

1.5 Cognitive tools / cognitive skills

Introduction Before we actually go on learning more about the tool, we have to think about tools in literary analysis. Let's start with a definition: a tool is "a device used to perform or facilitate manual or mechanical work" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Of course, when we think about tools, we tend to think of hammers and spanners, but the definition is so wide – a tool is in a way 'something we use to do something else' - there are also other kinds of tools:



Task: You could discuss similarities and differences between these tools with your classmates. To do so, it may be useful to distinguish between the [1] **composition** of the different tools, [2] their **aims** and [3] the **result** of working with them.

Turning tools into skills Thinking tools are not that different from other kinds of tools. In common is the basic idea of 'using something to do something else'. In common is also the idea that the tool must be good, but also that the tool is not enough, you need some skill to wield it. Look at the blacksmith on your picture:

[1] Selection of the object: The blacksmith is forging a piece of iron, so it makes sense to use a hammer. If he were repairing a TV set, he would not use the hammer, but maybe a screwdriver. You need a basic skill to know which objects demand which tool.

[2] Aim of using the tool: To shape the iron, the blacksmith is aiming for both maximum power and precision: the higher he lifts the hammer, the more power he develops, but the more he risks losing precision.



Try the following experiment Take a hammer and let a friend hold a nail. Aim for maximum power and precision, and lift the hammer the way the blacksmith on your picture does. Allow your friend time enough to drop the nail. 😊 If your friend insist on holding it, remind him/her that the test is not designed to prove real friendship, but whether skills are difficult to get by.

Want to know more?

Difference between abstract and everyday knowledge

Many students complain about tools. They consider them unnecessarily abstract and complicated.

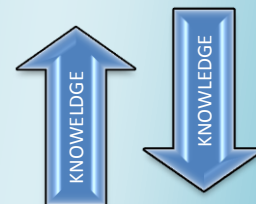
But abstract academic knowledge is not that different from normal everyday knowledge. The likes of Vygotsky these two types of knowledge describe the same world, only that each type approaches through different concepts:

1. **Spontaneous concepts:** normal everyday knowledge, a by-product of living, it is normal everyday knowledge, context-bound, unreflected
2. **Academic concepts:** academic knowledge, the result of instruction, de-contextualized and abstract

Both types of knowledge help each other in the process of understanding. Without pre-academic concepts we have no way to connect the abstract with actual life, while without academic knowledge the everyday remains opaque.

ACADEMIC

- abstract
- de-contextualized
- learned



SPONTANEOUS

- everyday
- contextualized
- unreflected

Cognitive skills What does the idea of skill imply for a cognitive tool like JustdoLit? Cognitive tools are models, ways of organizing abstract ideas. We have to turn them into skills. The skill can be tested as regards the

1. Selection of the object Some texts allow themselves to be analysed with the tool we use, and others don't. If you analyse a text with a tool and feel like you are repairing a TV with a hammer, use another tool.

2. Aim of using the tool our aim is to **think 'critically' with the tool**. To know what this means let's dissect the sentence 'think critically with the tool':

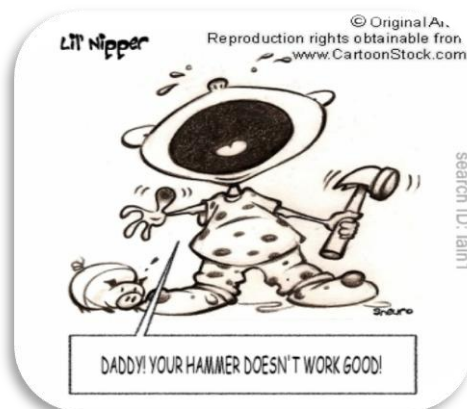
1. **Tool:** Thinking tools are in our head. Without them there is nothing to think, for we are always using one tool or another. We can of course choose to use the tool or be used by them. For me, there is no doubt that the first option is the better one.
2. **Think 'critically':** So tools are necessary, but - and this 'but' is important - if we just impose the model on the text we are analyzing, the result will be very mechanistic, and will probably not do the text justice. After all, every text is different, a unique collection of words. So...

...it's better to approach the text with respect. You'll do this best if you try some of the following:

1. Be **honest** when using a thinking tool
2. Use the tool to **think**
3. **Test** the text against the tool & the tool against the text
4. **Find** the **limits** of your tool

Meta-thinking My experience and that of most professionals in the field is that the best papers and essays invariably include some of the elements in the above blue box. This goes in the direction of something called 'meta-thinking'. Meta-thinking is thinking not only about your interpretation, but about your very thinking strategies and conceptual frameworks, their validity and limitations.

Conclusion Altogether, if we do not turn our tools into skills by thinking with them, we will become the little boy of the picture to our right, and end up blaming the tool for our own lack of skill.



Want to know more?

At its most basic, our brain works with what are called binary oppositions, e.g. reason & feeling, up & down, private & public.

Below you can see some common binaries. They can all appear in a text, and so it is good to bear them in mind.

JustdoLit is based on three such binaries: society & individual, metaphysics & nature, good & evil. The difference with traditional binaries is that JustdoLit uses

1. more than one opposition at a time and as parts of a great interconnected whole.

2. oppositions which belong to a 'select' group because from a cultural point of view they are very 'fundamental'.

But the other binaries *are* important. If you find any, see whether underneath them you can find the oppositions used in JustdoLit, or whether they form a system of their own.

