

Week Ten: Asking the Questions that Matter

Introduction: What difference does it make?

At this point in the semester, you have written and revised at least four papers. You are also, in all likelihood, somewhere near the beginning of at least four years in college writing papers. Where should you be right now? How can you assess your own progress?

We would like to suggest that, at this point in the semester, you should have a pretty good idea whether or not you are generating passing work: you should be producing writing that dependably engages with the assigned readings, that takes a position, and that is well organized. How do you get your writing up to the higher levels, though? It's one thing to produce passing work—that, at least, insures that you'll fulfill your writing requirement—but what about getting beyond passing?

For this tutorial, we'd like you to ask the same question of your writing that we do when we read it: what difference does it make if the argument that is being made is true? Or, to put the question more succinctly, so what? Your writing will begin to improve considerably when your essays begin to include clear answers to these questions. There are probably slightly friendlier ways to ask these questions, but we think it best not to mislead you at this point about how best to assess your own progress.

Questioning your own position

To begin the process of assessing your progress, we'd like you to identify the position you are arguing for in your current draft. Then we'd like you to apply the questions we suggest below to your position statement.

Let's say that you've written an essay that draws on Tenner, Siebert, and Davis to argue that:

“An over-dependence on technology has a negative impact on the relationship between humans and the environment.”

This sounds significant—it *sounds* like it matters, but how do you tell whether making such a statement is a notable achievement or not? To assess the significance of your own position, we invite you to ask the following questions:

Question type	Questions to ask	Questions applied to sample position statement
WHAT?	What do the important phrases in your position statement mean?	What constitutes an “over-dependence on technology”? What is a “negative impact”? What is “the relationship” between humans and the environment?
WHY?	Why does the relationship you focus on exist?	Why has the relationship between humans and the environment been altered? What is it about this relationship that led humans to establish a relationship with technology?
HOW?	How is the relationship you focus on produced?	How, specifically, does the over-dependence on technology produce a “negative impact” on the relationship between humans and the environment?
SO WHAT?	What is the significance of the relationship you focus on? Why does it matter? What follows from having established the existence of this relationship?	Why should it matter that humans are now “over-dependent” on technology? What can be done to alter this situation?

Once you’ve subjected your position statement to this line of questioning, you’re bound to find ways that both the statement and your essay can be improved.

To return to our sample position statement, we can see that it doesn’t stand up well to this initial round of questioning: while the claim does appear to establish a basic cause/effect relationship, it only allows a reader to agree (“Yes, there is a negative impact”) or disagree (“No, there is not a negative impact”). What this position needs to establish is why it matters that there is an “over-dependence” on technology and what follows from acknowledging that relationship.

Below is a revised version of the sample position based on responses to the WHY, WHAT, HOW, and SO WHAT questions:

The function of technology is to help humans increase their chances of surviving (WHY). Ideally, technology also improves the quality of human life. But, recent developments in cancer research and the changing behavior of animals toward humans show that technology also has the power to imperil human survival and to reduce the quality of human life (HOW). It seems that humans are no longer in control of the tools they originally created to harness nature's powers, and this loss of control is producing negative consequences for both the human community and the environment (WHAT). While this loss of control is producing a wide range of problems, the one I wish to focus on here is the sense of powerlessness and despair that are created once of sees technology as it charge of human destiny (SO WHAT).

As you can see, the revised position is more detailed. It provides an explicit explanation of context that has given rise to the writer’s project and it concludes with an explicit statement of

why considering this issue matters: it is this writer's contention that the rising importance of technology has produced a sense of "powerlessness and despair" in the human community. In the paragraphs that follow, it would be reasonable to expect the writer to explain just how this sense of powerlessness and despair is produced, offering evidence from the readings, and detailing its significance.

Summary

How will you know when your writing has improved? Does your position matter? Can you show how and why others should care about the argument that you've made? When you can show in your writing why your own position—what the consequences of holding your position are—then you will be well on the way to mastering the form of the academic essay.