
THE LITTLE BOOK OF THUNKS®

260 questions to make your brain go ouch!

Thunk *n.* **1.** a beguiling question about everyday things that stops you in your tracks and helps you start to look at the world in a whole new light. **2.** covers most areas of human existence including truth, justice, reality, beliefs, the natural world, the human condition, art, beauty, existence, right and wrong, good and bad, life and death, war, religion, love, friendship and whether Marmite™ tastes nice.

Ian Gilbert

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What is a *Thunk*?

A *Thunk* is a beguilingly simple-looking question about everyday things that stops you in your tracks and helps you start looking at the world in a whole new light. At the same time it encourages you to engage in verbal fisticuffs with the people sitting next to you and, if used properly, always leads to severe brain ache.¹

The *Thunks* in this book cover areas of human existence, including truth, justice, reality, beliefs, the natural world, the human condition, art, beauty, right and wrong, good and bad, life and death, war, religion, love, friendship and whether Marmite tastes nice.

Any one *Thunk* can start to help people see that all communication is riddled with potholes that, just maybe, we need to look out for including intentions, definitions, pre-suppositions, opinions, assumptions, approximations, biases, prejudices, non sequiturs, and everything else that happens when a politician's lips move.

What's more, 'think' is also the noise the brain makes when it starts to think about a *Thunk* and, as such, is the one of the first onomatopoeias to provide hours of endless fun since Ker-Plunk.

¹ Some people may try and tell you that a 'think' is 'computer code that performs a translation or conversion during a call or indirection' but don't listen to them. They are probably the same sort of people who will attempt to persuade you that 'debugging flat thunks generated by the thunk compiler can be difficult because the thunk mechanism is complex and debugging tools capable of tracing through thunks are difficult to use' and, as such, should be avoided.

What is a *Thunk* for?

It is easy to go through life without ever lifting it up, giving it a shake and looking at it from a different angle. When we do this we start to realise that what we thought were facts are actually opinions, what we took to be knowledge is actually supposition, and not everything you read in *Daily Mail* is true. A *Thunk* will help you to look with new eyes at everyday occurrences such as the wind, broken-down cars, and things that are black. And, by helping you to look deeper and question harder, may even help you to get more out of life – which is a big claim for a little book – but such is the power of *Thunks*.

In the words of one eight-year-old boy after his first session, “I’ve just realised how big life is.”

Where do *Thunks* come from?

There is a thinking skills programme that originated in the US called *Philosophy for Children* – known by those in a hurry as *P4C* – that has a growing following in the UK. A professor of philosophy named Matthew Lipman realised that his students could tell you what philosophers such as Socrates or Plato thought but couldn’t think for themselves. Which is a bit like putting your trunks on to read a book about swimming. He put together a series of stories and a special way of working that could be used with children of all ages to help them develop a more philosophical way of thinking. *Thunks* grew out of my work in this area with

children in primary and secondary schools (and even tax inspectors) and are a way of quickly and easily getting people thinking and talking philosophically.

How does a *Thunk* work?

Socrates was a clever man and a teacher who would help his students simply by asking questions, something we now call a ‘Socratic dialogue’. Through questioning in this way, people will either develop a more profound and reasoned appreciation of why what they feel to be true is true or untrue, or else may end up no longer really knowing what a tree is. Could go either way.

Although the idea of using questions to generate thinking goes back thousands of years, even great recent philosophers such as Wittgenstein have suggested that a perfectly respectable philosophical essay could comprise entirely of questions. Or jokes. Or both. He also knew the benefits to thinking of laughter and once asked the wonderful *Thunk*, “Why don’t dogs simulate pain? Is it because they are too honest?”

What are the benefits of *Thunks*?

Check out a list of famous Swiss people and somewhere between Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim and Ursula Andress you will find the name Jean Piaget.

Many present day insights into childhood development come from his observations and theories from the last century – theories that can now be backed up by neuroscience, despite having been dismissed at one time or another.² It was Piaget who suggested that – and I urge you to copy this line out and stick it in a place where you’ll see it daily – “Intelligence is what you use when you don’t know what to do.” *Thunks* tap into this definition of intelligence and help us move away from the idea that the intelligent person is the one with the good memory and a grasp of basic grammar. (If you don’t believe me, listen to *Brain of Britain* on BBC Radio 4 – it’s a memory game of abstruse facts, and nothing to do with the application of knowledge in new environments. I bet few of the winners over the last decade could fix a Fiesta headlight with a courgette as someone I know once did.)

I was recently asked to ‘motivate’ a conference of tax inspectors who were coming to terms with the fact that the Inland Revenue and HM Customs and Excise were being combined into one large organisation – HM Revenue & Customs. (Before I went, I typed ‘motivated tax inspectors’ onto Google™ and received the reply, “Your search returned no documents.”) These were people at the top of their tree for whom the world was soon to be unlike it had ever been previously. They were going to be asked questions that had never been asked before and were expected to come up

² Neuroscience spends a lot of time catching up with good practice when it comes to children, with parents and teachers greeting the findings of many multi-million dollar research projects with a resounding ‘Well, duh!’

with answers – answers that couldn't be found in books, on websites, or in anyone's brain. I took them through a number of *Thunks* for precisely the reason that Piaget explains.

In a similar vein, someone once told me an Oxbridge admissions tutor was asked how they differentiated between A grade A-level students who are clever and A grade A-level students who have been well schooled and have a good memory. "Easy," the tutor replied, "I simply ask them a question no-one's ever asked them before."

In a school setting *Thunks* are not only useful as a discrete thinking skills activity, they can also be used in all areas of the curriculum, for example, at the beginning of a new topic. One science teacher was going to use *Thunks* such as, "If your doctor knew you had a gene that meant you would die at 25, would you want her to tell you? Should she tell you anyway? Would you want anyone else to know?" as a lead into the part of the curriculum covering genetics and Human Genome Project. Similarly, some of the wonderful discussions I have had with children starting from the simplest of *Thunks* – Is black a colour? – would lead perfectly into science, art or even citizenship lessons.

A maths teacher was once berating me for suggesting that philosophical thought could be useful in his area where, as far as he was concerned, there were no grey areas and the answer to a mathematical question either was or it wasn't. I tried to point out that maths and philosophy go back a long way, reminding him that above Plato's door was

21. If you say sorry but don't mean it, but the person you are apologising to thinks you are genuine, does it still count?

22. *Should we thank our parents for our being who we are?*

23. CAN YOU EVER BE GRATEFUL FOR BAD THINGS HAPPENING?

24. Should you be made to be polite?

25. IS IT EVER RIGHT TO BULLY A BULLY?

137. If I have a problem with my brain that makes me do bad things am I a bad person? If I have an operation and that problem gets removed, so I no longer do bad things, am I a good or bad person? Was I a bad person?

138. With a water shortage looming could you harvest puddles? Who owns the water in them?

139. If I tell a joke that is translated who is making the other person laugh – me or the translator?

140. Can a dog be kind?

240. Can you love someone and hate them at the same time?
241. *Should stupid people be allowed to vote?*
242. IF YOU FEED A TERRORIST, DOES THAT MAKE YOU A TERRORIST?
243. If scientists could create a new species of animal purely for testing medicines on, should they use it for that purpose?
244. *If you steal my pen and I steal yours in return am I a thief too? Am I the same as you? Does it work for all crimes?*

*If I borrow a million pounds am I a millionaire?
Could a fly cause an aeroplane to crash?
Are you man-made or natural?
Do dogs believe in God?
When you comb your hair is it art?*

A *Think* is a beguiling question about everyday things that stops you in your tracks and helps you start to look at the world in a whole new light.

The author guides you through the origins and uses of *Thunks* and demonstrates how this powerful little book can develop philosophical thinking for all ages ... remember there are no right or wrong answers to these questions. How liberating is that ...?

“... a delightful book written by an inspired thinker.”

Alistair Smith, best-selling author and leading trainer

“... rich with ideas on how to implement Philosophy in your school.”

Lyn Walsh, Gifted and Talented Strand Coordinator

*“A *Think* can be used to warm up students of all ages; to entertain children on a car journey; or round off an evening with friends!”*

Mike Cousins, Northamptonshire Raising Standards Partnership Trust

“... the most flabby brain muscles in the room (including mine) have been encouraged to flex and tone confidently without fear of revealing the ‘wrong’ mental Lycra.”

Jeanne Fairs, Media Studies/English Teacher

“... an instantaneous passport to the very best of children’s thinking.”

**Phil Beadle, Columnist Education Guardian,
award winning teacher, and author of *Could do Better***

“So much excellent material in such a small book, demonstrates beautifully the simplicity of a truly creative idea.”

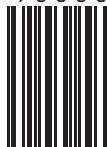
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