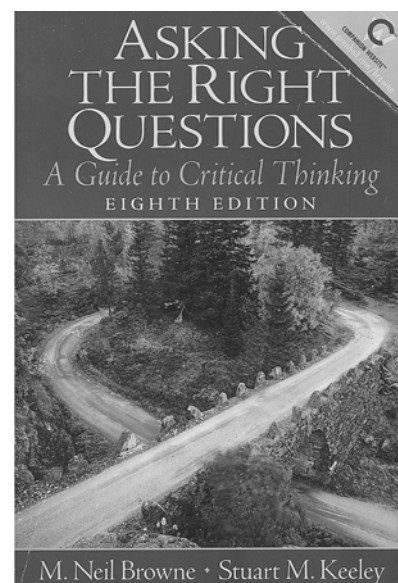


Asking the Right Questions by M. Neil Browne and Stuart M. Keeley
Reviewed by Tim Cairney

Biography: Tim Cairney is an associate professor of accounting in Georgia Southern University's College of Business Administration. He received his doctorate from Virginia Tech and teaches management and cost accounting cost in the School of Accountancy. Dr. Cairney may be reached at tcairney@georgiasouthern.edu

Asking the Right Questions is subtitled "A Guide to Critical Thinking" and provides a well written step-by-step explanation of how to critically evaluate arguments and conclusions. The book comes with a warning that readers should use these procedures cautiously because of the impact on personal relationships! That warning encouraged me to find out more, and I wasn't disappointed.

There are two main parts of the book. In the first part, each chapter covers a part of an argument: what are the issue and conclusion; what are the reasons that support the conclusion; what are the ambiguities in the reasons; what are the assumptions? This covers the first six chapters wherein much of the material is common sense. For instance in the ambiguities chapter, the authors ask the reader to substitute the different meanings of an ambiguous word to see if different conclusions result. While we are likely to notice ambiguous words and phrases in arguments we hear and read, substituting the alternatives into the context and restating the arguments is a procedure we would likely do without thinking. This illustrates the procedural nature of the book. However, from the seventh chapter onward the material turns to evaluating the arguments by employing procedures that the authors carefully describe. Evaluating arguments is more of a challenge than identifying the parts of an argument, so I found the second part of the book much more useful. Paralleling the first part of the book, the methods used in evaluating arguments are presented by chapter: what are the fallacies; how good is the evidence; are there rival causes; what information has been omitted? These methods require practice and although the book is a quick read, being able to use these skills will take me much more time. It is important to note that the many procedures discussed throughout the book are not presented like a laundry list. Instead each chapter contains ample illustrations and discussions so that by the book's end, we can apply them. To reinforce this goal, the end of each chapter includes practice examples. For example, the fallacies chapter describes fourteen fallacious reasons such as "searching for the perfect solution," or "using a slippery slope argument." Searching for the



perfect solution is a block we often find in coming up a decision. The authors provide explanations why this is a fallacy, have us recognize its use in a few examples, and provide us with tools to recognize it in different contexts, then test us at the end of the chapter. In the Rival Causes chapter, the authors not only provide procedures on how to detect the rival causes but also provide guidance on when to look for rival causes. The book has a companion website for additional practice and solutions.

The applications of the procedures in the book are many. Auditors, lawyers, and bankers will find useful this central source for procedures to evaluate arguments. On the other hand, the style of the book is aimed at a broader population because the authors' goal is to develop independent thinking in this age of information and information manipulation. I walked away from the book armed with some of the most useful procedures I have learned about evaluating arguments.

The Cover Story

Title: Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking, by M. Neil Browne and Stuart M. Keeley

Number of pages: 207

Area of business: Negotiations and Discussions

Time needed to read: 7 hours

Why should I read this book? To make better use of your time by critically evaluating arguments during discussions and negotiations.