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Making Sense of Theory: Why It Matters. How to Use It.

Theory is a way of thinking about reality. Theory matters because it provides constructive thinkers (also known as “scholars”) with the cognitive tools necessary to understand and explain reality. Scholars use theory to develop ideas and to communicate ideas with other scholars, government officials and other decision makers, and the public. As high school students, we are novice scholars – meaning that we’re just getting started with using theoretical thinking to understand and explain things. We use theory to write papers that explain reality (based on our own understandings of it). Scholarship, the application of systematic and rigorous thinking, is also called systems-thinking. High school students use all of this – theory, scholarship, constructive thinking, and systems-thinking – to write papers that make sense and add our way of seeing things to discussions about how and why reality is as it is.

This paper describes the different kinds of scholarship that novice scholars use for theorizing. The paper compares scientific scholarship to non-scientific scholarship, which is helpful because high school English assignments will often require both types of scholarship. Finally, a definition of *theory* is provided, with examples of some of the main theories that are used by the major decision makers (people in power) who shape almost every aspect of our daily lives. This paper also describes and explains practical ways for high school students to use, or apply, theory when writing a paper for a high school English class. This explanation of how to write a paper is meant to help you use theories when writing research papers, essays, and other kinds of high school writing assignments. This will help you become a better writer and a better thinker.

Main Body

Scholars use theory, a systematic way of understanding and explaining reality, to perform their work as researchers. According to Collins and Stockton (2018), *theory* is “an explanation of the way things work” (p. 1). Given this, theorists (also known as scholars and/or researchers) develop (or use) theories to explain things. Professional theorists/scholars/researchers work at universities, government agencies, research organizations, businesses, banks, unions, corporations, law firms, militaries, and other organizations. Their job is to think.

Professional theorists do this by understanding and explaining how data, facts, and logic explain an aspect of overall reality. Researchers often also consider ideas, feelings, beliefs, and values. Non-scientific ways of understanding can help inform and develop certain kinds of theories about reality, even if not based on data, facts, and logic. In fact, there are many kinds of theorists, including “scientific theorists” and “non-scientific theorists”. While not all theorists, or theories, are scientifically based on facts, all theories and theorists seek, by definition, truth and knowledge. Scientific theorists limit their work to observable facts and logical reasoning, giving them an edge since they use only theories grounded. These theories can therefore be applied to build things that will work, make predictions that will be accurate, and understand things in enduring ways (ways that last) that can make sense to everyone – across all contexts.

Other kinds of theorists or scholars, such as literary scholars, political scholars, and religious scholars, often base their research on opinions, beliefs, values, and feelings – not just facts, data, and logic. Even though not all scholars base their theories on facts, all scholars must use and develop theories that explain how and why reality is (as it is). They must therefore be able to assess and evaluate their theories, sorting out useful theories that explain reality, that predict what will happen, or that can be used to achieve certain intended goals from useless theories that cannot be used for such aims. Theorizing (defined as “the process of constructive thinking”) makes it possible for scholars to do their work, to think about the ideas of other people, and to communicate with other scholars and with the public. Theory is therefore essential and necessary to scholarship. Smith and Hodkinson write that “there is no possibility of theory-free observation and knowledge” (p. 412). You must use theory to do the work of research and scholarship, including the work of a novice scholar working at the high school level.

While “theory” and “scholarship” can seem far off and separate from the daily life of most people, there are many theories that shape, or at least help explain, the daily life of everyone. Some theories shape our daily lives because they are used by the most powerful organizations in society, such as the organizations that control money – including banks and governments. Money is an *idea* that has a big impact on daily life. Banks, governments, unions, and businesses must understand the idea of money to use money, which provides people with lots of real-world benefits. For example, almost everyone relies on economic systems that are based on

money. These systems and the theories that run them help people gain access to the things they need, such as food, housing, transportation, and safety. Economists, the scholars who research how and why money works, use economic theories to explain how economic systems work and how they help people meet their needs.

Political theories are also important to our daily lives. Theories of justice and theories of law shape the legal system. These theories are used to punish people whose actions are deemed “wrong” and to reward people whose actions are deemed “good”. Like economic theories, theories of justice and law are based not only on objective facts but also on subjective values. Other theories that influence daily life are scientific theories, such as theories that explain electromagnetism (every time you plug something into an electric outlet you are applying a benefit of these theories) and theories that explain gravity (so that you can understand not only why you don’t fall off the planet and out into outer space but also how gravity and space-time intersect). Unlike non-scientific theories, scientific theories *must*, by definition, be based on facts. According to Moore (1993), for a scientific theory to be (considered) proven it “will mean that it has been tested extensively and elegantly and has not been falsified” and that means that it’s been proven “beyond all reasonable doubt” (p. 135).

Scholars use theory by thinking systematically to understand and explain things, using constructive thinking tools and other cognitive tools to evaluate their understanding of reality. They do this by connecting with and reflecting on the implications of their understandings of things and by writing their thoughts and theories down as part of the thinking process. According to Pappas (1973), “writing is thinking made visible” (p. 2) and therefore thinking, writing, and theorizing are essentially the same thing. Plain thinking is invisible thinking because it happens only in your brain. Theorizing, whether done invisibly or visibly, is thinking using a systematic approach, otherwise known as *systems-thinking*, to understand and explain reality. But visible thinking (or theorizing) is *thinking done on paper* (or on a screen) *or in dialogue* (spoken or presented). This is theorizing in plain sight. Pappas writes that “researching means seeking truth by thinking, using evidence and ideas to gain understanding and knowledge, and doing this as part of a community of thinkers or scholars” (p. 3).

As a high school writer, you are a novice scholar, you are a novice researcher, and you are a novice writer. As a novice scholar, researcher, and writer, your high school job is to think. Think to understand how

reality works. Think to understand how the world works. Think to understand how you work, and how others around you work. These are the questions novice scholars should be asking: What makes me tick? What makes you tick? How can I do things that will make my life better and the life of my community better? What ideas make sense? What ideas do not make sense? Why does this matter? These are the questions that theories, the theories that you develop yourself by thinking about reality in ways that make sense, can help us all act in ways to achieve goals in life. As Pappas says, writing is thinking made visible. This means: Think well and you will write well. Write well and you will think well. It also means that the writing process can be used to help develop your thinking. Systematic thinking uses theories to explain, based on evidence, ideas, and logic. Writing provides a way to see your thinking, so see how different ideas build on each other and how evidence and conclusions intersect.

Conclusion

All theories should make sense, explain actual reality, and be useful in when applied to solving a problem or achieving a goal. Good thinking can make you more powerful because it helps you understand and respond to reality. Good ideas are powerful tools for shaping the world and making things happen as intended. Good theories make sense and are useful. But not all theories are based on facts and data.

There are many kinds of theories, including scientific theories and non-scientific theories. Unlike scientific theories, which must be based on facts and logic to be considered as “scientific”, other theories, such as literary theories, political theories, religious theories, and cultural theories, may include opinions, feelings, and beliefs. In general, the more a theory aligns with facts, data, and logic, the more tethered to reality that theory will be, making it useful, predictive, and explanatory. A theory is not a hunch, as theories explain reality based on well-thought-out reasoning and rigorous reflection. Facts, data, and logic are certainly reality-based and rigorous, so these forms of knowledge are often the bedrock for theories that can be used and acted upon. But other ways of knowing can also be useful, predictive, and explanatory.

Finally, writing is hard because thinking is hard. Reality-based (useful) thinking does not come automatically. It requires work. One tool for thinking is theory. Theory is a way of thinking using systems, logic, rigour, connection, and reflection. The purpose of learning to write in high school is to learn how to think.

Collins and Stockton (2018) define theory as explaining reality. In short, theory answers these two questions:

How? Why? Why are things like they are? How do things work or happen?

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