

Week Eleven: Follow-up Questions

Introduction: Can I ask a follow-up?

If you've ever watched a news conference, you've undoubtedly heard a reporter ask the question, "Can I ask a follow-up?" If this seems kind of pushy, it's because it *is* kind of pushy! Reporters do this because they know that the conversation doesn't end after the first question has received a reply; that reply, in turn, generates other questions, which require replies of their own. Of course, in a news conference, there are always lots of other reporters eager to ask questions and the person being questioned is usually equally eager for the topic to change, so it is difficult to get beyond one follow-up question.

By this point in the semester, you should be well equipped to answer the following questions about each of the readings you've been assigned to work with:

- What does the author think about X?
- Why does the author hold this position?

The question that we want to make certain you leave this course asking, in addition to these two, is:

- What is the significance of holding this position?
- Or, to put the question another way, what is the consequence of holding this position?

By asking this question and seeking its answer, you give yourself the opportunity to move the focus of your paper away from the assigned reading and on to your own ideas about and responses to the assigned reading. This last question, in other words, opens the door for you to write essays that are primarily concerned with your own ideas and interpretations: this last question allows you to use your own writing to advance your own education.

Reporters aren't the only ones who ask pushy follow-up questions, of course. This is a habit of mind that characterizes, in one way or another, all who are intellectually engaged and curious. No doubt, by this point in the semester, you will have found that, no matter what you write, your teacher has further questions to ask about your position. Indeed, you may well have had the following experience:

You have a strong paper overall and you've raised a point that you feel pretty sure no one else has thought of. But, when your paper is returned, your instructor, instead of remarking on the originality of your insight, writes only, "GREAT IDEA—BUT EXPLAIN IN MORE DETAIL."

It's not enough just to have a sentence or even a paragraph that makes an interesting point. You must also show the steps in your thinking that led you to that idea. You must explain not only WHAT you think, but also WHY you think that way and WHY it is a significant response. And the way to learn how to do that is to get yourself to ask follow-up questions—to follow your first "why question" with another "why question."

The Two “Why?” Questions

Here’s a simple strategy that will help you more fully explain the ramifications of the position you are exploring or constructing. Use this strategy on each of the body paragraphs of your paper.

- Step 1: Write down the position you take in the paragraph
- Step 2: Write a question about that position that begins with “why” and answer it.
- Step 3: Write another question that begins with “why” about the answer you gave for Step 2. Write down your answer.
- Step 4: Compare the statements you’ve written with what you’ve written in your paragraph in your first draft. Revise your paragraph to include the answers to these questions.
- Step 5: Check to see if your revisions require you to change the following paragraphs.

Example:

Position: Relying on the advice of scientific experts in determining public policy does not guarantee that the interests of the public are put first.

Step 2:

Question: WHY doesn’t relying on the advice of scientific experts *guarantee* that the interests of the public are put first?

Answer: A scientist’s career is shaped by his or her ability to gain funding for research. He or she is more likely to create studies that will advance the interests of the companies or institutions that fund the research. As Stephen Hall demonstrates...

Step 3:

Question: WHY are the interests of companies or institutions different from the interests of the public? How do we know they are different?

Answer: While Ben Barber would answer this question one way, I think the answer is.....

Step 4 and Step 5:

Does the rest of your paper explore the stated tension between the public and the corporate communities? Or does it just repeat the fact that there is a tension? Do

you consider ways to resolve this tension? Have you answered the SO WHAT question?

Summary

One of the secrets to writing successful essays is learning how to demonstrate that you find your own ideas interesting. When you can convince your readers that your ideas are worth thinking about, then you will be on your way to mastering the essay form. So, if you feel you have a great idea, you need to *explore* that idea in your paper. When you make a point, be sure to explain not only how and why you reached that conclusion, but also why that conclusion makes a difference.

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