Who, What, Where, When, Why: Using the 5 Ws to communicate your research

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/04/08/using-the-5-ws-to-communicate-your-research/

4/8/2015

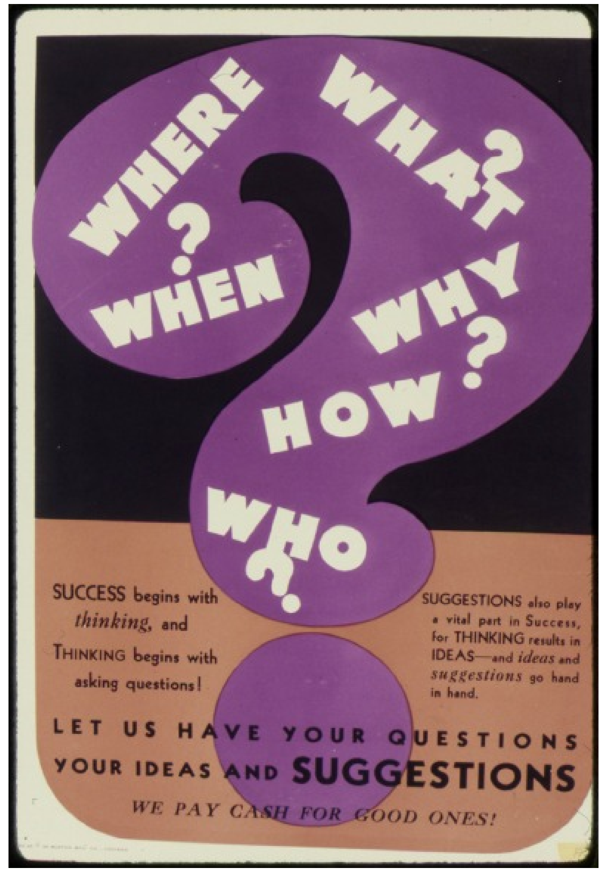
A lay summary can be a useful approach to breaking down barriers and making research accessible. A good summary focuses on the important aspects of the research, but distilling this information is not always easy. A helpful starting point for identifying the key elements of a research story can be the 5 Ws. **Andy Tattersall** *finds this approach might not work for every piece of research, but it has the potential to allow researchers to explore key themes and retain control of what they say and how they say it.*

In a previous incarnation I used to be a journalist, a sports journalist, but a journalist nonetheless. Whilst I was studying for my journalism degree at The University of Sheffield I learned valuable skills that now aid me in helping researchers and students communicate their research. One of these skills was the Five Ws: the Who, What, Where, When and Why. This background is probably the reason why I have been a keen advocate of open research and the development of scholarly communication using the Web, social media and Altmetrics for some time. So thinking back to my training some two decades ago made me think about the 5 Ws and how they can be applied to help researchers communicate what they do.

The problem for many academics is translating their research into lay and executive summaries, which is becoming increasingly more important when we think about impact. Many do not know where to start, and despite their research making absolute sense to them, it still can be hard to break down their work into simple messages. One possible solution is to ask a colleague or someone from the marketing and media department to interview you. It is surprising when asked a few simple questions how a piece of complex work can be broken down into easily digestible chunks. There have been many occasions when I have seen a colleague wax lyrical about their work in a way that is so far removed from the journal papers they produce it seems such a shame not to capture it. It is important to note here that this idea and that of the 5 Ws does not have to result in dumbing your work down. The Daily Mail and The Conversation both report research findings to their readers, but how they do it can be very different.

Applying the 5 Ws to your research might not work for every piece of research, but it is a useful idea worth exploring. It does have the potential to help translate research to a wide audience without much effort and allows the researcher to retain the control of what they say and how they say it, unlike some traditional media reporting.

So here's how it works. It is such a simple idea that it requires very little explanation.



Who: Who has conducted this research, who will benefit from it and who has funded it?

What: What has happened with this research? What was done to complete it, what processes were involved, what methods and what was the results and conclusion?

Where: Where did this research take place, at which organisation/s and geographical location?

When: When did this take place, when did the project start and when did it finish?

Why: Why did this research happen? Why was there a need for it?

Occasionally some journalists will apply a 'How' question, although this can often be covered by some of the previous questions.

There are various ways that this information can be captured to streamline the process. Firstly a Google Form can be used to complete the various fields, a smartphone or tablet can be used to record an interview with the project lead and the answers can be uploaded to such as AudioBoom and embedded into a website to accompany the research. For those wanting to explore further, video can be employed to capture the interview. It is important to remember that these options do not have to be perfect first time and can be refined until the researcher is happy with the answers.

Another rule I learned, especially as a sports journalist for The Press Association, and especially when covering football matches, was that often the end of the story can become the start of the report. For example live coverage of a 90 minute football match is often chunked up into various blocks of time. At the end of the game these blocks can be pieced together to make a full match report, with the last part of the report (such as the final result) making up for the first paragraph.

A published paper has an abstract as a way for fellow researchers and students to quickly glance at whether the paper is useful for them. But an abstract is a very short, concise report of the research paper. A lay summary can expand on that and take the important information such as results and make them more prominent. It can be done by applying the 5 Ws and putting the answers in the right order so we find out what happened at the end; who was involved, why it happened, when and where. The good thing about lay summaries or similar style communications such as blog posts and web articles is that they can get easier with practice. Once a few tips and tricks are applied it allows a researcher to imagine how their work reads to a wider audience. Yet with any of these tools and technologies for scholarly communication it still needs the academic to decide whether they want to reach that audience.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

Featured Image: question marks by gillian maniscalco (Flickr, CC BY-SA)

About the Author

Andy Tattersall *is an Information Specialist at the School of Health and Related Research (ScHARR) at the University of Sheffield. His role is to scan the horizon for Web and technologies opportunities relating to research, teaching and collaboration and maintain networks that support this. Andy has a keen interest in new ways of working by employing Altmetrics, Web 2.0 and Social Media but also paying close attention to the implications and pitfalls for using such advances.* *@andy_tattersall*