SEVEN

"SO WHAT? WHO CARES?"

Saying Why It Matters

BASEBALL IS THE national pastime. Bernini was the best sculptor of the baroque period. Evolution is central to the teaching of biology. So what? Who cares? Why does any of this matter?

How many times have you had reason to ask—or answer—these questions? Regardless of how interesting a topic may be to you as a writer, readers always need to know what is at stake in a text and why they should care. All too often, however, these questions are left unanswered—mainly because writers and speakers assume that audiences will know or will figure out the answers on their own. As a result, students come away from lectures feeling like outsiders to what they've just heard, and their own instructors come away from academic conferences feeling alienated by many of the presentations. The problem is not necessarily that these talks lack a clear, well-focused thesis, or that the thesis is inadequately supported with evidence. Instead, the problem is that the speakers don't address the crucial question of why their arguments matter.

That this crucial question is so often left unaddressed is unfortunate since the speakers generally *could* offer interesting, engaging answers. When pressed, for instance, most academics will tell you that their lectures and articles matter because they address some belief that needs to be corrected or updated—and because their arguments have important, real-world consequences. Yet many academics fail to explicitly identify these reasons and consequences in what they say and write. Rather than assume that audiences will know why their claims matter, all writers need to answer the "so what?" and "who cares?" questions up front. Not everyone can claim to have a cure for cancer or a solution to end poverty. But writers who cannot show that others *should* care and *do* care about their claims will ultimately lose their audiences' interest.

This chapter focuses on various moves that you can make to answer the "who cares?" and "so what?" questions in your own writing. In one sense, the two questions get at the same thing: the relevance or importance of what you are saying. Yet they get at this significance in different ways. Whereas "who cares?" literally asks you to identify a person or group who cares about your claims, "so what?" asks about the real-world applications and consequences of those claims—what difference it would make if they were accepted. We'll look first at ways of making clear who cares.

"WHO CARES?"

To see how one writer answers the "who cares?" question, consider the following passage from the science writer Denise Grady. Writing in the *New York Times*, she explains some of the latest research into fat cells.

> Scientists used to think body fat and the cells it was made of were pretty much inert, just an oily storage compartment. But within the past decade research has shown that fat cells act like chemi-

> cal factories and that body fat is potent stuff: a highly active tissue that secretes hormones and other substances with profound and sometimes harmful effects. . . .
>
> In recent years, biologists have begun calling fat an "endocrine organ," comparing it to glands like the thyroid and pituitary, which also release hormones straight into the bloodstream.
>
> DENISE GRADY, "The Secret Life of a Potent Cell"

Notice how Grady's writing reflects the central advice we give in this book, offering a clear claim and also framing that claim as a response to what someone else has said. In so doing, Grady immediately identifies at least one group with a stake in the new research that sees fat as "active," "potent stuff": namely, the scientific community, which formerly believed that body fat is inert. By referring to these scientists, Grady implicitly acknowledges that her text is part of a larger conversation and shows who besides herself has an interest in what she says.

Consider, however, how the passage would read had Grady left out what "scientists used to think" and simply explained the new findings in isolation.

> Within the past few decades research has shown that fat cells act like chemical factories and that body fat is potent stuff: a highly active tissue that secretes hormones and other substances. In recent years, biologists have begun calling fat an "endocrine organ," comparing it to glands like the thyroid and pituitary, which also release hormones straight into the bloodstream.

Though this statement is clear and easy to follow, it lacks any indication that anyone needs to hear it. Okay, one nods while reading this passage, fat is an active, potent thing. Sounds plausible enough; no reason to think it's not true. But does anyone really care? Who, if anyone, is interested?

TEMPLATES FOR INDICATING WHO CARES

To address "who cares?" questions in your own writing, we suggest using templates like the following, the first of which mimics Grady's style in the *New York Times*.

- ____ used to think ____. But recently [or within the past few decades] ____ suggests that ____.
- This interpretation challenges the work of those critics who have long assumed that ____.
- These findings challenge the work of earlier researchers, who tended to assume that ____.
- Recent studies like these shed new light on ____, which previous studies had not addressed.

Grady might have been more explicit by writing the "who cares?" question directly into her text, as in the following template.

- But who really cares? Who besides me and a handful of recent researchers has a stake in these claims? At the very least, the researchers who assumed that fat ____ should care.

To gain greater authority as a writer, it helps to name specific people or groups who have a stake in your claims and to go into some detail about their views.

- Researchers have long assumed that ____. For instance, one eminent scholar of cell biology, ____, assumed in ____, her seminal work on cell structures and functions, that fat cells ____. As ____ herself put it, "____" (200–).

> Another leading scientist, ________, argued that fat cells "________" (200–). Ultimately, when it came to the nature of fat, the basic assumption was that ________.
>
> But a new body of research shows that fat cells are far more complex and that ________.

In other cases, you might refer to certain people or groups who *should* care about your claims.

- If sports enthusiasts stopped to think about it, many of them might simply assume that the most successful athletes ________. However, new research shows ________.
- These findings challenge dieters' common assumption that ________.
- At first glance, teenagers might say ________. But on closer inspection ________.

Such templates help you to generate interest in your subject by identifying populations of readers who are likely to have a stake in it.

"SO WHAT?"

Although answering the "who cares?" question is crucial, in many cases it is not enough, especially if you are writing for general readers who don't necessarily have a strong investment in your subject (as Grady is in the *New York Times*). In the case of Grady's argument about fat cells, such readers may still wonder why it matters that some researchers think fat cells are active and others think they're inert. Or, to move to a different field of study, *so what* if some scholars disagree about Huck Finn's relationship with the runaway slave Jim? Why should anyone besides a few specialists in the field care about such disputes? What, if anything, hinges on them?

The best way to answer such questions about the larger consequences of your claims is to appeal to something that your audience already figures to care about. Whereas the "who cares?" question asks you to identify an interested person or group, the "so what?" question asks you to link your argument to some larger matter that readers already deem important. Thus in analyzing *Huckleberry Finn*, a writer could argue that seemingly narrow disputes about the hero's relationship with Jim actually shed light on what Twain's canonical, widely read novel says about racism in America.

Let's see how Grady invokes such broad, general concerns in her article on fat cells. Her first move is to link researchers' interest in fat cells to a general concern with obesity and health.

> Researchers trying to decipher the biology of fat cells hope to find new ways to help people get rid of excess fat or, at least, prevent obesity from destroying their health. In an increasingly obese world, their efforts have taken on added importance.

Further showing why readers should care, Grady's next move is to demonstrate the even broader relevance and urgency of her subject matter.

> Internationally, more than a billion people are overweight. Obesity and two illnesses linked to it, heart disease and high blood pressure, are on the World Health Organization's list of the top 10 global health risks. In the United States, 65 percent of adults weigh too much, compared with about 56 percent a decade ago, and government researchers blame obesity for at least 300,000 deaths a year.

What Grady implicitly says here is: "Look, dear reader, you may think that these questions about the nature of fat cells I've been pursuing have little to do with everyday life. In fact, however, these questions are extremely important—particularly in our 'increasingly obese world' in which we need to prevent obesity from destroying our health."

Notice that Grady's phrase "in an increasingly ______ world" can be adapted as a strategic move to address the "so what?" question in other fields as well. For example, a sociologist analyzing back-to-nature movements of the past thirty years might make the following statement.

> In a world increasingly dominated by cellphones and sophisticated computer technology, these attempts to return to nature and simplify one's life are extremely significant forms of protest.

This type of move can be readily applied to other disciplines because no matter how much these disciplines may differ, the need to justify the importance of one's concerns is common to them all.

TEMPLATES FOR ESTABLISHING WHY YOUR CLAIMS MATTER

- X matters/is important because ______.
- Although X may seem trivial, it is in fact crucial in terms of today's concern over ______.
- Ultimately, what is at stake here is ______.

- These findings have important consequences for the broader domain of ______.
- My discussion of X is in fact addressing the larger matter of ______.
- These conclusions/This discovery will have significant applications in ______ as well as in ______.

Finally, you can also treat the "so what?" question as a related aspect of the "who cares?" question.

- Although X may seem of concern to only a small group of ______, it should in fact concern anyone who cares about ______.

All these templates help you to hook your readers. By suggesting the real-world applications of your claims, the templates not only demonstrate that others care about your claims but also tell your readers why *they* should care. Again, it bears repeating that simply stating and proving your thesis isn't enough. You also need to frame it in a way that helps readers care about it.

WHAT ABOUT READERS WHO ALREADY KNOW WHY IT MATTERS?

At this point, you might wonder if you need to answer the "who cares?" and "so what?" questions in *everything* you write. Is it really necessary to address these questions if you're proposing something so obviously consequential as, say, a cure for a childhood disease or a program to eliminate illiteracy? Isn't it obvious that everyone cares about such problems? Does it really need to be spelled out? And what about when you're writing for audiences who you already know are interested in your claims and who understand perfectly well why they're important? In other words, do you always need to address the “so what?” and “who cares?” questions?

As a rule, yes—although it's true that you can't keep answering them forever and at a certain point must say enough is enough. Although a determined skeptic can infinitely ask why something matters—“Who cares about dieting?” And then, “Who cares about health?”—you have to stop answering at some point in your text. Nevertheless, we urge you to go as far as possible in answering such questions. If you ignore them or give them short shrift, you run the risk that readers will dismiss your text as irrelevant and unimportant. And though some expert readers might already know why your claims matter, even they need to be reminded. Thus the safest move is to be as explicit as possible in answering the “so what?” question, even for those already in the know.

If you take it for granted that readers will somehow intuit the answers to “so what?” and “who cares?” on their own, you may make your work seem less interesting and exciting than it actually is. Therefore we suggest that whether you are offering a cure for cancer or trying to change the way we read Walt Whitman's poetry, be sure to present what you're saying *as* a cure for cancer or a challenge to how Whitman's poetry is read. When you are careful to explain who cares and why, it's a little like bringing a cheerleading squad into your text. When you step back from the text—a move that we discuss in Chapter 10—and explain why it matters, you are urging your audience to keep reading, pay attention, and care.

Exercises

1. Read several articles and essays to see whether they address the “so what?” and “who cares?” questions. Probably you'll find that some do, some don't. The question to consider then is whether it makes a difference to you as a reader. Are those texts that say why it matters more interesting? More persuasive?

2. Look over something you've written yourself. Do you indicate “so what?” and “who cares?”? If not, revise your text to do so. You might use the following template to get started.

▸ My point here—that ________—should interest those who ________. Beyond this limited audience, however, my point should speak to anyone who cares about the larger issue of ________.