



# Questioning Assumptions: Thinking Outside the Box

## Proving Ground Overview

Being able to recognize and question assumptions is key to becoming a more active and critical thinker. Virtually everything we hear and read rests on a host of assumptions, most of them hidden. Once you can identify them, you are in a good position to determine whether or not they are valid.

## Proving Ground Directions

“Thinking outside the box” is now a cliché, but it comes from the 9 dot puzzle that you may have encountered.

<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-psychology/chapter/problem-solving/>

Whether or not you have seen the puzzle before, you probably made a number of assumptions about how to solve it. These unquestioned assumptions probably made it hard or even impossible to solve the problem. **Only when you recognize and challenge these assumptions can you begin to solve the puzzle.**

The same phenomenon occurs in many discussions of social and political issues.

**Practice Identifying assumptions.** There may be more than one.

## Example

- 1) Gluten is harmful to people with celiac disease. It is healthier to avoid gluten.  
Assumptions:
  - a) If something is bad for people with celiac disease, it is bad for people without celiac disease.
  - b) There are no health consequences to avoiding gluten
- 2) We need to shut down the summer internship program. It cost \$30,000 last year and our best tech hires come from word of mouth.  
Assumptions:

- a) The only benefit of the summer internship is tech hiring.
  - b) Hiring through word of mouth costs less than \$30,000
  - c) \$30,000 is too much to spend on the summer internship program.
- 3) We should restrict immigration to lower unemployment.
- Assumptions:
- a) The level of Immigration causes the unemployment rate to change.
  - b) People who are currently unemployed would take the jobs formerly held by immigrants.
- 4) We expanded the marketing department last quarter and sales did not increase, so we should start laying people off people.
- Assumptions:
- a) The number of people in the marketing department is directly responsible for the number of sales.
  - b) The effects of marketing on sales can be seen within one quarter.
  - c) Laying off people will increase sales.
- 5) College is a waste of time for entrepreneurs – after all, Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg did not graduate from college.
- Assumptions:
- a) The success of Jobs and Zuckerberg is related to not graduating from college.
  - b) If they had graduated from college, they would not have learned anything useful.
  - c) Jobs and Zuckerberg are typical entrepreneurs.

Now that you can identify assumptions, you can start challenging them. This is relatively easy to do when you disagree with the conclusions, but harder to do when you agree.

Pick a blog post, article, or video from a news or opinion source you read or watch regularly. Identify the hidden assumptions, then ask: *Is this actually true? How do I know? How can I find out?* Annotate the document by identifying the assumptions and then challenging them.

## Rubric

Criterion	Description	Yes	Not Yet
Identifies assumptions embedded in statements	<i>You pull out the underlying assumption from the statements</i>		
Identifies unstated assumptions in speech, op ed, or blog post	<i>You highlight the assumptions in the news and question them</i>		
Explains approach for determining if assumptions are true	<i>You walk through your thinking for how you identify assumptions</i>		