

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Hypothesizing

An important part of critical thinking is *hypothesizing*. This is the process of forming a hypothesis, or logical guess. A hypothesis offers a possible answer to a problem or gives a possible explanation for a limited number of facts. Being able to form such logical guesses helps people to better understand history.

Hypotheses can usually be proved or disproved. One way to do this is through further research. Another way is through information resulting from future discoveries. For example, about 200 B.C., Eratosthenes reasoned that a ship could reach India by sailing west from Spain. It was not until the late 1400s and early 1500s, during the European voyages of discovery, that Eratosthenes's hypothesis was proved correct.

To develop the skill of hypothesizing, use the following steps:

1. Read the sentence. For example: *After the Anglo-Saxons chased the Celts from Britain, Ireland became the major center of Celtic culture.*
2. Ask what the sentence is really saying. To do this, list the facts included in the sentence.
 - a. *The Celts left Britain.*
 - b. *The Celts settled in Ireland.*
 - c. *Ireland became the center of Celtic culture.*
3. Make hypotheses based on the facts given in the sentence. For example, note these two hypotheses:

- a. *The Celts settled in Ireland because it was near Britain, yet safer from attack.*
 - b. *Celtic culture flowered in Ireland because the land was geographically separated and thus free from foreign influence.*
4. Test each hypothesis to find out whether it is correct. This can be done by asking questions about the hypothesis and then looking up the answers. For example, in this case, testing can be done by finding out information about the history of the Celts in Britain and Ireland and the geographical features of the British Isles.

For further practice in this skill, apply the four steps outlined above to the following sentences:

1. By 550, the Roman Empire in the West had faded away, yet many Roman beliefs and practices remained to shape later civilizations.
2. The Germans' love of battle was closely linked to their religion.
3. On Christmas day in 800, the Pope placed a crown on Charlemagne's head and declared him to be the new Roman emperor.
4. During the 900s, Charlemagne's empire and Anglo-Saxon England were attacked by a new group of invaders known as Norsemen, or Vikings.