



## Arguing for Our Lives: Critical Thinking in Crisis Times

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We live in a time when public discourse is more skewed than ever by the propaganda that big money can buy, with trust in the leadership of elected officials at an all-time low. The “news” has degenerated into sensationalist sound bites, and the idea of debate has become a polarized shouting-match that precludes any meaningful discussion.

It's also a time of anxiety, as we're faced with economic and ecological crises on a global scale, with stakes that seem higher than ever before. In times like these, it's essential that we be able to think and communicate clearly.

In this lively primer on critical thinking, Robert Jensen attacks the problems head-on and delivers an accessible and engaging book that explains how we can work collectively to enrich our intellectual lives. Drawing on more than two decades of classroom experience and community organizing, Jensen shares strategies on how to challenge “conventional wisdom” in order to courageously confront the crises of our times, and offers a framework for channeling our fears and frustrations into productive analysis that can inform constructive action.

Jensen connects abstract ideas with the everyday political and spiritual struggles of ordinary people. Free of either academic or political jargon, this book is for anyone struggling to understand our world and contribute to making it a better place.

## Arguing for Our Lives: Critical Thinking in Crisis Times Details

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## From Reader Review Arguing for Our Lives: Critical Thinking in Crisis Times for online ebook

### Domhnall says

My own opinion is that this book fails to deliver what it promises and I was very disappointed in it.

The author is clearly a very agreeable and thoughtful academic teacher. He takes the view that we need active, committed citizens for democracy to work. It is important to have opinions and to discuss them socially on topics that matter, including politics, religion, economics, the environment. This requires effort, under the much maligned label of "intellectual," and it is hard work. We need to confront those who are unwilling to make the intellectual effort and who use the concept of "my opinion" to cover a thoughtless and unreflecting adherence to prepackaged viewpoints put about by others. We need also to understand the way people with power and wealth use their resources to mislead the public and promote their selfish interests. Of course such topics provoke argument, but this is desirable, and he advocates specific rules of thumb which will help us to participate in such arguments competently, critically and also politely and respectfully.

If you accept these laudable sentiments, then this short book will yield another quick and useful entry towards your Goodreads reading challenge. However, if we imagine a scenario where an American Republican candidate carries this book openly into a television debate, and is not struck by lightning as a result, then I predict it will be used for only one purpose - to demonstrate the left wing bias of university academics.

I just have no experience to suggest that political debate is going to remain good natured or respectful once people start to question what assumptions lie beneath "just my opinion" or why those assumptions may have no factual basis or may not lead by any logical pathway to the irrational beliefs expressed or may, in fact, be nothing better than the unquestioned acceptance of media lies. I do not need to be told how to conduct a polite discussion - I need to be told how to deal with trolls and bigots, how to confront direct and blatant lies, how to detect and dodge rhetorical debating tricks and techniques for misrepresentation, how to get a fair hearing for unpopular truths and how to attempt all this without becoming depressed or crazy. The point is that people are not simply too stupid to see the truth - they actively want to be deceived and will get very nasty with anyone who exposes that attitude for what it is.

I can suggest a more effective reading list for people who really do want an argument.

Thinking Fast and Slow by Kahnemann (how we are manipulated)

The Logic of Real Arguments by Alec Fisher (how to work out what is going on)

Taming the Ox by Charles Johnson (how to stay sane while being politically engaged!)

The Contours of American History by William Appleman Williams (a dated but excellent guide to the political ideology of the USA)

Of course, this is just my own opinion.

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### Sara says

The more complicated and confusing the world gets, the more seductive it is to believe that all claims are

mere opinion. From that perspective one isn't obligated to evaluate another's argument but can simply dismiss all arguments to an exchange of opinions is the lazy way out.

Since analysis is built on our always tentative determination of the facts, our claims on how the world works will be tentative as well. Normative claims on how the world should be

No knowledge is pretheoretical..the way we think about a question organizes the way we go into the world to answer that question.

Can we train ourselves to transcend our assumptions? The question makes sense only if we believe we can live without any assumptions. Certainly we can learn to identify and assess our assumptions - that's part of critical thinking - but we cannot live in the world as truly blank slates.

Greenspan reminds Waxman that ideology is not a slur but simply a way we organize our thinking. What is left unsaid is that \_\_\_\_ the dominance of free market ideology - not only in Greenspan's worldview but in the whole culture - is the product of years of efforts by the corporate sector to make that free market view the common sense of the society.

We are most free when we are bound to others. We don't bring a fully formed identity into our connections to others but construct an identity through those contexts. WE are in a very real sense who we hang out with... Our goal can be to maintain a sense of individuality (a recognition that each of us is unique and has creative capacity) where giving up individualism (the naive belief that we exist as fully autonomous beings separate from social groups)

The question isn't whether we are bound to others - we are, it's the human condition - but how we understand our identities and interests which is about how we understand power. Rather than imagining we can cut those ties that bind, we should focus on the people to whom we're bound and through what institutions. Some of those connections help us be the free, creative beings we are capable of being, and some keep us trapped in relationships that contain us.

...explore what kinds of collective living allow us to express our individuality without destroying the connections to others that not only make life worth living but make life possible.

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### **Meg says**

An excellent primer for organizers and others interested in intelligent communities that seek, through empirical, analytical and/or normative inquiry, ways to understand their histories, conditions and potential for improvement. The idea here isn't so much to replace collective anxiety with critical thinking but to acknowledge crises/resulting anxiety and then utilize our given abilities to think and communicate (which includes listening) critically, clearly and constructively. Good stuff.

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### **City Lights Booksellers & Publishers says**

"At the moment, what passes for political debate is the bickering of two vociferous and wrong-headed parties. Robert Jensen reacquaints us with the political and social skills we'll need if we're to reclaim politics for the 21st century. This is a brave book, one that packs more wisdom in its few pages than a shelf's worth of political theory, because it's also a book about political practice. Jensen patiently, honestly, and rigorously exemplifies the highest virtues of a public intellectual. "-- Raj Patel, author of *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World's Food System*

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### **Brandt says**

I would guess the best way to review this book is to first give the downside.

Robert Jensen, unfortunately weaves a lot of his own personal political philosophical beliefs in to the book. On the upside of this negative most of it is done at the end of the book so as not to distract from the absolute brilliance of the book itself.

The upside, and it is tremendous to a point that far outweighs the down, is that Jensen lays out a great pattern of thought as to how we should approach issues in our lives. Jensen's ability to explain that we will never get passed our indoctrination's and biased but, must understand we have them is refreshing. His ability to show a template on how to understand and discuss even the most difficult subjects is refreshing. I would highly recommend this book to anyone that has preconceived notions of right and wrong. This book will give you a guide to get passed your uncomfortable zone and allow you to perhaps, see things in a different light.

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### **Ryan Mishap says**

I was hoping for some viable strategies that I could apply to discussing difficult topics with other people, but the second title more accurately describes what lies within the covers of this slim volume. While defining and defending the worth of "intellectual" and imparting lessons on how to develop critical thinking are important goals, I feel like I have a grasp on those subjects already.

If I am engaged in a discussion--even argument--with another person who uses their own critical thinking skills when evaluating and presenting their position and we at least agree on some basic facts or perceptions of reality, then a lively discussion is possible. What I really want to know is how to engage someone whose referents and world view is diametrically at odds with what I see as facts, reality, or ordinary reasonableness. I feel like he skirts over the difficulties of arguing with religious ideologues, bigots, and those whose ideologies and beliefs are the opposite of reality (global climate change, etc.).

A good book to give to a young person in high school or heading for college, but certainly not a helpful primer on arguing with people who don't have basic intellectual skills or who refuse to use them to question their own biases and beliefs.

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### **Dennis Mick says**

If, like me, you're disappointed by how difficult it is to discuss the most important topics with those closest to you, this may be a book for you. Jensen rejects the timeless admonition to avoid politics and religion as conversational topics. Indeed, these should be discussed most. Further polarization is the only result from continued avoidance. Guidelines and recommendations for such discussions are offered to maintain civility and relationships.

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## Ashley says

Great antidote to the texts in this category that go on and on for the sake of filling pages. Jensen gets right to his point -- here's the problem, and here are concrete steps for addressing it. No heavy-handed philosophy or theory, just practical application tips. The perfect choice for a plane read or to keep in your desk to read a segment or two each day at lunch.

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## Trevor Maloney says

This is a very short (122 pages) guide to critical thinking and arguing. It's written in a very organized fashion; you could easily make an outlines of the whole thing. Jensen focuses on identifying assumptions, defining terms, presenting evidence, and arguing for an articulable position. For Jensen, this is key to facing (let alone solving) our political, economic, and ecological problems, which threaten life on Earth.

"We live in an *industrial* world with a globalized *capitalist* economy organized politically around *nation-states*. Finding a willing audience for even a mild critique of any of these foundational systems is not easy; suggesting that all three systems should be rethought in fundamental ways seems crazy." Jensen, however, doesn't shy away from this most important task.

This book encourages us to think deeply and seriously. While it is short and very approachable, don't be fooled into thinking that it is not demanding.

Here's the table of contents, which will give you a good idea of what it's all about.

Intro: The age of anxiety  
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Ch. 6: Thinking critically about news media  
Ch. 7: Thinking creatively: Paradoxes, metaphors, aphorisms  
Ch. 8: Thinking courageously: Reframing ourselves and our world  
Conclusion: The age of anguish

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