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It's Just a Matter of Opinion

Isn't it frustrating? You're trying to explain something important and people don't understand you. Or you're trying to convince someone of something but they're not going along.

The same thing can happen when you write. But it's worse because you can't be there to clear up any of your reader's confusion. The only thing you can do is make sure that your argument makes sense.

When you've got an important opinion to express, the best way to express it is with the What-Why-How strategy:

- **WHAT do you think?** This is your opinion. Sometimes a single sentence will be all you need. You can also think of it as your main idea if you're writing an essay. Or, if you're working on a research paper, this would be your thesis.
- **WHY do you think it?** Opinions don't just pop up out of nowhere for no reason at all. If you've got an opinion, you've got a reason for it, and often more than one. Can't think of a reason? Maybe your opinion isn't really what you think. (But then, that's just *my* opinion!)
- **HOW do you know?** As the saying goes: "Everyone's entitled to their opinion." But are you really? Where's your proof? What examples or evidence can you come up with to make your point? For every reason you should have at least one example or other kind of proof.

The key to a successful argument is great support. You've got to be able to back up everything you say with good reasons and solid evidence. You can use the What-Why-How strategy to support almost any opinion you have. It's great for expository and persuasive writing. And it even works well when you have to answer essay questions.

A What-Why-How Chart

WHAT

What do you think?

(This is your opinion)

WHY

Why do you think it?

(These are your reasons)

HOW

How do you know?

(This is your evidence or examples)

Example

Prompt: Some kids get allowance, some don't. Some get a little, some get a lot. What do you think about allowance? Explain how you feel and try to persuade someone that you're right.

WHAT

WHY

HOW

<p>Allowance works out better when parents think carefully about how much their kids should get, what they get it for, and what they can spend it on.</p>	<p>Some kids have so much money that it really isn't good for them.</p>	<p>A kid in my class gets \$50 a week and he's always bragging about how much money he has.</p>
	<p>Some kids get money just for doing normal stuff or for not getting in trouble.</p>	<p>Our neighbors give their kids money just to stop being bad. But it doesn't make them any nicer.</p>
	<p>Sometimes parents take away their kid's allowance and the kid doesn't think it's fair.</p>	<p>Mom took away my allowance once because I didn't clean my room but I just forgot to do it.</p>
	<p>Allowance is a good way for kids to learn about money.</p>	<p>I save some of my allowance every week so I can buy something really special.</p>

Paragraphs with What-Why-How

Instant paragraphs. In addition to helping you organize your ideas, the What-Why-How strategy can also help with paragraphing. Each row of the chart can become a single paragraph.

WHAT

WHY

HOW

I think dogs make better pets than cats for several reasons.	You can train them to do all kinds of cool things. Cats are almost impossible to train.	My dog can sit and fetch a ball or a stick, and he can even catch a frisbee in the air when I throw it.
	(Another reason...)	(More examples...)

Here's what a paragraph might look like if it was based on the first row of this What-Why-How chart. You build your paragraph by moving from left to right across a single row. Start with the "What," then move to the "Why," and finally, use the "How." You don't have to copy the words exactly. In fact, it's usually better if you change things just a bit:

I think dogs make better pets than cats. First of all, you can train dogs to do things that cat's can't. I have trained my dog to sit when I tell him and he does it every time. He can also fetch a stick or a ball, and he can even catch a frisbee in his mouth if I throw it to him. I've never heard of a cat that could do anything like this. In fact, I've heard people say that cats are almost impossible to train.

Writing in Reading with W-W-H

Using What-Why-How to support predictions and inferences. The What-Why-How strategy comes in handy when we want to express an opinion about something we've read. In this example, I'll make an inference about characters in the opening paragraph of a story and I'll use the What-Why-How strategy to write it up.

Eddie had always been able to fly, but it wasn't until his fifth birthday party that he realized that it would turn out to be a bit of a social problem. Until that embarrassing day on the Johnson's lawn, Eddie's parents had treated his airborne peculiarity as something of a childish whim. "Boy's gotta stretch out, learn what he can do," said his father. "I just worry that he'll hurt himself, you know, bump into the ceiling or get his eye poked out by a bird, I don't know...," said his mother. For the young Eddie, flying was just another discovery about his developing body, like learning that he could reach out his arm and ring the bell on his cradle railing, or finding that he loved the taste of peas. The first time his parents came into the nursery and found Eddie hovering a foot or two off the floor it came as a bit of a shock. But, after all, parents are forever discovering special little things about their children. Eddie's mother thought that perhaps they should take their son to see a specialist, but his father vetoed the idea. "It's not like anything's wrong with him, and I don't want him getting a complex about it."

—from *Eddie Takes Off* by Ben Hippen

WHAT	WHY	HOW
(Inference)	(Reasons)	(Examples From the Text)
Eddie's parents seem a little strange. They don't react to their son's unusual ability the way I think normal parents would act.	They speak in clichés. They sound like people on a cartoon or in a sitcom. They don't seem very smart or responsible.	"Boy's gotta stretch out, learn what he can do," said his father. "I just worry that he'll hurt himself, you know, bump into the ceiling or get his eye poked out by a bird, I don't know...," said his mother. and ... his father vetoed the idea. "It's not like anything's wrong with him, and I don't want him getting a complex about it."

In this example, my inference goes in the "What" column. My reasons for the inference go in the "Why" column. In the "How" column, I put the actual words from the story on which my inference was based. This is the tangible evidence that supports my opinion. Predictions work in a similar way: the prediction goes in the "What" column, your reasons for the prediction go in the "Why" column, and the words from the story on which your prediction was based go in the "How" column.

Using W-W-H in Social Studies

Using What-Why-How to support a thesis statement or to answer an essay question. In social studies, we're often asked to answer questions and to provide supporting evidence, we also have to come up with thesis statements for essays and reports. The What-Why-How strategy is the perfect tool to use in situations like these.

Here's a typical essay test question or a potential report topic: "Was Abraham Lincoln really as honest as his nickname suggests?"

WHAT	WHY	HOW
(Answer or Thesis)	(Reasons)	(Evidence and Bibliographic Citations)
Lincoln was honest about many things in his life but he was not always honest about the difficult subjects of slavery and race relations in America, especially while he was running for president. Like many politicians, Lincoln was good at telling people what they wanted to hear.	While campaigning for the presidency, he told northern voters he favored racial equality. But while campaigning in the South he told voters there that he supported the idea of whites being superior to blacks.	<p>"Let us discard all quibbling about this man and the other man, this race and that race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position." —Campaign speech made in Chicago, IL, July 10, 1858</p> <p>"...while they do remain together [blacks and whites] there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race." —Campaign speech made in Charleston, SC, Sept. 18, 1858</p>

The answer or thesis goes in the "What" column. The reasons go in the "Why" column. And the "How" column is used for evidence which in this case consists of two excerpts from campaign speeches Lincoln made in the summer and early fall of 1858, speeches that contain conflicting statements about racial equality. Put it all together and you've got a successful argument that is easy to understand and strongly supported by tangible evidence.

What-Why-How Strategy Tips

The “How” column is the hardest. We all have opinions, and most of the time we have a good sense of where they come from, a sense of the reasons why we think the things we do. But coming up with specific evidence can be hard. The trick is knowing where to look. If you’re trying to support an opinion about your own life, look for specific things that you’ve experienced. If you say that asparagus is gross because it has a bad taste, back it up with a description of a time when you actually tasted it. If you’re making a comment about a character in a book, look for evidence directly in the text. For a social studies report, you’ll find what you need in original historical documents, articles, books, and other research sources. In science, look at data and observations from your experiments.

The “How” column is the most important. If you look at the What-Why-How examples, you’ll notice that the “How” column always has the most information in it. This is no accident. “How” column information, the tangible evidence upon which all your assertions are based, is by far the most important information you can have. Why? That’s simple. Even if you didn’t have the “What” or the “Why,” many people could figure that out by themselves just by studying the evidence in the “How.” Information in the “How” column is also the most convincing. After all, it is only by evidence that we can answer the question, “How do I know for sure?” People may not understand your opinion at all, especially if it is quite different from their own. Knowing your reasons might help a little, but few people are convinced by reasons alone. What most people really want is proof. And for readers, just as it is for judges and jurors, proof requires evidence.

The more unusual your position, the more evidence you need. Many students want to know how much support they need for a given argument. “How many reasons and examples do I have to have, Mr. Peha?” they often ask. In truth, there is no specific number that will always be enough. The amount of support you need varies depending on how likely your audience is to believe you. For example, if I say to you that the sky is blue, you don’t need to know my reasons and you certainly don’t need much evidence. But if I say that the moon is made of green cheese, well, that’s a horse of a completely different color. In order to convince you, I’d have to have data from scientific studies, detailed photographs, and tasty samples from the surface. Even then you’d probably still be suspicious. In terms of school writing, if I want to write a report that says that Abraham Lincoln was one of our greatest presidents, that’s pretty easy to do. But if I want to say that he was one of the worst, I’m going to need good reasons and many solid examples.

What-Why-How... How-How-How. It is fair for people to question the truth of your evidence. (It’s annoying, but it’s fair.) You’ll put something great in the “How” column and someone will say in a whiney voice, “OK, but how do you know *that*?” And you’ll have to come up with a piece of evidence for your evidence. This can go on for quite a while. In cases like this, you’ll need to build in some extra “How” columns to the right of your chart. You’ll probably need a second piece of paper, too (or take a look on the next page).

WHAT

WHY

HOW

HOW

HOW

HOW

What-Why-How... How-How-How

(Opinion, Answer, Thesis)

(Reasons)

(Evidence or Examples)

(More Evidence)

(Even More Evidence)

(One Final Bit of Evidence)

What-Why-How



Great support for your opinions!



What

Why

How

(Opinion)

My dog is the most amazing pet in the whole world.



(Reasons)

He does my algebra homework for me.

He's helping me pay my way to college.



(Evidence)

He's great in math but sometimes he needs help holding the pencil.

He just signed a deal with CNN for his own talk show: "A Dog's Eye View."



What do you think?

This is your opinion. Make it a complete sentence.



Why do you think it?

These are the reasons for your opinion. Have at least 4 of 5.



How do you know?

These are your pieces of evidence, your examples, your proof.

