

# Why One Principal Sought to Dumb Down a High School Critical Thinking Course

There are few things in this day and age that bring people from both sides of the political aisle together in agreement. But one of the few things which *does* bring agreement is the need for school courses that teach students to become logical and critical thinkers.

Because few schools offer such classes, many students and parents are forced to navigate the critical thinking world on their own, and are able to do so quite successfully through the help of kid-friendly books like [The Fallacy Detective](#), [The Thinking Toolbox](#), and [An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments](#).

But there are a few schools which still offer critical thinking courses in the classroom, particularly through the likes of the International Baccalaureate's "Theory of Knowledge" (TOK) course. Unfortunately, as Jay Mathews explains in a recent *Washington Post* [article](#), even this rare course appears to be too difficult for the tastes of some.

According to Mathews, Jeremy Noonan taught the "Theory of Knowledge" course at a high school in Georgia. Noonan reports that although students found the course difficult, many liked it:

*"[A]s they began to see how intriguing TOK was, attitudes improved and essay scores rose above global averages. 'Parents regularly told me that they saw their children maturing into adult thinkers before their eyes,' Noonan said. 'Alumni described the advantages they had in college due to being able to argue well and think from different points of view.'"*

After several years of this success, however, the school's principal asked Noonan to "make it easier," presumably to boost enrollment in higher level classes. When Noonan refused, the principal replaced him with a less demanding teacher. The results were predictable:

*"Noonan said some students told him that TOK had become 'the course where you go to catch up on work from your other classes.'*

*Noonan had assigned several graded essays each year. He said the new teacher assigned none. Noonan said his principal told him that at a regional meeting of IB principals, it was agreed that TOK should be easy and not treated as a serious course."*

In his famous work, [\*The Abolition of Man\*](#), C.S. Lewis declared:

*"The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes. For famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head."*

Given the above scenario, one has to wonder if we are starving our students not only in the failure to offer critical thinking and logic courses, but also in the failure to make them genuinely challenging. If so, is the latter problem the greater sin? Will students be all the more likely to fall prey to propaganda if they think they have effective weapons to combat it, when in fact they have nothing more than an inflated opinion of their own critical thinking skills?

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