

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Distinguishing Relevant from Irrelevant Information

An important part of critical thinking is being able to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information. *Relevant information* is information that deals with the main idea of a discussion. It defines, explains, illustrates, serves as an example of, or describes a cause or consequence of the main idea. *Irrelevant information* is information that does not deal with the main idea.

The following guidelines will help point out the difference between these two kinds of information:

1. Read the material, and decide what the main idea is.
2. Look at each sentence carefully. Then, decide if it deals directly with the main idea by asking if the information in it defines, explains, illustrates, serves as an example of, or describes a cause or consequence of the main idea. If the information in a sentence does not do one of these things, then that sentence is irrelevant.

These guidelines are used to tell the difference between relevant and irrelevant information in the following paragraphs. The main idea of the first paragraph is that feudalism was based on ties of loyalty and duties among nobles. The main idea of the second paragraph is that political changes took place in western Europe during the late Middle Ages.

A vassal was a noble who served a lord of higher rank and gave him loyalty. (*defines*) In return, the lord gave his vassal a fief. (*explains a consequence*) Most fiefs were very

large. (*irrelevant*) The vassals' most important duty was to help the lord in battle. (*explains*) Vassals also had to make payments to their lord. (*explains*) One type of a vassal's payment was providing ransom. (*illustrates*)

During the late Middle Ages, there was a rise of trade and towns. (*cause*) This led to many changes in western Europe. (*consequence*) Some of these changes were political. (*describes a consequence*) Nobles lost their power as kings and queens grew stronger. (*explains*) Some kings and queens were famous, while others were not. (*irrelevant*) Monarchies developed in France, England, Germany, and Spain. (*illustrates*) One king, Frederick I of Germany, was called Barbarossa, or "red beard." (*irrelevant*)

For further practice in this skill, use the guidelines outlined above to decide which of the following sentences are relevant to the main idea—how the Crusades affected western Europe—and which are irrelevant.

(1) Urban II was the Pope who called for a crusade against the Muslims. (2) Because of the Crusades, the split between eastern and western Christianity became permanent. (3) Feudalism was weakened in western Europe as kings increased their authority. (4) Feudalism was a political and economic system based on the relationship of lords and vassals. (5) The cities of western Europe grew in size and importance. (6) Crowded conditions often made cities unhealthy places in which to live.