There can be no doubt that critical thinking is an important skill. Critical consideration of beliefs and supposed forms of knowledge is essential in dealing with the constant flow of information, opinion and appeal that is so characteristic of highly literate and technological societies. It is therefore hardly surprising that critical thinking is a popular subject, among educators and researchers. This popularity is not without risk. Due to confusion on what critical thinking is, how it should be assessed and how it can be taught, there is room for fashionable swings, grandiose conceptions and unrealistic expectations. In *Critical Thinking; Its Definition and Assessment*, Alec Fisher and Michael Scriven make an effort to advance the discussion on the first two of these issues. Fisher and Scriven give an elaborate account of the concept of critical thinking and comment on some of the leading attempts to define it. They list and discuss the competencies that are involved in critical thinking and review some classical and recent tests of critical thinking. Finally, they introduce a new kind of test item – the multiple rating item – against the background of a discussion of criteria for evaluation and issues of test validity and reliability. Fisher and Scriven build on earlier work; they point out that their definition of critical thinking has much in common with earlier conceptualizations of scholars such as John Dewey, Edward Glaser and Robert Ennis.

Fisher and Scriven define critical thinking as the ‘skilled, active interpretation and evaluation of observations, communications, information and argumentation’ (p. 20). The inclusion of the term ‘skilled’ signals that standards of quality are to be met before something qualifies as critical thinking. These standards are context-dependent, since what counts as critical thinking varies with the level of intellectual development of the thinker and the topic under consideration. The skill perspective also helps to avoid the very common confusion between the activity itself and the disposition to think critically, between thinking critically and being a critical thinker. The term ‘active’ refers to four levels of activity. The first, ‘reactive processing’ includes identifying key ambiguities and missing elements. The second, ‘proactive’ or ‘investigatory’ level involves interrogating, examining, or finding further sources in order to obtain further key information or clarification. The third level is ‘reflective, analytical’. Here, thinking about thinking, or metacognition, is at stake. Reflective critical thinking has to do with identification of good sources and information-gathering procedures. It can also be self-reflective, as when the critical thinker considers
his or her own knowledge, beliefs or actions. At a next sub-level, it implies the mastery and use of the powerful vocabulary of informal logic. Formulating new or refined concepts in, or principles of, critical thinking constitutes a final sub-level, that is reached by only very few people. The definition of critical thinking includes ‘interpretation’, since Fisher and Scriven see it as a crucial preliminary to drawing conclusions about complex claims, and because interpretation, when it is not straightforward, requires critical thinking. As a process of determining quality or value, ‘evaluation’ is integral to critical thinking. Evaluation can have different objects. As a separate object category, Fisher and Scriven distinguish ‘observations’, because of their pre-linguistic nature and because of the importance of non-verbal, sensory data. ‘Communications’ are introduced as a distinct category for two reasons. First, communications, like questions and commands, do not always intend to convey information, which makes them into a special object for critical thinking. Second, a critical thinker’s own ‘communications’ (the term is used here in a different and more general meaning!) will often need critical review by their author. ‘Information’ or factual knowledge constitutes a third object category, separate from the fourth and final category: ‘argumentation’.

Several critical questions can be raised in response to the definition of critical thinking Fisher and Scriven give. Most of these questions have been anticipated by the authors, who thereby provide an excellent model of self-referential critical thinking. However, not all of their answers are equally convincing. One may, for example, question the need to include ‘interpretation’ in the definition. The fact that interpretation is a crucial preliminary to drawing conclusions about complex claims does not necessitate its inclusion in the definition or critical thinking. Evaluation, when properly done, always implies interpretation. Fisher and Scriven observe that every difficult interpretation involves critical examination of hypotheses, which brings in evaluation, but only in support role. This observation is not convincing either. It rather illustrates that critical thinking can support complex interpretation. I find it very hard to conceive of cases where critical thinking does not involve evaluation. It seems very appropriate to conceptualize effortful interpretation as a process of hypothesis testing, and thus as an essentially judgmental activity. I therefore believe that ‘interpretation’ can be deleted from the definition. Parsimony and clarity will benefit alike.

The Fisher and Scriven definition categorizes the objects or material of critical thinking. Critical thinking can be about observations, communications, information and argumentation. Fisher and Scriven justify these distinctions by pointing out the different nature of the categories involved. Observations have a pre-linguistic nature; communications need not convey information, and information does not coincide with argumentation. While these distinctions all make sense, it remains questionable whether Fisher and Scriven accurately conceptualize the object of critical thinking. In their