

Three Questions for Essay Writing

The Three Question approach is a way you can write essays to make a clear, thorough essay that will get good marks. The Three Questions are “So?”, “So what?”, and “Now, what?” and you can apply them either for a long essay, let’s say a 2000-word essay you have to write on something, you can apply to each body pair after you introduce a new point. For short ads or questions, which may be a paragraph or two paragraphs long, you can apply it to the entire answer itself.

So, the first question is, “So?” The second question is, “So, what?” And the third question is, “Now, what?” and if you can sufficiently answer each of these three questions, you generally have a fairly decent essay or a decent starting point for an essay that you’re working on.

So, “So?” is where you make the point you’re trying to create. So, often students will maybe not quite hit exactly what point they’re trying to write about. They’ll talk about a few ideas or they’ll introduce their point mid-way through the sentence. This is a bad idea. When professors or graders are reading through essays, they’ve read through dozens already and so, they want to quickly pick out exactly what you’re saying. So, make the first sentence of your paragraphs, or the first paragraph of your essay, you want to make that your “So?” So, you want to be stating very clearly what point you’re trying to make.

The next part is, “So, what?” And in “So, what?” you bring evidence to support your main idea. So, you want to bring up the evidence, the pieces of evidence that support your main idea, and you bring it into play so that you can support the original idea.

Now, most people do these first two parts. This is classic essay writing. This third part of, “Now, what?” is where you go beyond that. You extend the idea to a new example, an original idea that breaks away from the structure of what you’ve been talking about. So, the process of me reading your essay should look like, “I get your point. I see why you’re arguing that that point is correct, and then, finally, you force me to consider something in the context of that point that I hadn’t considered before.

So, this is how you can go from writing an average, mediocre essay to writing a really good essay. So, let’s walk through one example. This is an example I wrote for an Intro Ethics course. Now, my philosophical background is pretty weak, so it’s not the greatest article, but I feel it’s a good example of applying this three question approach. So, the essay was arguing which theory of Social Justice, so Rawl’s or Nosek’s Theory of Social Justice was more correct, and my argument was that Rawl’s theory was more useful, because Nosek’s theory sort of wipes under the table the question of inherited injustices that happened long in the past.

My evidence for that was that if you imagine a Prince or a King who was horrible to his subjects and robbed them and stole all their money, and then bequeathed this amount of money to his grandson

who was perfectly noble and did nothing wrong, does this grandson not owe a little bit of entitlement to the robbed funds that his grandfather acquired?

So, this is a pretty basic point. Philosophy majors might scoff at my elemental reasoning, but it was an Intro course. So, this was the “So?” and then the “So, what?” The “So?” was making my point that the first theory, Rawl’s theory was more applicable to our current situation, and then my evidence was this example, and then, finally I parted it into the “Now, what?” where I was talking about the plight of the Native Americans, who over a period of social injustice in the past have been deprived of education and resource opportunities over a longer period of time which resulted in their current situation, which is usually of a lower economic status. And as a result, it’s not completely fair to take the Libertarian approach to assume that they deserve what they have because of the past injustices that were created by people who benefited from their gain.

So, in this simple example, I’ve gone from “So?” to “So, what?” to “Now, what?” and in the exam, I actually managed to get a high 90% for this particular essay. So, using this three-fold approach is not going to create award-winning prose, it’s not going to create the best examples, but by answering these three questions, you’re ensuring that you’re being thorough. Because, if you just say “So?” and then a “Now, what?”, so you say your point and then you extend it, but you don’t have evidence, then the person is going to obviously feel something’s missing there, because you haven’t really argued your point.

If the third point is missing, then you haven’t really written a great essay. You’ve argued your point, but I don’t really see its implications outside the context of the essay that you’re writing. And, if you don’t have the first point, if you don’t make your point clear and you make a bunch of evidence and extensions, then I don’t really know what kind of point that these things are supporting.

So, these three points, whether or not they’re in that particular order, or whether or not they are in that format, really need to be there in order for your essay to be full and rich. So, try this approach if you’re taking long-answer questions and tests or writing essays. Ask yourself, “So?” “So, what?” and “Now, what?” for every single point you’re trying to make.