Developing Critical Thinking Skills
with *The Colbert Report*

**Why Teach Critical Thinking with *The Colbert Report***?

A. Young people receive the majority of their information through popular culture.
B. Using popular culture in the classroom gains student attention and engages them in the content.
C. Thinking critically about how information is presented and understood is an essential skill students will use throughout the course of their education and careers.
D. Evaluating the development, support, and presentation of arguments will help students be better writers and learners.

**Background on *The Colbert Report***

The Character

A. Mega conservative
B. Represents every stereotype of conservatives
C. Willfully ignorant and stubborn in the face of facts
D. Caricature of prominent news pundits – Bill O’Reilly originally, but it has expanded since the beginning of the show in 2005.
E. Bombastic and egotistical

General Format of the Show

A. Teaser of the program
B. Title sequence
C. News – with an exaggerated right wing bias
D. Segment varies: the Word, Tip of the Hat/Wag of the Finger, Better Know District
E. Interview – can be anyone...usually an author with a new book, a musician (who performs at the end of the show), or a celebrity. Basis of the interview is that Colbert willfully misunderstands what his guests say to him.

**A Rulebook for Arguing**

*A Rulebook for Arguing* is a book written by Anthony Weston. It provides 45 rules for developing a strong argument in a variety of forms. Weston’s rules would be useful in thinking critically about *The Colbert Report*. A full outline of this title can be found at the end of this document. The rules are broken into the following sections:

A. Rules for Short Arguments
B. Generalizations
C. Arguments by Analogy
D. Sources
E. Arguments about Causes
F. Deductive Arguments
G. Rules for Extended Arguments
H. Argumentative Essays
I. Oral Arguments
Critical Inquiry

The Colbert Report is an interesting tool to use to think critically because each episode is full of possibilities. The following is a list of suggested questions that support higher level thinking.

1. Identify any images/symbols in the clip. Think about how Colbert is dressed, what the set looks like, what is in the background, and anything else you see. How are the images used and what effect do they have?

2. How does Colbert use pregnant pauses? When does he pause? What is the effect of the pause on what he is saying? How does the pause effect the presentation of the topic?

3. Listen to the words that Colbert uses in the clip. Which words stand out? Why do they stand out? Why is Colbert’s word choice important? How is it effective?


5. Identify alternative thinking in the clip and explain how it differs from mainstream expectations.

6. How do we expect information to be presented? How is it presented on The Colbert Report?

Suggested Activities and Assignments

The assignments discussed below could be easily adapted to any video or image you would prefer to use. Furthermore, these assignments can be combined and tweaked according to the critical thinking skills you wish to teach.

Effectiveness of Colbert’s style of argument – Show a clip of one of the segments on The Colbert Report and have students watch and listen for the main argument. They should answer the following questions:

1. Determine the conclusion – what is Colbert trying to get you to believe or think about?
2. Identify the support – does Colbert provide evidence for his conclusion? What is the evidence?
3. Evaluate the argument – does the evidence support Colbert’s conclusion? What is your interpretation of Colbert’s argument? Identify alternative interpretations.

If time permits a short lesson on developing arguments, this assignment works best in conjunction with the Rules for Short Arguments chapter in A Rulebook for Arguing. The following is a short summary of the rules:

A. Identify premises and conclusions – determine what you are trying to prove. Your conclusion is the statement for which you are giving reasons. Your premises are statements that give your reasons for the conclusion.
B. **Develop your ideas in a natural order** – since short arguments are developed in one or two paragraphs, you should put your conclusion first then follow with your premises. However, it may be just as effective to give your premises and then draw conclusions. Either way, it is about developing your ideas in an order that seems logical and natural.

C. **Start from reliable premises** – if your premises are weak, then your conclusion and argument will be weak.

D. **Be concrete and concise** – avoid abstract, vague, and general terms...be as specific as possible.

E. **Build on substance not overtone** – in other words, offer actual reasons not emotionally loaded words.

F. **Use consistent terms** – a short argument usually has a single theme or thread that carries one idea through several steps. Carefully choose clear terms and use those terms again and again throughout the argument.

To further student understanding, you could give an out of class assignment that has students find a clip of *The Colbert Report* and analyze the argument in a one page critical analysis and present it to the class. If the class is too large for individual presentations, students could be divided into groups. If possible, each group member could show their clip to the group and discuss it.

**Evaluating sources** – *The Colbert Report* does a segment called the Word. In the following clip, the Word is Wikiality: [http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/72347/july-31-2006/the-word---wikiality](http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/72347/july-31-2006/the-word---wikiality). Have students watch the clip and evaluate Colbert’s report on Wikipedia. Once students have discussed the clip, the discussion can turn to ways to find informed, credible sources, what they would like, and how you know when a source is a good source.

This activity would work nicely with a lecture on citations. The chapter on Sources in *A Rulebook for Arguing* provides a nice summary of the rules one should use when choosing their sources. The following is a short summary of the rules in the chapter:

A. **Cite your sources** – information that is not generally known should have a citation. All citations should have the same basic information regardless of style: enough so that others can easily find the sources on their own.

B. **Seek informed sources** – sources must be qualified to make the statements they make. Qualifications are based on appropriate background or access to information. Just because a source is qualified in one area does not mean the source has qualifications in other areas. Truly informed sources provide evidence and reasons for their conclusions.
C. **Seek impartial sources** – sources that have high stakes in the dispute or argument are not usually the best sources of information. An impartial source is found with people or organizations that do not have a stake in the immediate issue and who have a prior and primary interest in accuracy. Also, sources that spend their time making extreme or simplistic claims or spend too much time attacking and demeaning the other side weaken their own position.

D. **Cross-check sources** – it is important to consult and compare a variety of sources to determine if other equally good authorities agree. Disagreement between authorities does not mean that a source should not be used rather it simply means that there is no consensus on an argument. Therefore, care should be used when determining your own position on the topic.

E. **Use the Web with care** – since the Web allows anyone to say anything at any time, only rely on websites that are identifiable and independently reputable. If the source of a website cannot be determined then it should not be trusted as an informed source. Key questions: who created the site? Why did they create it? What are their qualifications? What does it mean if they don’t tell you this information? How can you double-check and cross-check its claims?

The companion website to *A Rulebook for Arguing* and *A Workbook for Arguments* has resources and activities specific to using Wikipedia to think critically. It can be found at: [http://www.hackettpublishing.com/workbookforarguments/cta/thinking_critically_about_wikipedia.html](http://www.hackettpublishing.com/workbookforarguments/cta/thinking_critically_about_wikipedia.html).
II. What is the point of arguing? (Introduction)
   A. “to give an argument” = to offer a set of reasons or evidence in support of a conclusion
      1. Arguments are efforts to support certain views with reasons
      2. Arguments are essential not pointless
   B. Argument is a means of inquiry – we cannot determine is an argument is “right” based only on our current opinion. Many issues are involved and we need to examine varying arguments by asking questions. (Book provides the example of factory farming animals).
   C. Real argument takes time and practice – preparing our reasons, relating our conclusions to evidence, and considering objections are all acquired skills.
      1. Argument helps our minds to become more flexible, open-ended, and alert
      2. Through argument we can appreciate the difference critical thinking can make

III. Rules for Short Arguments (Chapter 1)
   A. Identify premises and conclusions – determine what you are trying to prove.
      Your conclusion is the statement for which you are giving reasons. Your premises are statements that give your reasons for the conclusion.
   B. Develop your ideas in a natural order – since short arguments are developed in one or two paragraphs, you should put your conclusion first then follow with your premises. However, it may be just as effective to give your premises and then draw conclusions. Either way, it is about developing your ideas in an order that seems logical and natural.
   C. Start from reliable premises – if your premises are weak, then your conclusion and argument will be weak.
   D. Be concrete and concise – avoid abstract, vague, and general terms...be as specific as possible.
   E. Build on substance not overtone – in other words, offer actual reasons not emotionally loaded words.
   F. Use consistent terms – a short argument usually has a single theme or thread that carries one idea through several steps. Carefully choose clear terms and use those terms again and again throughout the argument.
IV. Generalizations – Assessing Arguments by Example (Chapter 2)
   A. **Use more than one example** – a single example is useful as an illustration of an idea, but it offers little support for a generalization.

   B. **Use representative examples** – a large number of examples alone do not necessarily support a generalization. A good generalization is supported by several examples that are representative or an accurate cross-section of an entire population.

   C. **Background rates may be crucial** – several examples that represent a population are not always sufficient in supporting a conclusion. One should ask questions like are these the only examples and how many potential examples are there?

   D. **Statistics need a critical eye** – numbers/statistics can be taken out of context and provide an incomplete picture of evidence. For numbers to be supportive, they must include the number of examples, other numbers reported on the same topic, and not be easily manipulated.

   E. **Consider counter-examples** – doing this allows you to determine if you have overgeneralizations. If you can think of counter-examples, then you should adjust your generalization. Considering the counter-examples is helpful when evaluating other’s arguments as well as your own.

V. Arguments by Analogy (Chapter 3)
   A. **Analogies require relevantly similar examples** – the example used as an analogy does not have to be exactly like the example in your conclusion. It should be similar like comparing a car that needs regular maintenance in the form of services or check-ups to a body that should get regular maintenance in the form of a physical.

VI. Sources (Chapter 4)
   A. **Cite your sources** – information that is not generally known should have a citation. All citations should have the same basic information regardless of style: enough so that others can easily find the sources on their own.

   B. **Seek informed sources** – sources must be qualified to make the statements they make. Qualifications are based on appropriate background or access to information. Just because a source is qualified in one area does not mean the source has qualifications in other areas. Truly informed sources provide evidence and reasons for their conclusions.
C. **Seek impartial sources** – sources that have high stakes in the dispute or argument are not usually the best sources of information. An impartial source is found with people or organizations that do not have a stake in the immediate issue and who have a prior and primary interest in accuracy. Also, sources that spend their time making extreme or simplistic claims or spend too much time attacking and demeaning the other side weaken their own position.

D. **Cross-check sources** – it is important to consult and compare a variety of sources to determine if other equally good authorities agree. Disagreement between authorities does not mean that a source should not be used rather it simply means that there is no consensus on an argument. Therefore, care should be used when determining your own position on the topic.

E. **Use the Web with care** – since the Web allows anyone to say anything at any time, only rely on websites that are identifiable and independently reputable. If the source of a website cannot be determined then it should not be trusted as an informed source. Key questions: who created the site? Why did they create it? What are their qualifications? What does it mean if they don’t tell you this information? How can you double-check and cross-check its claims?

VII. **Arguments about Causes** (Chapter 5)
   A. **Causal arguments start with correlations** – correlations are regular associations between two events/conditions or kinds of events/conditions. Correlations suggest causality. Inverse correlations (this increases while that decreases) can also suggest causality and non-correlations imply a lack of cause.

   B. **Correlations may have alternative explanations** – any correlation may be explained in multiple ways because the correlation may be coincidental, correlation itself does not determine the direction of the connection, other factors may underlie and explain both correlates, and multiple or complex causes may be at work.

   C. **Work toward the most likely explanation** – start by filling in the connections to spell out how each explanation could make sense. To fill in the connections, you need more information.

   D. **Expect complexity** – there are many factors at work and causes and effects may interpenetrate as well.

VIII. **Deductive Arguments** (Chapter 6)
   A. A deductive argument is an argument that if its premises are true then the conclusion must also be true. Properly formed deductive arguments are called valid arguments.
B. _Modus ponens_ – “the mode of putting” – the simplest valid deductive form. For example:

If (sentence x) then (sentence y).
(Sentence x).
Therefore, (sentence y).

C. _Modus tollens_ – “the mode of taking” – a second valid deductive form. For example:

If x then y.
Not-y.
Therefore, not-x.

D. _Hypothetical syllogism_ – a third valid deductive form. For example:

If x then y.
If y then a.
Therefore, if x then a.

E. _Disjunctive syllogism_ – a fourth valid deductive form. For example:

x or y.
Not-x.
Therefore, y.

F. _Dilemma_ – a fifth valid deductive form. For example:

x or y.
If x then a.
If y then b.
Therefore, a or b.

G. _Reductio ad absurdum_ – “reduction to absurdity” – this is a version of _modus tollens_. Arguments like this establish their conclusions by showing that assuming the opposite leads to absurdity.

H. _Deductive arguments in several steps_ – many valid deductive arguments are combinations of B-G.

IX. _Rules for Extended Arguments_ (Chapter 7)

A. **Explore the issue** – Begin with an issue, but not necessarily a position (opinion or conclusion). This requires research into several possible arguments/positions. Take the time to figure out well known arguments as well as their counterarguments.
B. **Spell out basic ideas as arguments** – constructing arguments means that you are constructing specific conclusions backed by evidence and reasons. Take basic ideas and frame them as an argument (based on 3-5 premises). You may have to try several conclusions before you find the best basic argument on a topic. You may also have to try several forms of argument before you find the form that really works for you.

C. **Defend basic premises with arguments of their own** – once you know your basic argument, it will need defense and development. Each premise that supports the basic argument will require its own evidence, reasons and/or examples.

D. **Consider objections** – it is important to anticipate possible problems or objections with your arguments. This will help you prepare a solid argument that demonstrates you know the topic or issue well.

E. **Consider alternatives** – you need to show that your argument is better than other plausible conclusions. This should not be a taken lightly. It is important to place your argument within the larger topic.

X. **Argumentative Essays (Chapter 8)**

A. **Jump right in** – avoid rhetorical padding or windy windups by getting straight to your point.

B. **Make a definite claim or proposal** – be specific and state your claim or interpretation simply.

C. **Your argument is your outline** – this begins the main body of your essay. Provide a summary of your argument in a concise paragraph. You want to provide the reader with the big picture: a clear overview of where you are going and how you plan to get there. Then, you need to advance each premise of the basic argument in its own paragraph. Each paragraph should restate the premise then develop and defend it.

D. **Detail objections and meet them** – you should discuss in detail the objections to your argument that you’ve identified. Responding to each objection by explaining how your argument is better results in a more persuasive paper.

E. **Get feedback and use it** – it is helpful to have other people look at your work to determine if your arguments are clearly stated and make sense.

F. **Modesty, please** – don’t claim more than you have or are able to show in the paper.
XI. Oral arguments (Chapter 9)

A. **Reach out to your audience** – one way to reach out is through your own enthusiasm in the topic. Another is to be patient especially with an audience that does not immediately share your view. You cannot expect them to be persuaded quickly. Instead, ask them to be willing to consider changing their view. It is also important to not make your audience feel like you are talking down to them. Finally, respect your audience and yourself...you are there because you have something to offer and they are there because they want to hear it or it is required. Simply, thank them for listening.

B. **Be fully present** – you should look at your audience and make eye contact with individuals. Also, speak with expression by not simply reading from your prepared notes. Use the instant feedback public speaking provides to determine if your audience is paying attention or appear to be interested and what the feeling is in the audience. Finally, if possible move out from behind the podium and walk around.

C. **Signpost your argument** – be considerate of your listener. This means that you may need to return to the main idea repeatedly, summarize your argument more fully, and refer back to both regularly.

D. **Offer something positive** – offer your audience something to do, something to hope for, or some sense of possibility...provide a positive spin. If discussing a negative topic, it would be helpful to provide the audience with specific actions or ways that they could make the situation better or different.

E. **Use visual aids sparingly** – only use those visual aids that you really need. PowerPoint presentations seem to be the norm, but that does not mean that they are effective. You do not want your presentation to be a tour through some slides.

F. **End in style** – this means that you end on time and with flair or flourish.

In addition to this book, Anthony Weston has published *A Workbook for Arguments* that provides activities for each of the rules discussed in *A Rulebook for Arguing*. There is also a companion website found at: [http://www.hackettpublishing.com/workbookforarguments/](http://www.hackettpublishing.com/workbookforarguments/).