

think
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***how do
you
know?***

Seven Simple Steps for Thinking Clearly

How Do You Know?

Our Dinner Table Lessons That Taught Us How to Think

Dinner time in our house was not optional. Growing up, the whole family was expected to sit down together each day at one rectangular table. Daddy sat at the head of that table, and Mother sat across from him at the other end. I always understood that dinner was Daddy's time. He was served first, and when he spoke, we stopped talking and listened. Eventually, we children would begin chattering back and forth about one thing or another. Someone would make a claim, usually with more confidence than evidence, and my father would quietly enter the conversation with a question that could stop the whole table:

"How do you know?"

There were two things wrapped inside that question. First, my father had been listening. Second, he wanted to know whether we understood what we were talking about. Everybody at that table knew what came next. Heads went down. The chatter disappeared. The person who made the claim was instructed to get up from the table, go into the living room, and find the answer to back it up.

At first, the rest of us would chuckle, relieved that we had not been the one caught making the statement. Then Daddy would look around the table and ask why we were still sitting there. "Get up and help find the answer." We had not finished eating. We grumbled, but we went. In the living room stood our proudly displayed set of World Book Encyclopedias. Those books were not decoration in our home. They were tools, purchased by my parents for our education, and when Daddy asked, "How do you know?" those volumes became part of the dinner conversation.

Together, we searched for information that came closest to proving—or correcting—the statement that had been made. Then we had to return to the table and state it again in a way that satisfied my father. The better we researched, and the clearer our answer, the sooner we could sit back down and finish our meal.

Of course, Daddy's purpose was larger than the answer to any one question. He was reminding us to do our research before we spoke on a topic. He expected us to prove what was true, defend what we believed, and be honest enough to discover when a claim did not hold up.

Sharing a Family Practice for Thinking Clearly

You do not need a set of encyclopedias to bring this practice into your home. Today, the search may happen on the internet, in a library, through a trusted book, or by asking someone with firsthand knowledge. What matters most is not the tool you use, but the habit you build: curiosity, patience, and a willingness to pause before accepting or repeating a claim.

The next time someone makes a confident statement, invite them—and yourself—to slow down. Ask the question my father taught us to ask:

How do you know?

Then use the question as a path toward clarity in thinking and care in speaking.

1. Name it

Ask: What exactly is being said?

Clear thinking begins by saying the claim plainly and specifically.

2. Sort it

Ask: Is this known, assumed, heard, remembered, or inferred?

Do not let an assumption pass for a fact just because it sounds familiar or confident.

3. Support it

Ask: What evidence backs this up?

Look for reliable evidence before repeating the claim as truth.

4. Check it

Ask: Who says so, and why should I trust them?

A source may be helpful, but it still needs to be tested for knowledge, accuracy, and limits.

5. Compare it

Ask: Do other reliable sources agree?

Comparing sources helps separate truth from error, exaggeration, and convenience.

6. Revise it

Ask: What should I believe now?

Changing your mind when the evidence changes is not weakness; it is honesty.

7. Say it

Ask: How should I speak now?

“Speak with the confidence the evidence earns—and with the humility truth requires.”

Over time, this practice can become a habit for individuals, families, classrooms, and communities. We learn to pause before repeating a claim, name exactly what is being said, look for evidence, check the source, compare reliable information, admit uncertainty, and change our minds when better evidence requires it.

My father's question interrupted dinner, but it also gave us a lifelong discipline. It taught us that knowledge is not merely something we possess. It is something we pursue, examine, and use responsibly before we speak.

Thinking clearly does not mean knowing everything. It means being willing to question what we hear, examine what we believe, and revise what we think when better evidence appears.

The next time you hear a confident statement—whether at the dinner table, online, over the phone, or in the news—pause before you repeat it.

Before you repeat it, ask:

How do you know?

Name the claim. Look for the evidence. Consider the source. Compare what you find. Be honest about what you do not know. Then speak only as strongly as the evidence allows. My father gave us more than an answer to look for. Around that dinner table, he gave us a habit to carry into the world. Now I invite you to make that habit your own. Try it today.

Think. Question. Discover. Think again.

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“Across our lives, the words shared among siblings have been both respected and challenged. In that exchange, we came to see the lasting imprint of our childhood—the respect, admiration, values, and principles gifted to us by our parents.”

Lillian L Thompson

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