



## WHAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT?

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In follow-up to a statement, assertion, or opinion expressed by someone, ask:

- What makes you say that?

The What Makes You Say That? (WMYST?) routine appropriates and modifies a line of questioning from the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) developed by Housen and Yenawine (Housen, Yenawine, & Arenas, 1991). In VTS, students look at art and are asked open-ended questions like “What’s going on in this painting?” Student responses are then followed up with “What do you see that makes you say that?” That question, modified slightly, becomes useful in a whole host of contexts both in and out of the classroom. WMYST? is as much a discourse routine as it is a thinking routine.

### Purpose

The What Makes You Say That? routine helps students identify the basis for their thinking by asking them to elaborate on the thinking that lies behind their responses. Seemingly simple on the surface, this routine, when used as a regular part of classroom discourse, goes a long way toward fostering a disposition toward evidential reasoning. Students are asked to share their interpretations backed with evidence so that others have an opportunity to consider multiple viewpoints and perspectives on a topic or idea. In this way, discussions deepen and go past surface answers or mere opinions. Using this routine, the teacher doesn’t present herself as the keeper of all answers but empowers the entire learning community to examine the reasons and evidence behind possible explanations to determine their worth. This helps convey a sense that the correctness of an answer doesn’t lie in a lone outside authority but in evidence that supports it.

### Selecting Appropriate Content

There are many occasions in life when it is useful to look closely at something and develop a personal theory. Students often have hidden ideas about the way things work, how something has come to be, or why something is the way it is. To make the thinking behind these theories visible, teachers need to help students identify the evidence and reasoning that give rise to those theories. It is only then that the nascent theories and ideas can be

discussed, debated, challenged, and moved forward in a meaningful way. Consequently, WMYST? can be useful when looking at works of art or historical artifacts, in exploring poetry, making scientific observations and hypotheses, making predictions in reading, or investigating broader conceptual ideas such as racism or fairness. Because of its great flexibility, teachers have adapted WMYST? for use with almost any subject, especially for surfacing students' initial ideas when launching new topics but also throughout a unit of study to continually press for close observation, explanation building, and justifying with well-anchored evidence.

Teachers wishing to create a culture of thinking in their classrooms will find it of critical importance to uncover students' thinking in all kinds of situations. On the DVD, chemistry teacher Mylessa Lenon from Michigan talks about this shift in her own teaching. This overarching goal, more than looking for a fit with specific content, will help you find a natural place for asking, "What makes you say that?" Whenever you want to dig a little deeper and push students to give the reasons behind their responses, this routine will fit. With time, it will become a natural part of your classroom.

## Steps

1. *Set up.* Unlike other routines, WMYST? doesn't need to be set up, as much as placed at the appropriate time. It naturally finds a place in response to students' explanatory or interpretive comments. Look for moments when students make assertions, give explanations, provide interpretations, or offer opinions.
2. *Push for elaboration with evidence.* As students share their ideas and explanations, it is important to follow up by asking the key question of this routine: "What makes you say that?" The goal here is to both elicit and support students' attempts at justifications; therefore, it may be necessary to ask, "So what do you see that makes you say that?" or "So what do you know that makes you say that?"
3. *Share the thinking.* WMYST? exists mainly in the interchanges that teachers have with their students, so while documentation of students' thinking is an option, simply creating an opportunity for more learners to share what their thinking is when prompted by WMYST? is often enough to enrich a conversation.

## Uses and Variations

At Lernshaga Akademi in Sweden, where we first began the Visible Thinking work, the teachers began referring to WMYST? as the "magic question" because they were always amazed at how much of students' thinking got revealed that previously lay hidden. They

found that by using the question regularly in their interactions with students, thinking became much more visible. Other ways to convey the nuance of WMYST? include "What do you think you were basing that on?" Or "What evidence were you able to find to support that idea?"

This thinking routine works well in combination with any number of routines when students are sharing their thinking. On the DVD, you'll see Lisa Verkerk and Debbie O'Hara from the International School of Amsterdam using it with See-Think-Wonder and the Explanation Game respectively. Notice how the use of the question with Debbie's kindergarten class elicits much deeper responses and elaborations that in turn produce a greater level of student engagement. In these and other classroom episodes on the DVD, notice how teachers often use WMYST? in their interactions with students to move their thinking forward. As you watch the videos, consider how the use of the question helps to convey interest in students' ideas and create a culture of thinking within the classroom.

## Assessment

As WMYST? becomes part of the regular pattern of discourse between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves, it is important to take notice of the students' responses to this question. More than calling for a procedural explanation or a short-answer response, WMYST? invites reasons based on what one has seen, noticed, or has drawn upon from prior experience or contextual evidence. The overall goal is to support students in their ability and disposition to create explanations, generate theories, and offer reasons that can be substantiated with proof. Over time, look for a deepening in students' responses. Are students going beyond a simple insistence that they are right or a reliance on an outside authority? Are students beginning to offer their reasons without prompting? Do students provide support for other people's assertions as a way of strengthening them?

## Tips

The language of this routine's key question, "What makes you say that?" is intentional. When this question is asked with a genuine tone of respect, it has the potential to convey our interest in the other. The question shouldn't sound like a challenge or a test but convey a curiosity regarding how the learner is constructing understanding of a complex idea or perplexing phenomenon. If a teacher is not genuinely interested in how students are making sense of ideas, students will soon realize this and the responses offered will be reduced to short answer responses without elaboration. Therefore, it is important

that this question, "What makes you say that?" gets asked in authentic contexts whereby student responses help drive the class's ongoing learning.

## A Picture of Practice

"Prior to being introduced to thinking routines, I had been interested in my own questioning of students for a long time," said Mary Kay Archer, an elementary teacher and mathematics specialist in the Traverse City Area Public Schools in northern Michigan. "I'd always wanted to investigate the depth of understanding of my students using questioning as a key avenue, so the What Makes You Say That? routine immediately attracted me with its seemingly simple language yet profoundly complex nuance." Mary Kay had taught kindergarten children for more than twenty years when she first began using thinking routines in her classroom. While she saw at once the immediate possibilities of using thinking routines such as Think-Puzzle-Explore and See-Think-Wonder with her very young learners, the WMVYST? routine seemed to resonate with her own professional interests in questioning and investigating as primary drivers of learning.

"I first experienced the power of What Makes You Say That? as a participant within a professional development setting offered within my school district," explained Mary Kay. "Though I can't exactly remember the context in which that question was posed to me, I do remember that such a simple question really pressed me to think and reason much deeper than before." From her personal experience with this thinking routine, Mary Kay decided that this question could become a good way for her to pursue making her young students' thinking and reasoning very visible in her classroom. "I was teaching kindergarten at the time, as I had for many years, and I was so excited—my young students really started to tell me what was going on inside their heads in ways I hadn't accessed before. Even when I began teaching fourth graders in the following years, I was amazed that such a simple question encouraged my students to justify their responses. They were clarifying ideas to me and to the rest of their peers as they explained and elaborated their thinking when provoked by WMVYST?"

At first Mary Kay remembers that the very language of WMVYST? didn't seem so natural. "I wanted it to feel blended in my teaching and connected to our classroom conversations," Mary Kay recalled. "When I first started to ask the question, I wasn't

always sure where it would go, but since I had experienced the depth of thinking it caused within me as a professional learner, I persisted in making this question a part of my classroom interactions, and it didn't take long for it to take off with my students."

Mary Kay experienced many rich discussions with students. She was surprised and pleased that her fourth grade students would explain their thinking with such sophistication. "When visitors would come into our classroom, my students would impress them with their responses. Visitors would tell me that they never heard students discuss ideas with such depth. It really took the classroom discourse up a few notches." Mary Kay also noticed how this very simple question provided access for all students to participate, especially children who might have traditionally struggled in class. "They were engaged and willing to share their thinking as much as anyone in the classroom, especially when I posed the What Makes You Say That? question in a science experiment we'd conducted or a math investigation we were debriefing. My students were truly expressing their thoughts around complex ideas in ways I just didn't imagine possible."

When considering the benefits to her students that this thinking routine offered, Mary Kay said that a significant development was when students started asking "What makes you say that?" to one another, within the setting of group projects or pair interactions. "I began seeing some independence and responsibility for their own learning, which is challenging for young students. I had always wondered about how best to provide opportunities for the students I teach to be more independent and responsible, and here my students were using the language of WMVYST? in the natural patterns of interactions they were having with one another. It was as if this question became a part of their natural abilities and inclinations to be curious about the topics we were exploring."

Regarding her own learning with using this thinking routine, Mary Kay remembers that at the beginning she felt perhaps she was overusing the routine. "Using it too many times seemed to weaken its impact. My students' responses, especially with my fourth graders, seemed to become shallow again as if they were verbally filling in a blank I had put before them. It was then that I became more aware of the placement of WMVYST?" In time, though, Mary Kay felt that her teaching and use of the routine became more purposeful. "I began to understand what making students' thinking visible really means. My decisions within teaching moments became more centered on what kind of thinking I wished to elicit from my students. When reasoning with evidence was called for, WMVYST? seemed appropriately placed, and that is

when I became more aware of the depth of reasoning my students were capable of. I had been teaching for many years, but now I really strived to provide my students with opportunities to think about their thinking. I tried to create a classroom where their thinking was given visibility and value. I didn't want to just give my students activities to do; rather, I wanted to create opportunities for them to think, to talk about their thinking with one another, and to value each other's thinking within our classroom community. Striving to make children's thinking visible—especially with WMYST?—really brought our group together. It was powerful.”

## CIRCLE OF VIEWPOINTS

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Identify the different perspectives that could be present in or affected by what you have just read, seen, or heard. Record these in a circle with the issue or event at the center. Choose one of these perspectives to explore further, using the following prompts as a starting place:

1. I am thinking of [name the event/issue] from the point of view of . . .
2. I think . . . [describe the topic from your viewpoint]. Be an actor—take on the character of your viewpoint]. Because . . . [explain your reasoning]
3. A question/concern I have from this viewpoint is . . .

When you are seated in a circle, around a table, or in a theater, it is easy to grasp the idea that those sitting somewhere else in that circle will literally have a different view of the goings on. Using this physical model as a springboard, we developed the Circle of Viewpoints (COV) routine to help students with the process of identifying different perspectives and viewpoints on an issue, event, or topic that they might then explore further. We then set out a few prompts to begin this process of exploration.

### **Purpose**

This routine focuses on perspective taking. Before one can develop skills at perspective taking, one must be able to identify the different perspectives present. It is all too easy to fall into the pattern of viewing things from one's own perspective and sometimes even being oblivious to alternate viewpoints. This routine helps learners to identify and consider these different and diverse perspectives involved in and around a topic, event, or issue. This process creates a greater awareness of how others may be thinking and feeling and reinforces that people can and do think differently about the same things. This routine also provides a structure to assist in the exploration of one of these viewpoints. The ultimate goal of this process is to gain a broader and more complete understanding of the topic, event, or issue through this process.

### **Selecting Appropriate Content**

The effectiveness of this routine depends on having source material that invites exploration from many different viewpoints. Therefore, an image, story, issue, or topic that