

~ from Writing Analytically (6<sup>th</sup> ed.)

### 3. ASKING "SO WHAT?"

#### PUSHING OBSERVATIONS TO CONCLUSIONS: ASKING SO WHAT?

(shorthand for)

What does the observation imply?

Why does this observation matter?

Where does this observation get us?

How can we begin to theorize the significance of the observation?

Asking So what? is a universal prompt for spurring the move from observation to implication and ultimately interpretation. Asking So what?—or its milder cousin, And so?—is a calling to account, a way of pressing yourself to confront that essential question, "Why does this matter?" It is thus a challenge to make meaning through a creative leap—to move beyond the patterns and emphases you've been observing in the data to tentative conclusions about what these observations suggest. In step 4 of The Method, when you select a single repetition, strand, or contrast and write about why it's important, you are essentially asking So what? and answering that question.

**Step 1:** describe significant evidence, paraphrasing key language and looking for interesting patterns of repetition and contrast.

**Step 2:** begin to query your own observations by making what is implicit explicit.

**Step 3:** push your observations and statements of implications to interpretive conclusions by again asking So what?

**Discussion** First, a note on implication—crucial to step 2, and a subject treated at length in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to know that implications are suggested meanings. We look at the evidence and draw a conclusion that is not directly stated but that follows from what we see.

For example, a recent article in *Foreign Policy* entitled "Bury the Graveyard" demonstrates that the reputation of Afghanistan as "the graveyard of empires" is a "bogus history," or myth. So what? The *implication*, unstated but palpable, is that the makers of U.S. foreign policy should seek out another version of the history of military intervention in Afghanistan—one that might put current military efforts there in a better light. When you ask So what? you are looking to make overt (direct, clear) what is at present indirect.

The tone of So what? can sound rude or at least brusque, but that directness can be liberating. Often, writers will go to great lengths to avoid stating what they take something to mean. After all, that leaves them open to attack, they fear, if they get it wrong. But asking So what? is a way of forcing yourself to take the plunge without too much hoopla. And when you are tempted to stop thinking too soon, asking So what? will press you onward.