



Asking Questions

How It Works

Once students have a rough draft, they should be encouraged to read it slowly and ask themselves, in multiple places, "Why did I say that?" and "So what?" These two questions alone can help students to expand their ideas.

"Why?"

When a student has a single idea, like "Recycling is not the panacea many municipalities present it to be," the beginning of an argument exists, but it isn't fully developed. Asking "why did I say that?" can prompt him to expand the idea: "Recycling is not the panacea many municipalities present it to be because of its high associated costs and the inefficiencies in current recycling practices."

Generating details by asking "why" questions can create more direction for the essay while strengthening the thesis. Why questions can be asked endlessly: now that the argument is more developed, why does the student say that recycling practices are inefficient? Each reason may comprise its own paragraph later in the essay.

Repeated "why" questions won't expand the thesis, which can only contain a limited amount of information, but can help to flesh out an outline.

"So what?"

The second question, "so what?" can help students identify and articulate the significance of their arguments. The facts of an argument aren't enough; an effective essay also shows why those details matter.

In the recycling essay, a student might respond to "so what?" by saying, "Until recycling science improves, cities should emphasize composting projects, which are more cost effective" or "The funding currently going into encouraging recycling would better be spent on expanding the uses for recycled materials." Potentially a student could work with more than one of these significances, leading to an essay that makes an argument, details that argument, and demonstrates that argument's implications.