

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 For a social studies report, you’ll find what you need in original historical documents, articles, books, and other research sources.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).

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)

<p>(This is your opinion)</p>	<p>(These are your reasons)</p>	<p>(This is your evidence or examples)</p>