

Five Motivating Moves: Adding the "So What?" Factor to Your Writing

Most academic papers contain a thesis of some kind. The nature and location of the thesis will differ, depending on discipline. For instance, in the humanities, a thesis statement usually appears on the first page. In the sciences, your thesis might be split among several sections: in one section, you might describe an experiment, while in another, you discuss the results of your experiment and its implications for further research.

Regardless of where you place your thesis and what form it takes, your writing will benefit from an articulation of the motive, or the "so what?" factor. Rather than telling readers what an argument *is*, a motive tells readers what the argument is *worth* -- why the argument is worth making in the first place. You should articulate your motive explicitly, rather than assuming that readers will grasp it by reading your thesis.

Below, we provide five different ways to ask and answer the "so what?" question. We also provide some questions that can help you articulate the motive in your own writing.

So What? Five Ways to Answer This Question



Discuss the bigger picture or overall takeaway. Frequently, writers focus their essays on small or specific objects, such as a poem, a historical document, a case study, a business initiative, and so forth. However, in order to keep their essays from feeling trivial or claustrophobic, experienced writers "pan out" -- typically in the final pages -- to explain how their smaller or more specific arguments connect to larger social issues of general concern. For example, a paper focused on Disney's film *Pocahontas* could touch on the broader issue of

how children are affected by stereotypes in the media. This motivating move works best when you have some concrete evidence to illustrate the bigger picture. That is, don't just state in a general way that stereotypes are bad. Instead, try quoting a recent article from the *New York Times* that discusses a new study in developmental psychology. Here are some phrases that can help you articulate your motive, if you're discussing the bigger picture:

- Ultimately, analysis of X reveals social issue Y. The implications of Y are broad...
- While X tells the story of Y, it also tells a bigger story -- the story of Z.



Challenge conventional wisdom. Oftentimes, writers motivate their work by showing how their arguments challenge common wisdom or disrupt the status quo. For instance, a writer might develop a paper arguing that we can best address the obesity epidemic by creating initiatives to improve mental health. This challenges the conventional wisdom, which holds that we need to educate people about diet and exercise. You can tell that writers are using this move if

they start asking rhetorical questions ("But is this really the case?" "Why do we believe this?"). Here are some phrases that can help you articulate your motive, if you're challenging conventional wisdom:

- Common sense tells us X, but my argument suggests Y.
- It seems obvious that X, but the data tells a more complicated story, suggesting Y.

(over)



Challenge specialized wisdom by “picking a fight” with the experts. This move is a variation on challenging conventional wisdom. Here, rather than challenging a broadly accepted truth, writers challenge more specialized knowledge at work in a particular academic or professional field. For instance, your paper may develop a bold new interpretation of what motivates customers to buy a product. In so doing, you might push back against prevailing assumptions about when and why customers make a purchase. Bear in mind that this move can work even if you broadly agree with what other scholars or professionals have said. For instance, you might agree with a landmark Supreme Court decision but argue that the decision’s supporting logic needs to be stronger. Here are some phrases that can help you articulate your motive, if you’re picking a fight:

- While X argues Y, such an argument fails to account for Z.
- X argues Y, correctly. Yet X’s argument still leaves room for debate...
- The dominant assumption within the field of X has been Y. But what if...



Make a practical suggestion/address an ongoing question or problem. Sometimes, essays focus on experiments, discoveries, or attempts to solve a problem. In papers such as these, you can articulate the significance of your argument by explaining how your analysis provides new insight into ongoing dilemmas. This type of move is especially common in the sciences and engineering: we built a better X. Even in highly technical fields, however, it is useful to think about how your work touches on issues of general concern. In what small way does your research make the world a better or an easier place? Here are some phrases that can help you articulate your motive, if you’re making a practical suggestion:

- The problem of X is well-known. One approach to solving it could be Y.
- The problem of X has, heretofore, been addressed by Y. Yet a better solution might be Z.



Make surprising or illuminating connections. Sometimes, writers focus their essays on the connections among seemingly distinct phenomena. For example, an essay might argue that there is a relationship between where a person lives and how much that person weighs. However, an essay will never be sufficiently motivated if you simply point to an unexpected or wacky connection between two things. You *also* need to explain how that connection helps to solve a problem. For example, perhaps weight-loss initiatives work better when they involve entire communities, rather than individual households. In other words, essays that make surprising connections also usually solve a problem: “By drawing this connection, I’m suggesting that we should approach X or Y differently.” Here are some phrases that can help you articulate your motive, if you’re making a practical suggestion:

- X has immediate implications for Z, but it also has an indirect impact on Y.
- In this paper, I have argued X. While X has obvious relevance for Y, X can also teach us about Z.

Finding the So-What Factor in Your Paper

1. What is the ongoing problem that my paper seeks to change or improve?
 - The answer can be very localized: I want to change how customers interact with websites when shopping for shoes. Alternatively, it can be quite broad: I want to change how politicians talk about immigrants. Likewise, the answer can be technical – I want to change how a syringe works – or abstract: I want to enrich our understanding of how filmmakers represent memory. Overall, most answers to this

question will take one of two forms: I want to change what people (in my field or outside of it) are *doing*, or I want to change how people (in my field or outside of it) are *thinking*.

2. What evidence exists to show that the problem *is* a problem?

- Hard facts are your friend here. If you want to change how politicians talk about immigrants, quote them. If you want to enrich our understanding of how filmmakers represent memory, then summarize what that current understanding is. If there is no evidence to show that the problem is a problem, then you are probably working on an understudied topic. If that is the case, spend a few minutes explaining why the field remains unexplored.

3. Have efforts been made to solve this problem?

- Once again, you need facts to support your answer, rather than generalizations or assumptions.
- If not, why not?
- If so, what are some of the efforts most relevant to your paper?

4. In what way does my paper address the problem and/or contribute to the solutions that I have just outlined?

If you are discussing the bigger picture or making surprising connections, you should spend most of your time answering questions #1 – 2. In papers such as these, you're primarily arguing that the smaller topic of your paper relates to something bigger. Therefore, your primary task is to **make the connection via evidence**, showing how the topic of your paper reflects an issue of general concern. For example:

- By examining these trends in children's picture books, we see a shift in how authors envision "the" American public. In particular, the focus on multiracial families pushes back against an overly simplified account of the nation's racial demographics....
- The high rate of depression among teenagers tells a simple story, or so it seems: one generation, addicted to smartphones, trapped in a spiral of self-doubt and anxiety. Yet the rising rates of depression can also be linked to the unprecedented challenges facing today's teenagers in an increasingly competitive and globalized economy. In particular, the stagnating wages of the middle class tell an important part of this story....

If you are challenging conventional wisdom, challenging specialized wisdom, or making a practical suggestion, you should spend most of your time answering questions #3 – #4. In papers such as these, the problem is already well-known or easily explained. Therefore, your primary task is to **critique the current approach and suggest a new one**. For example:

- If manufacturers replaced the latch with one made of plastic, it could be more easily replaced during the product's lifetime. Admittedly, doing so would require retrofitting the existing equipment, but my calculations suggest that this innovation will pay for itself after ten months...
- Traditionally, managers have believed that they can motivate employees by providing material benefits, such as year-end bonuses. Yet the results of my research suggest that the opportunity to work on a personally meaningful project will create greater motivation and goodwill....