

A Simple Way to Make Good Decisions

by Winston Sieck - September 24, 2012

<https://www.globalcognition.org/write-to-decide/>

Figuring out how to make good decisions can be hairy. It's not always easy to get past your uncertainty and make a tough choice. So, how do you do it?

Some suggest that you “go with your gut,” acting quickly and instinctively.

Others suggest analytical approaches that may involve computation of the anticipated value of options, based on numerically expressed likelihoods and utilities.

Each of these approaches can be useful in special circumstances. Each has a place in your toolkit of decision making skills.

For many of the everyday decisions we face, it's not clear that our [intuitive systems](#) are all that well tuned for optimal responding. On the other hand, extensive mathematical analysis seems like overkill.

Fortunately, there's an everyday technique for making good decisions. A way to decide that feels right. Yet keeps a little [critical thinking in your decision process](#).

This middle way is to simply write about your decision before you make it.

We often feel that writing helps us to understand more deeply. Studies in education and cognitive science show that writing and explanation improve comprehension and other learning outcomes.

Does it also help you make good decisions?

[Winston Sieck](#) and Frank Yates conducted a set of studies at the University of Michigan to test the idea that the process of writing would help people decide critically and confidently.

The idea was that writing would encourage people to [explore alternative ways of framing their decision problems](#), leading to improved decisions.

The researchers also examined whether writing would increase people's confidence in their decisions. Their paper describing these [exposition effects on decision making](#) was published in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

The researchers gave study participants tricky decision problems that attempted to bias their decisions by describing the details in a particular way (much like the latest ad you've seen).

Sieck and Yates then had some people write about the decision they were about to make. They then compared the level of bias in the participants' decisions with the responses from control groups who did

not write before making their decisions.

How to Make Good Decisions

Here is the essence of the instruction that the “write-to-decide” group was given:

Write a memo to yourself. In your memo, make the best argument or arguments you can for the option you plan to choose, as compared with competing options. Explain to yourself, “Why is that the smart thing to do?”

This is a simple instruction for making a decision that you can easily use yourself. But should you?

In the Sieck & Yates studies, the researchers found that the writers were reliably less biased in their decision making than the control groups. Writers built a more complete picture of the decision problem that was less easily susceptible to subtle influences.

The writers were also more confident that they had, in fact, made the best choices. That is, the writing technique can help you to make good decisions and be more confident in your decision making.

The confidence boost can be important, especially as you are likely to find that decisions that you would bother to write about are those for which you feel particularly [indecisive](#) in the first place.

Are you worried about how to make good decisions? Try "write to decide."

Image credit: [OpenClipart-Vectors](#)

Sieck, W., & Yates, J. (1997). Exposition Effects on Decision Making: Choice and Confidence in Choice *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 70 (3), 207-219 DOI: [10.1006/obhd.1997.2706](https://doi.org/10.1006/obhd.1997.2706)

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