

Successful Intelligence: Use Your Smarts to Solve Problems in School

Successful Intelligence theory asserts that a person's overall intelligence comprises three distinct elements -- a combination of analytical, creative, and practical thinking skills.

by Katharine Hansen, Ph.D.

You may know your [learning style](#) and how intelligent you are, but how do you use your intelligence to solve problems? Successful Intelligence theory asserts that a person's overall intelligence comprises three distinct elements -- that when you are trying to solve a problem you use a combination of analytical, creative, and practical thinking skills.

In his book, *Successful Intelligence* (Simon & Schuster), Robert Sternberg refutes the idea of any one definition of intelligence. Instead, he suggests that successful intelligence determines one's ability to cope in career, in life -- and in school. Successfully intelligent people capitalize on their strengths and recognize and compensate for their weaknesses; self-motivating and flexible in their work style, they create their own opportunities, actively seek out role models, recognize and accurately define problems, and know when to persevere.

Successful intelligence is the kind of intelligence you need to succeed both in school and in the real world. It is the translation of underlying skills and abilities into routines that lead to highly competent, everyday performances -- on the job, in personal relationships, and in the classroom.

More specifically, Sternberg describes successful intelligence as the ability to balance analytical, practical, and creative intelligence and use these intelligences effectively. And the best news from his more recent work is the affirmation that people can actually perform exercises to improve their three types of thinking.

Analytical intelligence involves the conscious direction of our mental processes to find a thoughtful solution to a problem. It is the ability to overcome obstacles to find a solution. Being analytically intelligent is having the ability to solve problems effectively.

Creative intelligence is the ability to come up with new ideas. With creative intelligence, a person can generate innovative solutions to solve problems.

Practical intelligence is common sense and deals mostly with social situations. Some might refer to this aspect of intelligence as street-smarts.

To find out your level of successful intelligence, take this assessment on our sister site, Quintessential Careers: [What's Your Degree of Analytical, Creative, and Practical Thinking? A Quintessential Careers Quiz](https://www.quintcareers.com/intelligence-quiz/). <https://www.quintcareers.com/intelligence-quiz/>

How did you do? Which skills do you need to improve? Following are suggestions for improving your thinking skills in each area when solving problems. These suggestions are excellent for working through obstacles you come across in class projects. After each set of suggestions, see how a student named Megan Cahoon, in an assignment she published on the Internet, described academic experiences she'd had relating to successful intelligence.

Improving Analytical Thinking Skills

- **Seek out more (complete) information about the situation/decision.**
- **Separate the information you do have into fact and opinions.**
- **Evaluate and decide on the importance of each piece of information.**
- **Break down larger concepts into smaller, easier to manage pieces.**
- **Dedicate time to gather, read, and evaluate information.**

Megan Cahoon noted that she encountered analytical thinking skills when she attempted to publish a personal web page, but it didn't work. She defined her problem and decided the best course would be to start over. She recreated the page step by step and at each juncture tested whether it would actually work when published on the Internet.

Improving Creative Thinking Skills

- **Take risks by pushing yourself out of your comfort zone when seeking understanding.**
- **Seek out examples of the creative solutions of others to similar situations.**
- **Examine the situation you face from multiple perspectives.**

- Go beyond obvious and conventional solutions.
- Free yourself to brainstorm (develop) multiple solutions to situation.

Megan Cahoon described encountering her creative thinking skills when she made a paper collage in a class. She detailed the color choices she made and very simple materials she used in making a black cat the centerpiece of her collage.

Improving Practical Thinking Skills

- Try to observe how others work and make decisions.
- Examine how others have successfully accomplished things.
- Look for patterns in past experience to prepare for future decisions/situations.
- Read and review common-sense tips for everyday situations.
- Apply what you have learned from the past to present day.

Megan Cahoon confronted practical thinking skills in discerning which classmate selected a piece of music that was being played in an activity about nonverbal communication. She looked for patterns in her classmate's nonverbal behavior and used her past knowledge of her classmates to guess who selected the music.

Megan also related the three thinking skills to her career goal as a doctor, noting that she would need practical-thinking to communicate with patients, analytical-thinking skills to diagnose them, and creative-thinking skills to solve problems in her medical practice.

Questions about some of the terminology used in this article? Get more information (definitions and links) on key academic terms by going to our [College Success Glossary](#).

Katharine Hansen, Ph.D., is an educator, author, and blogger who provides content for [EmpoweringSites.com](#), including [MyCollegeSuccessStory.com](#). Katharine, who earned her PhD in organizational behavior from Union Institute & University, Cincinnati, OH, is



author of Dynamic Cover Letters for New Graduates and A Foot in the Door: Networking Your Way into the Hidden Job Market (both published by Ten Speed Press), as well as Top Notch Executive Resumes (Career Press); and with [Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.](#), Dynamic Cover Letters, Write Your Way to a Higher GPA (Ten Speed), and The Complete Idiot's Guide to Study Skills (Alpha). She curates, crafts, and delivers compelling content online, in print, on stage, and in the classroom. Visit her personal Website [KatharineHansenPhD.com](#) or reach her by e-mail at [kathy\(at\)astoriedcareer.com](mailto:kathy(at)astoriedcareer.com). Check out Dr. Hansen on GooglePlus.