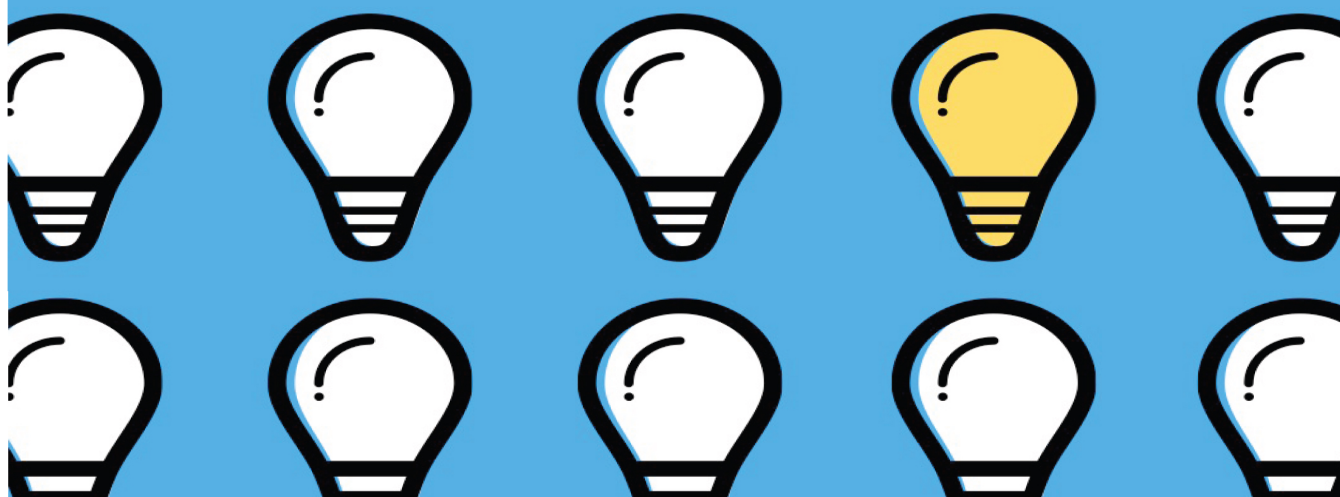


Clear Thinking

in an Age of Hype,
Nonsense, & Anxiety

Phillip G. Clampitt, Ph.D.



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“Despite evidence to the contrary, we all use our brains. But most of us have never learned how to think effectively. I’m not talking about IQ or other measures of intelligence, which matter in their own way, of course. I’m talking about thinking as a learned skill. We don’t teach thinking in schools, and you can see the results of that nearly every day.” - Scott Adams (Creator of *Dilbert*)

Clear Thinking

Consider the following situations:

- You just heard a pitch from a college recruiter praising the virtues of a psychology major. The core message was “You can do almost anything with a psych major and we’ve got the graduates to prove it!” Should you be enticed or wary of the pitch?
- You are assigned to work on an important project team. You’ve already clashed with one team member who you’ve concluded “just sees the world differently than I do.” Should you request a transfer out of the team or stick it out?
- Your doctor informs you that you are at “mild risk” for a heart attack or stroke. She recommends that you start a statin regimen “just to be safe.” Should you heed the doctor’s advice or not?
- Your boss just returned from a seminar about “How metrics can transform your business.” He energetically embraces the concept and insists that your team start “metricizing” every aspect of the workplace. Should you push back or not?
- You are considering retiring and one of your retired friends keeps praising the virtues of a responsibility-free life – “I don’t have any ‘gotta do’s’ in my life...how could it get any better than that?” Should you accept your friend’s claim at face value?

Clear thinkers immediately recognize the hype and nonsense (see Tables 1.1, 1.2) in these scenarios.¹

- The college recruiter’s subtle hype fails to mention the challenges of finding the right job when “you can do almost anything.”
- The team members may not recognize the potential benefits of clashing world views.
- The physician’s professional recommendation sidesteps the potential downsides of statins.
- The boss’s enthusiastic endorsement does not account for potential employee pushback that can emerge from a “program-of-the-month” mentality perpetuated by many leaders.

- Your retired friend's exuberant testimonial may not reflect the joy some people find in meaningful responsibilities.

Whether you are just entering the job market, contemplating retirement, or anything in between, you need to be a clear thinker to navigate through all the hype and nonsense that engulfs our life. Clear thinkers abide by three simple rules:

- 1. Every situation, proposal, perspective or idea has upsides (plusses), downsides (minuses), and unknowns (questions)**
- 2. Most people fail to clearly identify all the relevant upsides, downsides, and unknowns**
- 3. If you can't identify the plusses, minuses, and questions, then see rule #1 and try again**

These simple rules should be a standard feature of every person's clear-thinking operating system. But, are they? Usually not. In fact, in my decades of teaching college students and consulting with executives, I've come to believe that the clear thinkers are usually outnumbered by others in the classroom and boardroom. Why? There are four main challenges.

The Challenges of Clear Thinking

1. Clear thinkers fight inertia

When faced with a decision, new idea or novel perspective, most people simply react with a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down." If the situation is similar to a previous one they've experienced, they just respond like they always have, even though they are meeting an entirely new person or encountering a novel idea. If a person in a red hat spouts some nonsense, then you might unwittingly start believing that all people wearing red hats spout nonsense. It's Stereotyping 101 applied to people, ideas, and perspectives. It's a quick, easy, and intuitive response that often works. After all, the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said, "Civilization advances by extending the number of operations we can perform without thinking about them."² Indeed, one researcher found that 43% of our daily activities and decisions are driven by unconscious thoughts and habits.³ Yet, significant hidden costs emerge from these effortless decisions.

"The first principle is that you must not fool yourself.. and you are the easiest person to fool."
— Richard Feynman

One Nobel Prize-winning commentator, along with his colleagues, identified some of those costs: "In typical unstructured decision making...we (often unconsciously) weigh losses more than gains, the near future more than the distant future, and vividly presented anecdotes more than dull statistics."⁴ Resisting these effort-saving tendencies becomes even more difficult when we are emotionally or physically stressed. We tend to narrow our focus to a few issues, often ignoring relevant information. Stress makes us more irritable and less able to consider

differing views. Clear thinkers learn to *resist* these psychological forces, particularly during times of great stress.

2. Clear thinkers resist emotional impulses

Our natural whims, passions, and sentiments often lead us astray. How else do you explain the following?

- People who buy something they don't really need or want because "it was such a good sale that I couldn't resist."
- People who post something on social media they later regret because, at the time, they were "feeling dissed" or enraged.
- People who embrace particular political candidates because "they look the part."

In each case, emotional reactions overwhelm more sensible responses, overriding sound judgment. If you don't want or need the sale item, then why even consider buying it? If you are really upset about something, why not calm down before tapping into your social media account? If you are attracted to a candidate, then why not use this as a cue to examine his or her views on important issues? In short, passions are fine but clear thinkers learn to temper them.

3. Clear thinkers often defy crowd-based sentiments

Conformity to prevailing opinions of your reference group may well be the strongest barrier to clear thinking. Why? Agreeing with supposed "wisdom of your crowd" provides social proof and reinforcement that you are making a proper decision or holding the right opinion.⁵ Note the word "your" in the sentences above. We tend to associate with like-minded people. In today's hyperconnected and social-mediated world, we can easily create our own little pods of like-minded, but ill-informed people who will reinforce our existing opinions. How else do we explain a group of parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated?⁶ Celebrity endorsements, of course, add legitimacy if not expertise, to such nonsensical and dangerous movements. We should never underestimate the ability of clever people to manufacture evidence to support preexisting opinions or discover "credible" sources advocating their established viewpoints and prejudices.

"When difficult cases occur, they are difficult chiefly because while we have them under consideration all the reasons pro and con are not present to the Mind at the same time; but sometimes one set present themselves, and at other times another, the first being out of sight."
— Ben Franklin

4. Clear thinkers fight mental clutter

We live in an age of mental clutter induced by hyper-connectivity, fingertip-quick information, and instantaneous opinion-formation. These technology-driven features of our world make clear thinking extremely challenging because they increase the likelihood of unreflective and

quick decision making. They can mess with your mind if you don't have a structure and process to sort it all out.

Clear thinkers learn to structure, store, and sort out conflicting opinions, ideas, and data with the same, almost spiritual discipline and effectiveness Maria Kondo brings to anyone's cluttered home. This best-selling author, Netflix host, and TED star almost suffered a nervous breakdown trying to figure out how to tidy up her room.⁷ Her epiphany came when she learned to ask, "Does this spark joy?" She went on to develop a structure and system for organizing closets, rooms and homes embraced by millions around the world. Clear thinkers use the tools in this book to organize their mental space much like Maria does physical space with the proper cerebral bins to store useful ideas and discard the rest (e.g., Does this thought spark insight?).

The Value of Clear Thinking

When we asked a random group of people about the decisions they most regretted, they often recounted stories where they were either blindsided by an unanticipated pitfall, ignored a warning sign, or underestimated a potential negative consequence. In essence, the negatives never surfaced or were weighted incorrectly. Others regretted not making a move sooner or failing to appreciate potential joys. Just ask anyone who has moved on from a job they hated. Their only regret? "I should have moved on sooner." In essence, the upside of new joys was not clearly identified or incorrectly weighted. That's exactly what Ben Franklin was signaling in the highlighted quote.

Clear thinkers make reasonable and sustainable decisions despite their inherently limited prognosticating powers. They adopt points-of-view and beliefs with a clear understanding of the positive and negative implications. They anticipate likely consequences of their choices and flexibly respond to shifting circumstantial climates. As a result, clear thinkers reach better decisions, communicate more effectively, resiliently respond to shifting circumstances, command more respect from others, and lead a more mindful life.

Employers covet clear thinkers. Universities seek to develop them. Good parents nurture them. And most professionals, from Gen Z to the baby boomers, aspire to become clearer thinkers. In short, the demand for clear thinkers far exceeds the supply.

Clear Thinkers

- Adopt points-of-view with a clear understanding of positive and negative implications
- Anticipate likely consequences of their methods
- Make better, more sustainable decisions
- Communicate more effectively
- Resiliently respond to shifting circumstances
- Command more respect from others
- Lead a more calm and mindful life

You can help meet the demand for clear thinkers by fully absorbing the ideas in these pages, incorporating them into your mental toolbox, and applying them to a wide range of everyday

and complex issues. The framework, process and sensibilities outlined in this book will NOT guarantee that you'll make all the right decisions or embrace all the right ideas, *but*, they will increase the odds.

We need to start with the fundamental mental building blocks: plusses, minuses, and questions. Read on.

Table 1.1 Signs of Hype	
Definition: Any exaggerated promotion, deceptive statement or overstated claim	
Sign	Example
Selling something or touting a belief with total certainty	Salesperson: "I guarantee you 100% that you're going to love this product"
Avoiding or marginalizing information contrary to an established position	When you "push back" on your boss' pet initiative and the boss responds, "That's nothing for you to be concerned about"
Trusting the "wisdom of the crowd" to justify a belief or behavior	Investment advisor to client: "Everyone's investing in this stock; you don't want to be left out of the 'party'"
Using symbols of authority rather than expertise to back up claims	Using an actor, dressed in a physician's coat, to sell a medical product
Touting only one solution or "answer" to a complex question or decision	Accepting the top Google search entry as the THE answer to a challenging home repair
Persuading others using emotionally loaded or extreme language and images	Comparing a political opponent's plan to "Something Hitler would endorse"

Table 1.2
Signs of Nonsense

Definition: All manner of foolishness, absurdity, and valueless declarations

Sign	Example
Claiming there is only one interpretation of existing facts	Any political pundit who says, “There is only one way to see this situation and it’s very bad for the President”
Predicting the unpredictable	Real estate agent to prospective home buyer: “I can assure you that this home will rise in value by 20% in the next two years”
Assuming you are omnipotent – or “all knowing”	A professor who says, “Ask me anything – I know more about this subject than anyone in this room could possibly know”
Trying to read someone’s mind	Anyone who says, “No need to tell me...I know exactly what you’re thinking right now”
Focusing on only one statistic to explain a complex subject or issue	A blogger who only cites the number of “likes” on a particular post as a measure of her influence
Relying on your personal network or a superior rather than scientific reasoning to decide on an objective question	Arguing that “Everybody in the company is satisfied with communication” because my work friends or my boss says so (An employee survey would be far better proof)

About the Author

Phillip G. Clampitt (Ph.D., University of Kansas) is the Blair Endowed Chair of Communication at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay (previously, the Hendrickson Chair of Business). He is a recognized expert in organizational communication, consulting with organizations such as PepsiCo, the U.S. Army War College and Nokia on issues such as communicating major changes, enhancing leaders’ effectiveness, and strategically using communication technologies. His more recent books include *Social Media Strategy: Tools for Professionals and Organizations* and *Communicating for Managerial Effectiveness* (6e), which is a Sage Publications best seller. His research has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal* and *MIT Sloan Management Review*. Professor Clampitt is passionate about teaching critical problem-solving skills to address communication and leadership challenges in climates of uncertainty. In fact, his students know him as “Dr. So What” because of his unique questioning techniques designed to provoke critical thinking (see www.DrSoWhat.com).



Notes

¹ There are numerous great resources on spotting hype and nonsense. I recommend the following: Scott Adams, *Loserthink: How Untrained Brains Are Ruining America*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2019; Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005; Robert Gula, *Nonsense: Red Herrings, Straw Men, and Sacred Cows*. Axios Pres, Mount Jackson, VA, 2007.

² A. North Whitehead, *An Introduction to Mathematics*. New York: H. Holt and Company, 1911, 61.

³ Wendy Wood, *Good Habits, Bad Habits*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2019, 40 out of 504.

⁴ D. Kahneman, D. Lavaloo, and O. Sibony, “A Structured Approach to Strategic Decisions.” *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 60(3), Spring 2019, 67-73, 71.

⁵ See this video for further evidence: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7iN0V-GbM0>

⁶ See *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/23/health/anti-vaccination-movement-us.html>

⁷ See <https://shop.konmari.com/pages/about>