Five Ws

The **Five Ws** (sometimes referred to as **Five Ws and How**, **5W1H**, or **Six Ws**)[1] are questions whose answers are considered basic in information gathering or problem solving. They are often mentioned in journalism (*cf.* news style), research and police investigations.[2] According to the principle of the Five Ws, a report can only be considered complete if it answers these questions starting with an interrogative word:[1]

- Who
- What
- When
- Where
- Why

Some authors add a sixth question, *how*, to the list:[1]

- How

Each question should have a factual answer—facts necessary to include for a report to be considered complete.[3] Importantly, none of these questions can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no".

In the United Kingdom (excluding Scotland), the Five Ws are used in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 lessons (ages 7–14).[4]

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Origin

The Five Ws and How were long attributed to Hermagoras of Temnos.[5] But in 2010, Michael C. Sloan[6] established Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics as the source of the elements of circumstance or *Septem Circumstantiae*. Thomas Aquinas had much earlier acknowledged Aristotle as the originator of the elements of circumstances, providing a detailed commentary on Aristotle's system in his "Treatise on human acts" and specifically in part one of two Q7 "Of the Circumstances of Human Acts". Thomas Aquinas examines the concept of Aristotle's voluntary and involuntary action in his *Summa Theologiae* as well as a further set of questions about the elements of circumstance.[7] Primarily he asks "Whether a circumstance is an accident of a human act" (Article 1), "Whether Theologians should take note of the circumstances of human acts?" (Article 2), "Whether the circumstances are properly set forth (in Aristotle's) third book of Ethics" (Article 3) and "Whether the most important circumstances are 'Why' and 'In What the act consists'?" (Article 4).

> For in acts we must take note of *who* did it, by what aids or instruments he did it (*with*), *what* he did, *where* he did it, *why* he did it, *how* and *when* he did it.[7]

For Aristotle, the elements are used in order to distinguish voluntary or involuntary action.

> Because Aristotle employs this schema as a primordial crucible for defining the difference between voluntary and involuntary agents (a topic of incalculable importance in the works of Aristotle), the benefits of locating this schema within Aristotle, and ultimately providing clarification of the passage, *may prove helpful to a number of disciplines* (Sloan 2010, 236).

These elements of circumstances are used by Aristotle as a framework to describe and evaluate moral action in terms of What was/should be done, Who did it, How it was done, Where it happened, and most importantly for what reason (Why), and so on for all the other elements. He outlines them as follows in the Ethics as translated by Sloan.

> Therefore it is not a pointless endeavor to divide these circumstances by kind and number; (1) the *Who*, (2) the *What*, (3) around what place (*Where*) or (4) in which time something happens (*When*), and sometimes (5) with what, such as an instrument (*With*), (6) for the sake of what (*Why*), such as saving a life, and (7) the (*How*), such as gently or violently…And it seems that the most important circumstances are those just listed, including the *Why*.[6]

For Aristotle (in Sloan), ignorance of any of these elements can imply involuntary action.

> Thus, with ignorance as a possibility concerning all these things, that is, *the circumstances of the act*, the one who acts in ignorance of any of them seems to act involuntarily, and especially regarding the most important ones. And it seems that the most important circumstances are those just listed, including the *Why*[6]

In the Politics, Aristotle illustrates why the elements are important in terms of human (moral) action.

> I mean, for instance (a particular circumstance or movement or action), How could we advise the Athenians whether they should go to war or not, if we did not know their strength (*How much*), whether it was naval or military or both (*What kind*), and how great it is (*How many*), what their revenues amount to (*With*), Who their friends and enemies are (*Who*), what wars, too they have waged (*What*), and with what success; and so on.[8]

Essentially, these elements of circumstances provide a theoretical framework that can be used to particularize, explain or predict *any* given set of circumstances of action. Hermagoras went so far as to claim that *all* hypotheses are derived from these seven circumstances.

> In other words, no hypothetical question, or question involving particular persons and actions, can arise without reference to these circumstances, and no demonstration of such a question can be made without using them.[5]

In any particular act or situation, one needs to interrogate these questions in order to determine the actual circumstances of the action.

> It is necessary for students of virtue to differentiate between the Voluntary and Involuntary; such a distinction should even prove useful to the lawmaker for assigning honors and punishments.[6]

This aspect is encapsulated by Aristotle in Rhetoric as *forensic speech* and is used to determine *"The characters and circumstances which lead men to commit wrong, or make them the victims of wrong"*[9] in order to accuse or defend. It is this application of the elements of circumstances that was emphasised by latter rhetoricians.

Rhetoric

Even though the classical origin of these questions as situated in ethics had long been lost, they have been a standard way of formulating or analyzing rhetorical questions since antiquity.[10] The rhetor Hermagoras of Temnos, as quoted in pseudo-Augustine's *De Rhetorica*,[11] applied Aristotle's "elements of circumstances" (μόρια περιστάσεως)[12] as the loci of an issue:

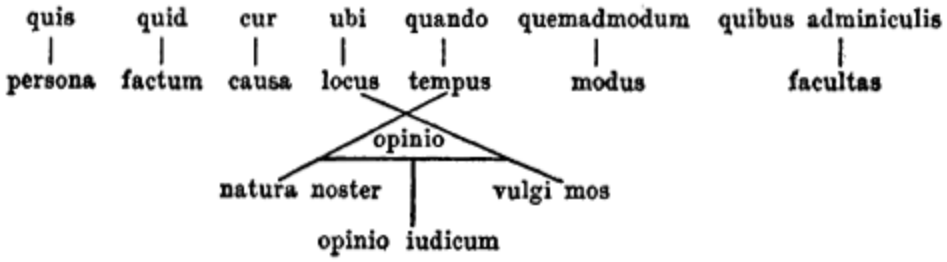
> *Quis, quid, quando, ubi, cur, quem ad modum, quibus adminiculis.*[13][14]
> (Who, what, when, where, why, in what way, by what means)

St. Thomas Aquinas[7] also refers to the elements as used by Cicero in De Inventione (Chap. 24 DD1, 104) as:

> *Quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, quando.*[7]

Similarly, Quintilian discussed *loci argumentorum*, but did not put them in the form of questions.[13]

Victorinus explained Cicero's application of the elements of circumstances by putting them into correspondence with Hermagoras's questions:[13]



Julius Victor also lists circumstances as questions.[13]

Boethius "made the seven circumstances fundamental to the arts of prosecution and defense":

> *Quis, quid, cur, quomodo, ubi, quando, quibus auxiliis.*[13]
> (Who, what, why, how, where, when, with what)

The question form was taken up again in the 12th century by Thierry de Chartres and John of Salisbury.[13]

To administer suitable penance to sinners, the 21st canon of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) enjoined confessors to investigate both sins and the circumstances of the sins. The question form was popular for guiding confessors, and it appeared in several different forms:[15]

> *Quis, quid, ubi, per quos, quoties, cur, quomodo, quando.*[16]
> *Quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, quando.*[17]
> *Quis, quid, ubi, cum quo, quotiens, cur, quomodo, quando.*[18]
> *Quid, quis, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, quando.*[19]
> *Quid, ubi, quare, quantum, conditio, quomodo, quando: adiuncto quoties.*[20]

The method of questions was also used for the systematic exegesis of a text.[21]

In the 16th century, Thomas Wilson wrote in English verse:

> Who, what, and where, by what helpe, and by whose:
> Why, how, and when, doe many things disclose.[22]

In the United States in the 19th century, Prof. William Cleaver Wilkinson popularized the "Three Ws" – What? Why? What of it? – as a method of Bible study in the 1880s, although he did not claim originality. This would also became the "Five Ws", but the application was rather different from that in journalism:

> "What? Why? What of it?" is a plan of study of alliterative methods for the teacher emphasized by Professor W.C. Wilkinson not as original with himself but as of venerable authority. "It is, in fact," he says, "an almost immemorial orator's analysis. First the facts, next the proof of the facts, then the consequences of the facts. This analysis has often been expanded into one known as "The Five Ws": "When? Where? Who? What? Why?" Hereby attention is called, in the study of any lesson: to the date of its incidents; to their place or locality; to the person speaking or spoken to, or to the persons introduced, in the narrative; to the incidents or statements of the text; and, finally, to the applications and uses of the lesson teachings.[23]

The "Five Ws" (and one H) were memorialized by Rudyard Kipling in his "Just So Stories" (1902), in which a poem, accompanying the tale of "The Elephant's Child",[24] opens with:

> I keep six honest serving-men
> (They taught me all I knew);
> Their names are What and Why and When
> And How and Where and Who.

By 1917, the "Five Ws" were being taught in high-school journalism classes,[25] and by 1940, the tendency of journalists to address all of the "Five Ws" within the lead paragraph of an article was being characterized as old-fashioned and fallacious:

> The old-fashioned lead of the five Ws and the H, crystallized largely by Pulitzer's "new journalism" and sanctified by the schools, is widely giving way to the much more supple and interesting feature lead, even on straight news stories.[26]

> All of you know about – and I hope all of you admit the fallacy of – the doctrine of the five Ws in the first sentence of the newspaper story.[27]

Starting in the 2000s, the Five Ws were sometimes misattributed to Kipling, especially in the management and quality literature,[28][29] and contrasted with the 5 Whys.[30]

Etymology

In each of English and Latin, most of the interrogative words begin with the same sound, *wh* in English, "qu" in Latin. This is not a coincidence, as they both come from the Proto-Indo-European root *k^wo-*, reflected in Proto-Germanic as *χ^wa-* or *kh^wa-* and in Latin as *qu-*.

See also

- 5 Whys (problem solving)

- Lasswell's model of communication
- Means, motive, and opportunity

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11. Although attributed to Augustine of Hippo, modern scholarship considers the authorship doubtful, and calls him pseudo-Augustine: Edwin Carawan, "What the Laws have Prejudged: Παραγραφή and Early Issue Theory" *in* Cecil W. Wooten, George Alexander Kennedy, eds., *The orator in action and theory in Greece and Rome*, 2001. ISBN 90-04-12213-3, p. 36.
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14. Robertson, quoting Halm's edition of *De rhetorica*; Hermagoras's original does not survive
15. Citations below taken from Robertson and not independently checked.
16. Mansi, *Concilium Trevirense Provinciale* (1227), Mansi, *Concilia*, XXIII, c. 29.
17. Constitutions of Alexander de Stavenby (1237) Wilkins, I:645; also quoted in Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica I-II, 7, 3.
18. Robert de Sorbon, *De Confessione*, *MBP* XXV:354 (https://books.google.com/books?id=3eoscxXAd5oC&pg=PA354)
19. Peter Quinel, *Summula*, Wilkins, II:165
20. S. Petrus Coelestinus, *Opuscula*, *MBP* XXV:828
21. Richard N. Soulen, R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, (Louisville, 2001, ISBN 0-664-22314-1) *s.v.* Locus, p. 107; Hartmut Schröder, *Subject-Oriented Texts*, p. 176ff
22. Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* Book I.
23. Henry Clay Trumbull, *Teaching and Teachers (https://books.google.com/books?id=VAYCAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA120#PPA120,M1)*, Philadelphia, 1888, p. 120.

24. The poem compares Kipling's own day-to-day situation as a writer/journalist, with that of Queen Victoria ("a person small") who "keeps ten million serving men", and, unlike Kipling, "gets no rest at all".
25. Leon Nelson Flint, *Newspaper Writing in High Schools, Containing an Outline for the Use of Teachers (https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=86tDAAAAIAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA3#PPA47,M1)*, University of Kansas, 1917, p. 47.
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28. Simon Burtonshaw-Gunn, *The Essential Management Toolbox*, 2009, ISBN 0470687436, pp. 55, 68, 198
29. e.g. in E. Kim and S. Helal, "Revisiting Human Activity Networks", in *Sensor Systems and Software: Second International ICST Conference*, Miami 2010, p. 223 (https://books.google.com/books?id=lf2qCAAAQBAJ&pg=PA223)
30. Richard Smith, *et al.*, *The Effective Change Manager's Handbook, 2014, p. 419*
