

Tips for the Classroom

Just the Facts: A Modification of the 6 W's

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The following article describes a critical-thinking activity that can be used in undergraduate college reading classes. The focus of the assignment is for students to ask a formalized and logical set of questions about a text by relying on the 6 W's (Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How). An activity guide is included.

The activity described in this article is aimed at facilitating text engagement and critical thinking for students. It is particularly useful in scaffolding students' navigation of fact-laden expository texts.

The focus of this "Just the Facts" assignment is for students to ask a formalized and logical set of questions—Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How—about a story they are either reading or writing. These questions foster cognitive and metacognitive development because they allow students to build schema, develop working memory, and build connections between various bits of related information. The more ways students can connect new knowledge with previous knowledge or schemata increases the likelihood that they will retain and use the information. The students can also transfer these critical thinking and cognitive strategies to other content areas (Spire, 2003).

To begin this activity, the students are asked to respond to the six questions

while reading a selected text. The teacher can scaffold the reading activity through acting as a witness or guide the development of student responses in relation to the questions provided. The teacher can also guide the quality and quantity of responses to these questions to fit his or her pedagogical needs. In groups and individually, students can develop their own logical processes over the course of reading and commenting on this type of information. After the scaffolding is removed, students will be able to apply these questions independently (Spire, 2003).

The questions ask the students to consider the 6 W's (Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How) when reading various texts. The question "why?" should be the most important of the group. They should be able to answer questions such as: What is the author's motive? What is the author trying to get me to consider?

This assignment fits well with factually dense material—historical chronologies, for example—because

these text types and genres require the reader to keep large amounts of data and facts straight. It also helps the readers to consider how various characters or agents interact in the text and the reason that these aspects of the text are needed. This consideration of material also ties into developing students' working memory: "Working memory allows us to integrate current perceptual information with stored knowledge, and to consciously manipulate the information (think about it, talk about it, and rehearse it) well enough to ensure its storage in long-term memory" (Wolfe, 2001, p. 92).

To prepare the "Just the Facts" assignment, locate a short story or textbook excerpt to focus on with the class, and make copies of that text and of the handout for the students. For the initial presentation of the "Just the Facts" assignment, it would be beneficial to make an overhead to show/share with the students.

To implement the questions, introduce the 6 W's with the students;

ideally this would be about 10 minutes. I would also have the students silently read the short text in class; this part of the activity should only take 15-20 minutes. After reading the text, the students would individually respond to these questions; this should take only 10 minutes. Then, the class would reconvene and share answers.

I usually scaffold or demonstrate my own answers from having read the text. The sharing of answers is a check for the teacher and shows the students what the expectations are for their written responses. To continue the assignment, the students would read another story/text for homework and write the answers to these questions in their notebooks. We would discuss the text and the students' answers during the next class period.

After the first few uses of the activity, students should be able to use these strategies without the teacher repeatedly asking them to answer the questions.

This activity has helped my undergraduate college students to question the motives writers have for writing or including certain information. They are able to apply these concepts to the readings and to their own written work.

I have included a lesson plan version of the activity for ready classroom use (see Appendix A). Modifications can be made to make this assignment fit better into a teacher's own pedagogical practices.

References

- Spire, H. A. (2003). Promoting text engagement through reader-generated elaborations. In E. Paulson, M. E. Laine, S. A. Biggs, & T.L. Bullock (Eds.), *College reading research and practice: Articles from the journal of college literacy and learning* (pp. 248-258). Newark: International Reading Association.
- Wolfe, P. (2001). *Brain matters: Translating research into classroom practice*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

APPENDIX A: Just the Facts Activity Guide

Original Idea:	The origin of this activity comes from journalism's 5 W's of who, what, where, when, and why.
Goals:	Students are able to think logically and critically about texts they are reading. They are then able to think metacognitively and apply these skills to what they are writing/producing.
Audience:	College readers (though this activity can be adapted for students at other educational levels as well).
Materials Needed:	Each student will need a copy of the text (either story or student-generated rough draft), notebook paper, and a pen/pencil. If this is a first run through the assignment, an overhead or PowerPoint slide of the six questions would also be helpful.
Preparation (Time and Actions):	30-45 minutes. This activity would come during the reading of the text. It could be homework. It should be an initial activity to the unit or class because it will be used by students to deconstruct the information they are reading throughout.
Implementation (Time):	50-60 minutes (approximately).
Brief Activity Overview:	This activity is an initial foray into developing students' questioning skills. As the students begin to question the material they are reading, they can then transfer these skills to consider what they are writing. The students' skills should and will become more developed over time. It is fruitful to do a round of questioning with the students in order for them to learn what is expected of this activity. The best way to do this would be to read a shared piece of text and then break it down with the teacher. The students should have a copy of the questions and the teacher should have a these questions displayed on the overhead or projected on a screen.
Initial Activity Directions:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Find text example. 2. Make copies of text, questions, and overheads. 3. Begin discussion of what the 6 W's are and how they apply. 4. Silently read the example text. 5. Individually answer the questions in reference to the text. 6. Discuss/share responses to the questions (entire class, including the teacher). 7. Students are given follow-up homework for which they are expected to read another text and answer the questions on their own. 8. The class will go over this assignment during the next meeting.
Adaptations:	I have given this activity a journalistic spin in the past and showed my students articles from a newspaper. The students could also create journal entries for each portion of a text they are reading. It is up to the instructor how he or she wants to frame the activity.