our lives are finite confers value on every moment we spend above ground. Why waste a single day more in a terrible job, or with a partner we don't love? Life's too valuable for that.

The flipside of death is that it can also make our deepest concerns seem completely unimportant. Who cares if you didn't land that job? Before long you'll be a pile of bones anyway. Your crush rejected you once more? So what! Who's going to care when you're six feet under? Thinking about the destination we're all heading toward can make the details of our journey seem pretty unimportant.

Whether thinking about death makes you feel liberated or grave, determined or carefree, chances are that it does change your perspective on things. Even if you decide not to buy a human skull, it's worth considering life from a morbid point of view now and then.

Be skeptical about your own beliefs.

You might imagine that effective thinkers rarely doubt their own opinions – and, in a way, that would make sense. After all, thinking's what they're good at. Why should they be skeptical about the conclusions they reach?

For instance, you might assume that persuasive lawyers rarely doubt their arguments, and convincing actors rarely doubt their performances. But they do – and for

good reason. Experiencing doubt is one of the core aspects of thinking well. In fact, the best thinkers are very often the most skeptical.

If you can't conceive of being wrong, then you can't examine your own beliefs in a critical manner. And if you can't interrogate what you believe, then all of your intelligence counts for nothing.

Here's the key message: Be skeptical about your own beliefs.

We all know what it means to be skeptical: to doubt received opinion, to probe for answers, and to regard simple explanations with suspicion. To be skeptical means to be in possession of, and to exercise, a restless and questioning mind.

What you might not know is that *Skepticism* originally referred to a school of thought in ancient Greece – one that emphasized just how little we humans can ever know about the world. As the ancient Skeptics pointed out, our minds are subject to innumerable distortions, biases, and errors. To doubt ourselves is often the wisest course of action.

In day-to-day affairs, you can generally identify effective thinkers by the caution, nuance, and humility with which they articulate their positions. They're aware of the mind's tricks and distortions, consider issues from multiple perspectives, weigh up conflicting information, and take the time to disengage from emotional and irrational ways of thinking.

That isn't to say that a skeptic should never adopt a certain viewpoint – of course they should. But when they lay out their opinions, they do it in a precise, considered, and tentative manner. Skeptical thinkers have learned to be suspicious of hasty generalizations and sweeping statements.

If you want to become a more skeptical – and effective – thinker, there's one simple step you need to take in order to start: genuinely entertain the idea that everything you believe could be wrong.

Don't believe it? Good! That means you're already halfway there. Beginning to doubt what you're told is a key step in becoming a more effective thinker. So what are you waiting for?

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that:

It's amazing what you can achieve when you change the way you think. That means thinking about *why* you do things, and not just *how* – you should always take the time to assess your ideas and goals. It's also important to accept that thinking develops in fits and starts; novel ideas are hard to pin down. You can try a few tricks to think more effectively, like distracting

yourself a little, identifying the roots of your envy, and reflecting on death. But whatever you do, stay skeptical. In other words, keep on thinking.

And here's some more actionable advice:

Make your thinking “mad” every so often.

Some of our best ideas occur when we leave the confines “normal” thought behind, and let our minds wander into weird and wonderful territory. One way to encourage this type of thinking is to pose hypothetical questions to yourself, like *What would your ideal country look like?* or *What would you do with your life if you knew for sure you wouldn't fail?* By posing questions like these, you allow your mind to engage with ideas and possibilities that your day-to-day life never presents.