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## Preface for Teachers

Whenever I ask my students to analyze anything, I am usually met with a collective groan. To them, the implied definition of an academic analysis is making something that could be enlightening and fun in a non-scholastic context seem irrelevant and dull. “Why do we have to analyze it? Why can’t we just enjoy it?” the students think, mutter, and sometimes ask outright. What I find strange is that I know that they often talk to each other about many subjects—film, politics, sports—in a highly analytical manner. And they seem to enjoy doing so. I believe the main reason students often dislike analyzing anything in school is because of the dominance of what James A. Berlin and others have labeled “current traditional rhetoric,” an approach that has always “denied the role of writer, reader and language in arriving at meaning” and places truth “in the external world, existing prior to the individual’s perception of it.” By its very nature this approach keeps students from finding their own meaning in the composing process, making analysis seem like an academic game of guesswork to find the answer that the teacher has determined to be correct.

Despite the fact that this approach seems naïve in light of twenty-first century epistemology, where even the hard sciences recognize the role the observer plays in the definition of the subject, it continues to dominate composition classrooms because of its pedagogical efficiency. It’s simply much easier to tell students to come up with the “right” way to look at a given subject than to help them individually to form their own perspectives. In addition, many teachers find that when students have the freedom to write what they think, the results are often disappointing. Instead of thoughtful, unique analyses, they get surface level meanings that retreat to easier modes of writing: summaries, oratories, and tangents. But this is understandable. How can we expect students to write an original analysis, when few of them have ever had the opportunity to do so? I wrote this book to help students with this difficult task, to give them a better understanding of how to discover, develop, and revise an analytical essay.

The first two chapters focus on the nature of an analysis and what’s involved in writing an analytical essay. First I show that analysis consists of a balance of assertions (statements which present their viewpoints or launch an exploration of their concerns), examples (specific passages, scenes, or events which inspire



these views), explanations (statements that reveal how the examples support the assertions), and significance (statements which reveal the importance of their study to personal and/or cultural issues). After showing why each feature should be present throughout an essay, I reveal how to “set the stage” for producing one of their own. I first help students to evaluate their own views on a subject and to examine how these views emerge from their own experiences, values and judgments. I then show them how to research what others have said about the subject and provide suggestions for evaluating and incorporating this research into their own perspectives. Finally I discuss the nature of writing, not as a linear procedure, but as a recursive process in which the discovery and clarification of a concept occur simultaneously.

The remaining three chapters deal with more specific advice on how to develop an analytical essay. In [Chapter 3 "Developing Assertions: From a Close Reading of Examples"](#), I show how to carefully consider the features of a subject to develop a working thesis. In [Chapter 4 "Explanations and Significance: Developing Your Analysis"](#), I reveal how to justify and show the significance of this thesis in light of both purpose and audience. In both chapters, I point out that the thesis will evolve and become more complicated as they consider it further, and, may no longer demonstrate a singular perspective. In the fifth and final chapter, I discuss strategies for putting all of their observations together into effective, deliberate essays and provide an example of how I developed an article of my own. In each of these chapters, I provide students with examples, advice, and exercises that will help them to discover and develop their perspectives through a critical reading of both their subjects and their own drafts, thus demonstrating that we actually do “write to think.”

Before you read further, I should clarify how this text departs from others that focus on analysis. First, the organization does not follow the writing process as traditionally understood (prewriting, composing, revising), but focuses on the process of analysis (careful observation, forming perspectives, justifying, modifying and showing the significance of this perspective). Consequently, the heuristics and exercises are not simply relegated to the first chapter but are scattered throughout the book. For instance, I discuss brainstorming and clustering as strategies for exploring the significance of an essay, and Kenneth Burke’s “Pentad” for helping students to explain and justify their perspectives. I do this so that students will not consider their subjects too quickly, come up with a broad or obvious thesis, and list the most obvious



examples to defend it. Instead I encourage them to invent and revise their perspectives throughout the entire composing process.

My advice may contradict what students have been taught in the past not only in regards to how they form their analyses, but also in how they phrase them. For instance, I discourage students from using terms like “the observer” or “the reader” because they imply that all people see subjects the same way, thus ignoring the transactional nature of rhetoric. Instead, I encourage students to show why they initially see something in a certain light and how their views change as they consider the subject further. Some students may find this advice contradictory to what they may have learned previously—for example, the pedagogy of high school composition, where the use of “I” is often forbidden. I believe the process and methods outlined in this text show a more sophisticated, accurate, and meaningful way to engage in analysis.

Along these lines, I do not provide students with a list of guidelines for analyzing particular disciplines, but rather look at features that are common to many of them. For instance, instead of discussing metaphorical language as something that is unique to literary analysis, I point out how it is also necessary for understanding philosophy, science, politics, and advertising. And in those places where I show students how to explore the metaphorical implications of particular tropes, I encourage you to extend this lesson to those that are central to the particular subjects that your students are examining. Also, I do not include a list of sample readings for students to analyze. I did not design this book to provide all the material for a course, but rather to be a tool for the first two weeks—so that once students gain a general understanding of how to write an analysis, instructors can then move on to their own specific choice of subjects.

Finally, though I use several examples from various disciplines throughout the text, the focus of the book is on essay writing. Other forms of scholastic writing, such as lab reports, fall outside the scope of this book. Nonetheless, I believe that when students develop the ability to write an analytical essay, they learn to think more critically and more precisely in other areas as well. I am confident that after students read this book, the resulting writing on any subject will be far more sophisticated, meaningful, and varied—



more challenging yet more fulfilling for the students to write, and far more interesting for their teachers to read.



# Chapter 1

## Analysis for Multiple Perspectives

### 1.1 The Nature of Analysis

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define **analysis**.
2. Show how we use analysis in everyday situations and in academic writing and discussion.
3. Understand the components of analysis (*assertions, examples, explanations, significance*), and explain why each is a necessary part of any analysis.
4. Show how too much attention to one particular component of analysis makes an essay seem like a different type of writing.

Jeff is not happy. His clock shows 2 a.m., but his computer screen shows nothing. For the last four hours he has tried to get started on an essay on William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but he just doesn't know where to begin. "It's Professor Johnson's fault I'm in this mess," he thinks to himself. "My other teachers always told me exactly what and how to write, but Professor Johnson asked us to focus on what each of us finds important about the play. She even told us that no one knows Shakespeare's real intentions, and that a million ways to analyze the play are possible." Jeff slams his hand down on the table. "If this is true, how do I know when I've found the right interpretation?" And Professor Johnson made it even more difficult for Jeff by instructing her students not to summarize the plot or give unsupported opinions, but to come up with their own interpretations, show why they are important, and justify them through close readings of particular scenes. "No one has ever shown me how to do this," Jeff grumbles to himself as he gulps down his third cup of coffee.

In actuality, Jeff already possesses the ability to write an analytical essay. He would have realized this if he had considered the discussions and activities he engaged in during the previous week. In planning a date, and in thinking of the best way to convince his parents to send him more money, Jeff had to carefully evaluate a variety of situations to develop a point of view that he then had to justify and show why it mattered. In each of these instances, he made plenty of assertions, statements



which present points of view; used examples, specific passages, scenes, events, or items which inspire these points of view; gave explanations, statements which reveal how the examples support and/or complicate the assertions; and provided significance, statements which reveal the importance of the analysis to our personal and/or cultural concerns.

Analysis is a way of understanding a subject by using each of these elements, expressing an opinion (making assertions), supporting that opinion (including examples), justifying that opinion (explaining the examples), and showing why the opinion matters (extending the significance). The second letter in the second component (examples) helps create the acronym AXES, which is the plural form of both *axe* and *axis*. This acronym provides a way not only to remember the four components but also to visualize them working together. Like an axe, analysis allows us to “chop” our subjects into their essential components so that we can examine the pieces more thoroughly, and, like an axis, analysis inspires insights that become the new reference points around which we rearrange these pieces.

Though a complete analysis always needs to use these elements, the reasons for engaging in it may vary widely. For instance, sometimes the goal is to persuade the reader to accept an interpretation or to adapt a course of action, and other times the goal is to explore several possible interpretations or courses of action without settling on any one in particular. But whether the goal is to persuade, explore, or enlighten, analysis should always spring from a careful examination of a given subject. I always tell my students that they do not need to convince me that their points of view are correct but rather to reveal that they have thought about their subject thoroughly and arrived at reasonable and significant considerations.

The structure and form of an analysis can vary as widely as the many reasons for producing one. Though an analysis should include attention to each of the four main components, it should not be written in a formulaic manner, like those tiresome five-paragraph essays you might recall from high school: “I spent my summer vacation in three ways: working, partying and relaxing. Each of these activities helped me in three aspects of my life: mentally, physically and psychologically.” At best, formulaic essays serve as training wheels that need to come off when you are ready for more



sophisticated kinds of writing. Rigorous analysis doesn't rely on formulas or clichés, and its elements may occur in different orders and with various emphases, depending on your purpose and audience. In fact, individual elements may sometimes blend together because a section may serve more than one function. With practice, you won't even need to recall the acronym AXES when producing an analysis, because you will have mastered when and how to express each of its components.

Though it would be impossible to outline all the possible manifestations and combinations of these elements of analysis, this book will help you to create, balance, and express each of them with precision, clarity, and voice. The first task is to make certain all these elements are present to some degree throughout your paper, because when any one is missing or dominates too much, the essay starts to drift from analysis to a different mode of writing. Consider, for instance, how Jeff might have gotten off track when trying to respond to the following speech from *The Tempest*, when the character Prospero becomes morose as the play he is putting on within the play becomes interrupted:

*Our revels now are ended. These, our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air; into thin air.  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision  
The cloud capped towers, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep  
(Act IV, Scene 1: 148-57).*

### **Response 1: Review (assertion emphasis)**

This is a very famous speech about how our lives are like dreams. No wonder Shakespeare is such a great playwright. He continuously and brilliantly demonstrates that he knows what life is about; this is why this is such a great speech and I would recommend this play for everybody.

Assertions are necessary to communicate your points of view, but when you make only declarative statements of taste, your essays will seem less like analyses and more like reviews. A review can be useful, especially when considering whether a movie might be worth spending money on, but in an analysis you should not just state your opinions but also explain how you arrived at them and explore why they matter.

### **Response 2: Summary (example emphasis)**

First Prospero gets angry because his play was interrupted, causing his magical actors to disappear. Next, he shows how everything will dissolve in time: the sets of his theater, the actors, and even “the great globe itself.” He concludes by comparing our lives to dreams, pointing out how both are surrounded by sleep.

Like a review, a summary can sometimes be useful, especially when we want the plot of a piece or basic arguments of a policy described to us in a hurry. However, a summary stops short of being an analysis because it simply covers the main aspects of the object for analysis and does not provide any new perspective as to why it is significant. Though you need to provide examples, you should select and discuss only those details that shed the most light on your points of view. Always remember that people want to read your essay to learn *your* perspective on what you are analyzing; otherwise, they could just examine the piece for themselves.

### **Response 3: Description (explanation emphasis)**

In Prospero’s speech, Shakespeare points out how life, plays, and dreams are always being interrupted. He makes a lot of comparisons between these different areas of existence, yet makes them all seem somewhat similar. I never really thought about how they are all so similar, but Shakespeare helps me consider ways they all kind of fit together.

Though you should explain how you derived your assertions from your examples and not just let the piece speak for itself, you should not do so in too general a manner. You do not want to give the impression that you are trying to remember the details of a piece that you are too lazy to pull out and reconsider, but that you are engaging in a close reading or a careful consideration of all the aspects of



an issue. Your analysis should seem like it was a challenge for you to write, and not something that you pieced together from vague recollections.

#### **Response 4: Tangent (significance emphasis)**

This speech reminds me that life is short. My father keeps telling me that life is over before you even realize it, and he should know because he's getting pretty old (he's in his late 40s!). I think it also shows that it's important to be careful about what you dream of because these dreams may affect the way you choose to live your life. I dream about being a famous surfer and that's what makes me try hard to be one.

If an essay had no significance, the reader might constantly think, "So what?" You might provide a very close reading of the piece, but unless you have a reason for drawing our attention to it, your essay will not leave the reader with anything new or important to consider. Be careful, however, not to leave the piece completely behind when discussing why it matters, or your essay will seem less like an analysis and more like an excuse to deliver a soapbox speech or to write about something that is easier for you to discuss.

#### **Response 5: Analysis (attention to each aspect)**

In *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare connects plays, lives, and dreams by showing that while each contains an illusion of permanence, they're all only temporary. The "baseless fabric of this vision" of "cloud capped towers" may immediately refer to the painted sets contained within the "great globe itself," the name of Shakespeare's theater. Yet when we measure time in years rather than hours, we can see that most of the real "cloud capped towers" of the Seventeenth Century have already faded and at some point in the future even the globe we live on will disappear and "leave not a rack behind." Likewise, it is not just the actors who are "such stuff as dreams are made on," but all of us. We are unconscious of the world before we are born and after we die, so our waking lives mirror our sleeping lives. Thinking of it this way leaves me with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I find it a bit disturbing to be reminded that neither we nor our world are permanent and all that we do will dissipate in time. On the other hand, it inspires me to enjoy my life further and not to worry too much about my inability to accomplish every one of my goals because nothing I do will last forever anyway.



Had Jeff not waited until the last minute to write his essay, he might have come up with a paragraph like this last one that gives adequate attention to each of the elements of analysis. The main assertion that our dreams, our lives, and our creative works only provide an illusion of permanence sets the analytical stage in a compelling fashion. The examples are well chosen and intelligently explained. For instance, the analysis shows that whether we see the “cloud capped towers” as actually existing or as paintings on the sets of the stage, they both have succumbed to time. Finally, it reveals the significance of the author’s perspective without coming to a trite conclusion or skipping off on a tangent. In general, the analysis reflects the thoughts of a writer who is engaged enough with the text to take the time to carefully consider the quote and reflect on its implications. Though the paragraph could use a more thorough development (especially of the significance) and a more deliberate style, it certainly reveals a more compelling analysis than the previous four paragraphs.

So is it a waste of time to write paragraphs that mostly consist of summaries, opinions, descriptions, or tangents? Absolutely not. Thinking and writing are not separate processes but occur simultaneously, and we often need to produce responses that focus on one of these simpler rhetorical modes before we can understand the underlying complexity that allows us to develop a more thorough analysis. And Jeff will experience essentially the same thinking and writing process when he switches from his Shakespeare essay to the ones he’s composing for his courses in history, political science, and psychology. Understanding an event, an issue, or an aspect of human nature requires careful attention to the details of what happened and to the arguments and theories that make up a particular perspective. But before Jeff can develop his own point of view on any of these subjects, he first needs to consider what might influence the way he sees them, a process that will require him to look at his culture and his experiences while consulting the points of view of others. In the following chapter, I will discuss how to set the stage for analysis by bringing together all of these factors.

## EXERCISE

Write about a time you tried to persuade a friend to see a creative work, issue or subject in the way that you do. What assertions did you make? What examples did you use to back them up? How did you explain how you saw the examples? How did you reveal the lasting significance of the decision that you wanted your friend

to make? How did these components take a different form the next time you tried to persuade your friend to see a different subject in a new light?

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- We use analysis many times throughout the day, especially when trying to persuade others to see our points of view.
- Analysis consists of four main components: assertions (our points of view), examples (evidence that supports these points of view), explanations (justifications of these points of view), and significance (discussions of why these points of view matter).
- These components need to be present for an effective analysis, but not in a strictly formulaic manner; they can appear throughout an essay to various degrees and in various orders.



## Chapter 2

### Setting the Stage for Writing

#### 2.1 Considering your own subjectivity

##### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss how analysis does not lead to definitive answers but rather to subjective impressions.
2. Discuss how our points of view are influenced by our connections, values and experiences.
3. Introduce the reading/observation journal as a means of initially exploring our reactions.

*Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.* <sup>[1]</sup>

- Kenneth Burke

This often quoted parable reveals how history functions as an on-going conversation, a conversation that we're invited to participate in during the time we have on earth. Likewise, when we write an analysis of a subject, we should see ourselves as participating in a discussion on it, one that will continue long after we've handed in our essays. Just as it's unlikely that what we have to say will be the last word, so we should not allow others to have the final say either. Of course, there isn't just one conversation that goes on in our lives; instead we are involved every day in several discussions, and they all influence each other. Because we do not begin any analysis as a blank slate, we first need to understand why we see a subject in a certain way, by considering how past discussions and experiences inform our reactions.



None of us are raised in a vacuum: our friends, our teachers, and our families influence our beliefs, tastes, and judgments. Though sometimes we may disagree with their perspectives (especially those of our parents), we can never completely escape from them. Likewise, our broader culture exerts a heavy influence. For instance, although you might enjoy shows like *South Park* or *Family Guy* that satirize the American family, you might not have liked them if you were alive (and able to see them) in the 1950s when Americans were more celebratory and less critical of themselves. In addition, personal experiences strongly inform our reactions. At some time, we have all heard a sappy song about a person getting his or her heart broken and wanted to scream at the singer to get over it, only to hear the same song again after being freshly dumped and feeling as though it now penetrates our soul.

This holds true not only for works of art and fiction but also for writing that reveal the author's intentions more directly, such as editorials, documentaries, and essays. For one, we may disagree as to whether the author's stated purpose is the only reason behind the piece. If, for instance, I were to write an editorial arguing that the government should spend more money on education to make it more accessible to the poor and bring about greater cultural literacy, I know what my friends and family would say: "Yeah, right, Randy; you just want a raise." And even if everyone were to agree that the author has sincerely stated the purpose of the piece, the effect of that purpose will vary from person to person due to the different experiences, morals, and beliefs that shape each individual's unique perspective. For instance, a Michael Moore documentary that is critical of American business practices may leave one person (who just received a promotion) seething at him for trying to tear down established institutions, while another viewer (who just got downsized) may applaud Moore for bravely calling our attention to an injustice that needs to be rectified.

I am not bringing this up to suggest that when you prepare to write you should wipe your mind clear of any potential bias. "Objectivity" is an ideal that is largely unattainable, for we all see the world through our own subjective lenses. This is why we need to first acknowledge, understand, and evaluate our subjectivity, especially as it relates to the subject of our analysis. To consider why you react to something as you do, I recommend that when reading a text, viewing a show, listening to a song or recalling an experience, you take the time to pause periodically and record your thoughts in



reading/observation journal. Your responses will vary in length and type, but should essentially consist of two parts: first summarize what you encounter (if it's a written or visual text, mark the page number or DVD chapter so you can find it again), and then write your reaction to it. The advantage to keeping a reading/observation journal is that it allows you to reflect on your subject as you examine it. Though you might think pausing to write in a journal will take away from experiencing or enjoying your subject, it may actually help you to encounter it more fully. When a piece inspires a particular thought, your mind may wander through its implications even as you continue reading or viewing, causing you to overlook important details. The journal allows you to pause and record your considerations and then return to your focus with greater attention. On the following page are a few examples of reading observation journal entries for an analysis of a book, a business report, and a travel essay.

### **Response to Virginia Woolf's Essay "A Room of One's Own"**

p. 5 Wolfe claims that she had to "kill the Angel of the House" before she felt the freedom to engage in her own writing. She clearly associates this phrase with the expectations laid out for women in this period.

This seems a bit dated to me. Most of the couples I know split the household chores. I also know that I would not like it if my girlfriend asked me to do all the dishes for the next two weeks so she could write.

p. 7 Wolfe also points out that to write anything worthwhile we need to have a "room of one's own", free from distractions or expectations.

I would love to have a room of my own, but unfortunately as a student living in Southern California, I can't afford one. And there are plenty of distractions: My roommate's TV, the passing traffic, the cat that keeps jumping up on my lap. She's so aware of the problems with gender, she isn't thinking about social...

### **Business Report on Buddies, a Family Restaurant Chain**

Quarterly Profits were up by 10% on the Lincoln and Elm location, but down over 5% at the Broadway and Fourth location.

Of course several factors could allow for this. The management team at L&E is more competent, but they are also located in a family neighborhood. B&F is more gentrified and customers want something more upscale.

A suggestion was made at board meeting on 12/7 to increase advertising for B&F location and possibly bring in new management.

I doubt either plan will have much success, other family restaurants tried the same thing but failed in that area. Best scenario is to shut down and move to a more family friendly neighborhood, and then consider...

## **Travel Journal for a Week in Paris**

June 23, 8 p.m. Sitting across the coffee shop from me are two Americans, asking for soymilk. The waiter clearly looks confused, so they repeat their request more loudly. The waiter simply walks away, leaving the Americans to comment, “It’s true what they say about the French being rude.”

Why don’t more Americans understand not everybody should speak English and that raising your voice does not help? I made an effort to order in French and the waiter was very nice to me. Another example of how we create and believe our stereotypes.

June 24, 3 p.m. Amazing view from top of Eiffel Tower, the city stretches on as far as you can see in every direction.

On further reflection, however, I preferred the quieter places in the city. I loved the hidden restaurants, the small art galleries, the...

As you can see from these examples, what you write at this point will probably not appear in your finished draft, at least not verbatim. In this chapter and the next two, I encourage you to write in a more exploratory fashion, using your pen or keyboard to discover and develop your perspectives before you present them more formally. Your initial responses should take the form of freewriting, writing that comes out as a stream of thoughts unencumbered by grammar, spelling, or a fear of where it is heading. In addition to freewriting, we will look at several other exercises and heuristics, which are discovery procedures, that will help to get you started—but always remember that if you do

not take the time to explore your ideas, then your final draft will most likely seem obvious and boring, no matter how much you polish the structure or style.

### EXERCISE

Get a hold of a journal, notebook, or pad, and write “Reading/Observation Journal” on the front cover. Make your first entry about one of the subjects you’re examining for your first essay. Divide the pages between left and right; on the left side, write down what you do, and on the right side, record comments. Your comments might be about what you like/dislike about the subject, how it seems odd or justifiable, how it emerges from social pressures and/or policies, and whether it’s inevitable, modifiable, or avoidable. Make a separate journal for each of your classes and use it to comment on all of your assignments.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Writing about a subject when you first consider it can help you to formulate a point of view and save time down the road.
- Your initial considerations do not have to be stated formally or definitively—they can be tentative and exploratory.
- A consideration of the various implications of a subject results in more original, thoughtful assertions.

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[1] Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 110.



## 2.2 Consulting Other Sources

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain how consulting research may inform and expand our analysis.
2. Discuss effective ways to find sources.
3. Discuss how to evaluate and incorporate relevant sources.

To return to Burke’s parable at the beginning of this chapter, consulting sources is how we invite authors into the mini parlor discussion of our essay where their ideas may support our own or provide points of contrast. Looking at what others have to say may help you to extend and clarify each aspect of analysis. For example, relevant biographical and cultural background can help you to form more thoughtful assertions, especially on the more obscure aspects of your subject. Your explanations will also become clearer and more thorough as you compare and contrast your perspectives with those of others. Finally, looking at other sources can help you to see new dimensions of significance as you learn more about the issues that relate to your subject—issues that were central at the time the subject was formulated or took place as well as issues that we still struggle with today.

I recommend that you begin your research with a detective mindset; be organized and deliberate but also open to the unexpected. And like a good detective, be prepared to take plenty of notes in which you consider both the content and your initial reactions, using the reading/observation journal discussed above. Thinking about the sources as you examine them will save you time down the road when you incorporate them into your analysis. And just as detectives ask for help in conducting investigations, don’t hesitate to consult experts about which sources might be the most useful and where to track them down. In all the years I have been doing research, I have yet to find a librarian who was not happy to assist me. Furthermore, as a detective lets clues lead to new clues, so you should let the sources you examine lead you to new sources. Look at the bibliographies and notes of the essays you consult to see which ones they rely on, and especially look for those that are cited in more than one piece.



Gathering information has become much easier in recent years; in fact, sometimes we often feel buried in it. If I wish to consult secondary research, pieces written by others, I can stroll over to a library where I can glance at more texts than I can read in fifty lifetimes, visit a local bookstore to browse through bestsellers and magazines, or stop at a newsstand and flip through papers from almost every major city in the world. And thanks to the Internet, I do not even have to leave the house, but can do a Google search for up to the minute news or visit any number of academic websites to see what my fellow scholars have written about my subject. And I do not need to rely just on what others have already written, but can also turn to primary research, information that I gather for myself. I can conduct interviews, send out surveys, visit relevant locations, and even set up experimental studies (as long as they conform to proper ethical guidelines). Having so many options, we can sometimes feel like the proverbial donkey that starves to death because he can't choose which bundle of hay to eat from first.

To return to the opening parable, once you have gathered enough research on your subject, you can now participate in the on-going discussion about it. As Burke suggests, you might begin by simply listening to what experts have already said by reviewing the background information that provides a fuller picture of the subject and the circumstances out of which it emerged. You might consult (but do not rely on) a few websites that are specifically devoted to the subject to familiarize yourself with the main issues connected to it. You might then want to examine more specific historical or biographical texts to read about the prevalent issues and concerns for the author or key people involved at the time the event happened or the piece was created. You might also look at interviews and correspondence with these people to learn what they had to say about their influences, affiliations, and concerns.

Once you understand the general circumstances out of which your subject arose, you can more directly examine what critics and scholars have written about it. If your subject is a creative work, then you might want to peruse reviews that came out at the time of its release as well as examine more recent perspectives published in scholarly books and journals in the humanities. If you are analyzing a non-fiction person or event, then you might consult contemporary newspapers, op-eds, and political documents, along with more recent books and journals in the social sciences. When



reviewing these, you will soon discover that critics, pundits, and scholars often disagree with each other; keep in mind that if they all held the same opinions, then neither they nor you would have any reason to continue to examine your subject. Finally, you should not only examine the research that focuses directly on your subject but also explore research that focuses on the surrounding significance. For instance, if you were analyzing the diary of a runaway slave from the 1840s, then you might want to read about the debate over slavery during that period. You could consult current historical perspectives as well as documents from the period, such as congressional debates, or testimonials from both slave owners and abolitionists.

After examining several sources, you can begin to formulate more specific research questions. For instance, if you were to analyze the current state of the economy, you might ask the question: Are we on the verge of an economic recovery? Keep in mind that you might get several answers to this question and you shouldn't rely on any one of them to do your thinking for you by picking out one or two of the leading economic indicators and drawing the obvious conclusions from them. Let's say that you look at the New York Stock Exchange and see that it has risen a thousand points in the past six months. You might be tempted to see this as evidence that the economy is strong overall, though this may only be true for a small segment of the population. Likewise, if you were to look at only the national unemployment rate and see that it has risen during this period, you might conclude that the economy is weak overall, though, again, this may be true for only certain types of workers and in specific parts of the country. For a more complete analysis, you should consider both statistics, and explain why you think the economy could be strong in one area and weak in another in light of both current circumstances and historical precedence. Also, you should not rely on others to explain these statistics for you, but reveal why you agree or disagree with their opinions. For instance, it would probably not be enough to write, *"The stock market has risen substantially, a sign, according to Wall Street expert Joe Dollars, that the economy is doing well as a whole."* Instead you should add your perspective to both the statistics and expert opinion: *"While the stock market has risen substantially, leading some experts like Joe Dollars to conclude that the economy is doing well, the number of unemployed continues to increase in key services throughout the country, leading me to believe that the recession is far from over."*



The temptation to rely on a singular source becomes even stronger when we come across an author whose point of view is similar to our own. For example, suppose that you are a vegetarian and are analyzing the rise of obesity in the United States. If you read an article on how meat consumption has increased in recent years, you might be tempted to immediately put the two together and argue that the meat industry is solely responsible for this unhealthy trend. But if you stop your research there, you could miss out on a plethora of other causes, such as how technology keeps us from getting adequate exercise. In doing background reading on your subject, you should examine a variety of sources, especially those that take positions that are antithetical to your own. In doing so you show that you are participating in a general discussion as opposed to merely focusing on those whose ideas agree with your own. And if, after examining all of these sources, you are still having trouble formulating more precise research questions, you might try utilizing some of the invention exercises suggested in the next three chapters. These will help you to both read your sources more critically and consider their implications more fully.

Whichever sources you decide to include, make certain that you acknowledge them, even when writing a draft. Plagiarism, the attempt to pass off another's ideas as your own, is something that could not only earn you an F on a paper or in a class, but also get you expelled from your school. And many teachers make no distinction between unintentional plagiarism (simply forgetting to cite a source in an early draft) and intentional plagiarism (purposely taking credit for another's ideas). To be on the safe side, you should cite any ideas that you come across in your reading that are not common knowledge. Though sometimes this may be difficult to assess if you are not well versed in a particular field, you can always ask your teacher when you are in doubt (just make certain that you do so before you hand in your paper). You should also ask your teachers which format they want you to use when citing your sources. The APA, Chicago, and MLA manuals reveal different ways of going about it, so you should consult their respective publications and websites to learn more about their formats and procedures.

Make certain, too, that you integrate these sources into your essay, and that you do not let the authors speak entirely for you. If you do not show what you think, you might leave the impression that you randomly tossed in a few sources simply to fulfill a research requirement, which can be



especially problematic if you rely on information that comes from questionable sources. Instead you should incorporate sources as if you were a moderator in a discussion (recall again the opening parable), responding to each and showing how they inform or provide points of contrast to each other and to your own views. To determine whether you should include a particular piece in your essay and if so, how to integrate it, ask yourself the following questions:

### **When was the piece published?**

Using up-to-date sources in your essay is important because they show that you are at the forefront of the academic conversation. You should especially keep this in mind when examining disciplines that are constantly being updated due to recent discoveries or advancements in technology, such as genetic engineering or computer programming. However, it is not necessary to refer only to analyses that were published in the past twenty years as long as you take into account that your source might be limited by outdated cultural attitudes or obsolete scientific theories. In fact, sometimes you might wish to quote a misguided statement as an example of what some people thought about the subject during a particular era, but try not to set it up as the final word on how we should continue to see it today. For instance, you might quote a nineteenth century professor who viewed Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* as being a demented fantasy of a psychotic woman who doesn't know that her place is in the home, in order to show how unenlightened critics interpreted the novel at the time. You should not, however, allow such sexist biases to limit your understanding of the piece today.

### **What is the author's area of expertise?**

Usually at the beginning or ending of an article or book, you can find a summary of the author's special background, education, or training that gives her opinion a sense of weight and authority. Though you should make certain that most of the people you quote or paraphrase are experts in a field relevant to your subject or its implications, you might also include opinions of others so long as you qualify how and why you choose to include them. For instance, if I were writing an analysis of how Americans were affected by the Second World War, I might quote my mother, who was a child when it occurred, to show the effect it had on someone who was not fully cognizant of its broader implications.



## What are the author's possible biases?

An author may have a certain perspective not only because he wrote at a particular time and place or because of his expertise, but also because of his beliefs and affiliations. Sometimes authors are blatantly upfront about their political, moral or religious agendas, and other times they strongly imply them through their choice of words or the way they shape their analysis. In either case, it's always a good idea to qualify what they have to say by acknowledging the one-sided or overly opinionated nature of their views and/or by including contrasting perspectives. You do not have to pretend to be objective yourself (I don't believe such a state is possible), but you should leave the impression of a reasonable and thorough scholar who has explored different points of view before arriving at your own opinions.

Even when citing authors who demonstrate more informed, reasonable, and enlightened perspectives, you still need to reveal to what extent you agree or disagree with them and why. Sometimes your opinion will be implied by the way you set up their perspective, especially when the author's point of view echoes your own: *Huckleberry Finn has had an enormous influence on other authors, for, as Ralph Ellison argues, "No Huck and Jim, no American Novel as we know it."*<sup>[1]</sup> Other times, you may need to explain why and to what degree you disagree: *Tom Wolfe's famous definition of the 1970s as being a "me generation"*<sup>[2]</sup> *has a certain amount of validity, but he fails to take into account that historically nearly all people have been motivated by their own selfish interests and are not overly concerned with the welfare of future generations.*

As you may have noticed, I chose to quote the source in the first case and paraphrase it in the second. Which method you decide to use when you incorporate a source has mostly to do with how much you like the specific words the author uses and how succinctly they are stated. In the first case, I thought that Ellison summed up the influence of Twain's novel in such a clear, definitive, and succinct manner that I wanted to use his exact words, but in the second, Wolfe's notion of the "me generation" is explored throughout his entire essay, and my response focused less on a specific way he sees this attitude manifested and more on a perspective that he doesn't take into account. If you choose to quote a source, make certain that you put quotation marks around it when it is four lines or less and, when longer, set it off through indentation and spacing.



When incorporating long quotes, use them sparingly and follow them up with almost equally long explanations to justify why you needed to include all of the words, as opposed to providing just a summary of the main ideas. For instance, when I opened this section with a quote from Kenneth Burke, I did not just leave it hanging there for the reader to consider but attempted to integrate it into the main issues I wanted to cover, pointing out that we are all part of an ongoing conversation whenever we choose to do research, and that neither you, me, nor anyone else will ever get the final word. I also chose to quote the parable in its entirety because I like the way Burke invites us into his metaphorical parlor to consider our place within history. Usually, however, you can paraphrase the gist of an author's ideas and reserve direct quotes only for places where his choice of words is especially striking or significant.

Exactly how much you choose to quote or paraphrase will also depend on your subject and the reason you have for writing on it. Just make certain that your finished essay does not seem like a research report (like those forms you filled out in the sixth grade to prove that you read a book) or like a pastiche of long quotes with only a few brief statements tying them together. Instead, your own considerations should primarily drive your essay, with other sources used mainly for support or as catalysts for further reflection. Still, though your research should not completely replace your initial considerations, it most certainly will modify them as it helps you to discover insights that would not have occurred to you had you only analyzed the subject on your own.

### EXERCISE

Think of a person or place that is important to you but is not widely known. First, look over what you may have already written about this person or place in the form of letters, e-mails, or diaries. Next, write down a list of people whom you might wish to interview to find out more about your subject, for instance family, friends and colleagues if it is a person, or frequent visitors and caretakers if it is a place. List the main questions you would like to ask the people involved and consider possible follow up questions you could ask depending on their initial answers. Now, consider some of the main issues that you associate with the person or place. Look for a few secondary sources that might help you learn more about these issues.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- It is important to understand and acknowledge personal influences and experiences before beginning an analysis.



- Research can help us learn new perspectives on a subject and engage in a wider discussion about how we see it and why it is relevant.
- Always acknowledge research, even when writing initial drafts, and incorporate it gracefully into the essay.
- Carefully review the research for relevance and bias before introducing it in an essay.
- Research should always supplement but never dominate an essay, and special care should be taken before incorporating long quotes.

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[1] Ralph Ellison, *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Michael Patrick Hearn (New York: Norton, 2001), backcover.



## 2.3 An Overview of the Writing Process

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain how writing takes both time and effort, and discuss effective ways to go about it.
2. Discuss how the writing process is not linear but recursive, moving back and forth from invention to revision.
3. Reveal how learning to write analytically can lead to success in many areas of life outside of the classroom.

Once you've chosen a subject, initially considered how your beliefs, culture, and experiences might influence how you see it, and consulted other sources for background information and differing perspectives, you can begin to draft your essay. But before you can actually sit down to formally write your essay, you have to actually, well, sit down and write. Be careful not to try to produce a formal draft too soon because sometimes you can get writer's block when you haven't taken the time to thoroughly explore your ideas. If you get stuck and do not know where to begin your analysis, go back and write out your thoughts less formally. This will help you to think (and get more excited) about what you want to write. At the same time, don't wait too long to get started, because motivation usually comes after you've begun the process. Often when you force yourself to start writing you will discover new insights that will ignite your desire to find even more. Personally, I seldom feel like sitting in front of the computer and wracking my brain for another writing session, but once I get started and become excited by what I produce, several hours may just zoom by without me even noticing.

Of course, this happens only when I get into the act of writing itself and shut off the voices of self-doubt. Like most of you, I carry a committee of past teachers and critics in my head, a committee that constantly questions every word I write: "Can't you find a better way to put that? You're an English Professor, so you should know exactly what to say the first time through! This piece of writing is terrible and it will prove to everyone that you were an imposter all of these years." Thoughts like these do not, of course, motivate me, but instead make me want to exit my writing program and switch to a more relaxing file like Spider Solitaire. To get anything accomplished,



therefore, I first have to make a deal with these voices of self-doubt — if they will be quiet long enough to let me get out a draft, then I will review my essay with a more critical eye later.

I don't want to give the impression, however, that writing is a linear procedure, moving steadily from invention to writing to revising. Instead, writing is a recursive process in which all of these functions may go on simultaneously. I see writing more as an increasingly complicated discussion between writers and their words. As I put the words down on paper or on the computer screen, I take a step back, consider their implications, and add, delete, rearrange, or modify them until they express my view in a clear, precise, and thorough manner. This often takes several drafts. Writing is not a skill (something you can master after a few lessons), but an art, and, like any art, you can never perfect it. In fact, the better you get at it, the more time and effort you need to devote to it. Any child can learn to play "Chopsticks" on the piano before even having a formal lesson; however, a concert pianist must spend hours practicing everyday before being satisfied with a performance. Likewise, when I was in high school, I would write only one draft of my essay before handing it in, but now I often produce as many as thirty drafts before I submit a book or article for publication.

To help your writing go more smoothly, find a good place to work, relatively free of distraction, and set aside a certain amount of time you plan to devote to the assignment. Ideally, I like to spend between two to three hours a day writing because less than that does not give my ideas adequate time to develop, but more than that tends to make me feel like I've exerted my analytical muscles too hard (which is another reason not to wait to begin the essay until the day before the assignment is due). I also try to break the writing into smaller tasks, focusing on one section of my analysis at a time, to avoid the feeling of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the project, reminding myself that the section I work on might appear anywhere in the finished draft and that I do not have to write the essay in the same sequence that it will later be read. I can always change the order after I have a chance to articulate my thoughts more fully.

By this I do not mean that you should write in the exact manner that I or anyone else does. Some writers like to outline their papers before they begin; others like to discover their ideas while composing. Some like to begin their assignments early, and others get added inspiration from the



adrenaline of a looming deadline. Additionally, your composing process may vary, depending on your subject and the nature of the assignment. For instance, if you know a subject well, you may not need to do as much additional background reading as you would when tackling one that's less familiar, and if the assignment does not allow you to hand in additional revisions, you might want to start it earlier to make certain that you have the time to fully develop your main ideas.

Having said all this, there is a common way that most of us go about forming an analysis, at least initially. As you will see in Chapter 3, once you've learned something about a subject and considered your general feelings toward it, you can carefully examine the key examples to establish your main perspective or working theses. Afterward, as you will see in Chapter 4, you can modify and justify these perspectives by explaining how you derived them and by considering their broader implications. Finally, as you will see in Chapter 5, you can structure your thoughts into a deliberate and effective essay. Of course, as you go through this process, you may continue to examine and even question your own beliefs and consult additional sources. As Burke implies in his parlor parable, the process is never ending, but eventually we all leave the discussion of our subjects to concentrate on other concerns. Yet at the same time, be careful not to give up too quickly and merely throw out the most obvious statements that occur to you. To contribute something worthwhile to this ongoing discussion, you need to slow down the process of analysis to fully consider the relevance of each of its features. Doing so will not only help you to understand and appreciate the subjects you analyze for your classes, but also can make you more successful in your future endeavors.

Whether you go into business, medicine, law, or any other profession, you will be expected to develop, present, and defend your opinions. Simply having a wealth of factual knowledge will continue to have less and less importance in this information age, where people can get basic answers by picking up their cell phones or searching with Google. More significantly, when people cease to think critically and analyze established knowledge, both social and academic progress stagnates. Just imagine what the world would be like today if teachers had given up on analysis five hundred years ago and continued to allow students only to memorize what we knew then about all academic subjects. We'd still be living in a feudal society, riding around on horses, and facing a life expectancy of around thirty-five.



Furthermore, analysis can also help us to understand and change those parts of our lives that often matter more to us than our careers and contributions to academic knowledge. We don't have to take Socrates' phrase "the unexamined life is not worth living" as seriously as Thoreau did and escape to a cabin in the woods to look at ourselves without distraction. Yet we can all benefit from slowing down from time to time to think about our daily activities, key relationships, and future goals and consider how we might make each more fulfilling. If we learn to examine and avoid the mistakes we made in the past, we are more likely to take control of the present and move toward a more promising future.

### EXERCISE

Think of a social issue or personal concern that has been troubling you as of late. Write down all your thoughts without stopping and don't be concerned if your writing seems scattered or informal because you can fix these problems at a later stage. Now look over what you just wrote and underline the five most important words. Next, write a sentence in which you use all five of those words, perhaps in a different order and manner than they initially came out. Now write a paragraph based on that sentence. In the process, how did your writing evolve? Did any sections become clearer? Did your perspective change? Consider how writing is a process that constantly moves you in directions you might not have anticipated.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Writer's block occurs when we become too critical of our thoughts and expressions before we have a chance to develop them.
- Writing is a recursive process of forming, developing, and clarifying our ideas, causing them to evolve in unexpected directions.
- To produce ideas worth sharing, we need to slow down the process of analysis, taking the time to carefully examine each of its components.



## Chapter 3

# Developing Assertions: From a Close Reading of Examples

### 3.1 A Close Reading of the Details

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how to provide a close reading of different types of details.
2. Explain how to provide a close reading of creative works, non-fiction, and personal experiences.
3. Discuss how to extend the implications of loaded words, metaphorical language, images, and sounds.

Everywhere we turn, we hear people engaging in analysis. Sitting in a coffee shop, we overhear fellow caffeine addicts discussing diet fads, politics, and the latest blockbusters. Watching television, we listen to sports commentators discuss which team has the best chance to win the Super Bowl, comedians rip on the latest cultural trends, and talk show hosts lecture their guests on the moral repugnance of their actions. Still most of the time I find myself dissatisfied with the level of these conversations. Too many people throw out blanket judgments they can't defend while too many others mindlessly nod in agreement. If more people actually took the time to carefully examine their subjects, they might discover and articulate more satisfying and worthwhile perspectives. This chapter will help you to consider the components that make up your subject in a way that avoids the traps of a closed mind—trying to make everything fit into a ready-made interpretation—or an empty mind—giving your subject a fast read or a cursory glance.

The best way to begin your analysis is with an attentive, open mind; something that is more difficult than most of us care to admit. Our analytical muscles often grow flabby through lack of use as we rush from one task to the next, seldom pausing long enough to consider anything around us. From an early age, overwhelmed by school, scheduled activities, and chores, we discovered that it is much easier to accept someone else's explanations than to think for ourselves. Besides, original thinking is rarely encouraged, especially in school where deviating from the teacher's perspective seldom results in good grades. It should therefore come as no surprise that the ability to slow down long enough to fully consider a subject is, for most of us, difficult, and not something that comes naturally. It is,



however, definitely worthwhile to do so. Remember how Jeff, the frustrated student from [Chapter 1 "Analysis for Multiple Perspectives"](#), wasted hours staring at his computer screen because he did not think very deeply about *The Tempest* when he first read it? Paying close attention when you first encounter a subject will save you time down the road.

Learning to prioritize the details on which to focus is just as important as learning how to pay close attention to a subject. Each detail does not warrant the same amount of consideration. Consider, for example, meeting someone at a party who relates every single detail of what happened to him throughout the day (I woke up at 6:58 a.m., brushed each of my teeth, had breakfast consisting of two thirds cereal and one third milk...). Who would not try to find an excuse to move to the other side of the room? Likewise, sometimes teachers will tell students to make sure that they use plenty of concrete details in their essays. Yes, concrete details are good to include and examine, but only if they matter. You risk boring your reader if you simply include details for their own sake without exploring what makes them important. When you read this section, keep in mind that you do not have to pay equal attention to all the kinds of details presented. Instead, focus on those that are most essential to your subject and purpose.

## Events, Plots, and Actions

Usually the first detail we relate when someone asks us “what’s new?” is an important event or recent action we’ve taken in our life: “I ran a marathon on Sunday, found out I got into law school, got engaged to my girlfriend.” Events and actions also tend to be the first things we consider about our subjects. Sometimes actions are overt—we see a movie about a superhero who saves a city; sometimes they’re implied—we see a painting of a distraught face and we assume that something bad must have recently happened. Events and actions tend to consume the majority of our attention, whether they happen on a small scale to us individually or on a large scale to an entire city, country, or culture.

The subject that focuses the most closely on this type of detail is, of course, history. Certain events are so central to a particular era that they are studied again and again, often with different perspectives and conclusions. Take, for example, the big event of 1492. Up until I got to college, I was told that this was the year Columbus discovered America. Later I discovered that many historians disagree with this assessment



of what happened. First of all, you can't discover a place that has already been found, yet the fact that people were living in America already was always brushed aside in my high school history texts. Given that many Native Americans had more sophisticated forms of government and agriculture than their European counterparts makes this oversight seem particularly troubling. And even if we were to revise the assessment to state "Columbus was the first European to discover America," that too would be wrong. New discoveries of Viking settlements in southern Canada and the northern United States suggest that they beat Columbus by several decades. Understanding the event in light of these facts may cause us to revise the assessment of the event to "Columbus introduced the Americas to the people of Europe," or, less charitably, "Columbus opened up the Americas to modern European imperialism."

This is not to say that we should now consider Columbus a nefarious figure (at least from the Native American's point of view). He could not have anticipated the centuries of conquest that would follow his arrival. Often in history, people are caught up in forces they don't completely understand. The same holds true when you examine the actions of fictional characters. For instance, sometimes characters create the condition for their own downfall, which inspires us to learn from their mistakes. Other times, characters may act nobly yet come to bad ends anyway. Such plots may encourage us to try to change the system that rewards bad behavior and punishes good, or they might leave us feeling frustrated with the seemingly random nature of our existence.

In the first ten minutes of Mike Judge's film *Office Space*, all the actions solidify into a very definitive attitude about the problems with the modern workplace.<sup>[1]</sup> Angry music plays as we see an above shot of a typical Southern California traffic jam. We now see it from the perspective of Peter Gibbons, one of the unfortunate drivers attempting to get through the jam. He moves a couple of feet, brakes; moves a couple of more feet, brakes. He tries to switch lanes, but whenever he does the one he just left begins to move and the one into which he moved comes to a grinding halt. All this time, an elderly man with a walker, who was once behind him on an adjacent sidewalk, has caught up and passed him. Peter responds with a momentary flare of anger that ends with a sigh of resignation. After the camera switches to a few of his colleagues stuck in the same jam, we see Peter arrive at his place of work, "Initech." He sighs again with resignation as he gets the usual electrical shock from the brass doorknob that opens into a large room



made up of a sea of office cubicles. Once again, the camera shot is from above, showing Peter lost among the crowd of workers.

Before he has a chance to get much work done, his boss comes by his cubicle to talk to him. He begins by asking Peter “how’s it going?” in a tone of voice that makes it clear that he doesn’t really care about the answer, and before Peter can respond the boss interrupts to chastise him for not using the correct cover sheet for the “TPS Report” he sent out the previous day. Two other bosses visit Peter repeating their predecessor’s instruction and tone. During all of this, Peter continues to reveal the same look and sigh of resignation, until finally he begs two of his friends to take a coffee break out of fear that he might “lose it.”

All of these actions inspire us to ask the question: Does it have to be this bad? I don’t think so. A more critical analysis could provide solutions to both the social and personal concerns touched on in the film. It could lead us to create much better systems of public transportation that get us to work in a more timely, less stressful manner. It could also lead bosses to discover better ways to encourage enthusiasm and dedication from their employees.

Understanding the implications of recent events and actions can be much more difficult than evaluating those that occur in the distant past or in fiction. At what point, for example, do the seemingly inappropriate actions of one country justify another to declare war on it? At what point do the actions of an individual justify another to call the police? Like everything else, most of this is a matter of interpretation, but success in professional settings often requires the ability to justify your point of view through a close reading of what actually occurred. Take for instance the proverbial story of a woman stealing a loaf of bread to feed her starving children. You could look at this action as extremely noble, as the mother puts herself in danger to keep her children healthy. The baker, however, may not share this sentiment, particularly if he too is struggling to survive.

## **Loaded Terms and Stock Phrases**

Though actions may speak louder than words, words are what usually inspire the actions to occur in the first place. In addition, we often base what we know of the world on what people tell us rather than on our direct experiences. Thus, unless we are able to discern how language may be manipulated, we stand a



good chance of being manipulated ourselves. For instance, consider how politicians often ignore their opponent's actions and simply repeat loaded terms, words infused with negative associations like "bleeding heart liberal" or "heartless conservative," to characterize an opponent as being against the public good. I came across a particularly blatant example of this when writing my dissertation on the Red Scare in America that followed World War II. The Red Scare was a period when the fear of the spread of communism abroad inspired a great deal of domestic suspicion and conformity. In a series of pamphlets released by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (often referred to as HUAC), the members attempted to feed this fear in the manner in which they explained the nature of communism to the American public. The pamphlets were set up in a question/answer format, similar to the FAQ sections of websites today. Several of the answers attempted to show communism as a warped view from its inception by going after the man whom we often credit with inventing it: "What was Marx's idea of a Communist World?" HUAC's answer: "That the world as we know it must be destroyed—religion, family, laws, rights, everything. Anybody opposing was to be destroyed too."<sup>[2]</sup> The repetition of "destroyed" clearly inspires a feeling of dread, and presents an overly simplistic, and nearly cartoonish duality: melodramatic socialist villains twirling their mustaches while planning the destruction of their own families versus the warm-hearted capitalistic politicians in Washington who are only out to serve the public's best interests.

When loaded terms combine into stock phrases, aphorisms that people often repeat without fully considering their implications, you should be especially careful to look beyond the obvious meaning that's usually attached to them. Take the phrase, often attributed to legendary football coach Vince Lombardi: "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." First of all, does this mean that we can never engage in sports for fun, exercise, or friendship? On the contrary, in sports and in all of life, we often learn best from our mistakes and our failings. If we only play it safe and try to win all the time, then we don't get to experiment and discover anything new. As Thomas Edison pointed out, he had to allow himself to fail over a thousand times when trying to invent the light bulb in order to discover the right way to do it. Clearly, winning isn't the *only* thing, and I doubt that it should even be the most *important* thing, at least for most of us.

Be especially attentive when analyzing creative works to make note of any stock phrases or loaded terms the characters repeat, as it often reveals insights about how they see themselves and the world. In J.D.



Salinger's novel *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield, the troubled teenage protagonist, has just been expelled from his high school and goes to see his old history teacher, Mr. Spencer in his home. After a polite exchange, Mr. Spencer asks Holden to repeat what Dr. Thurmer, the principal, said to him just before giving him the boot:

*"What did Dr. Thurmer say to you, boy? I understand you had quite a little chat?..."*

*"Oh...well, about Life being a game and all. And how you should play it according to the rules. He was pretty nice about it. I mean he didn't hit the ceiling or anything. He just kept talking about life being a game and all. You know."*

*"Life **is** a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules."*

*"Yes, sir. I know it is. I know it."<sup>[3]</sup>*

Though Holden agrees with Mr. Spencer out of politeness, he goes on to narrate:

*"Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right—I'll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game."*

*What disturbs me even more about the phrase is that it leaves absolutely no room for creativity because nothing new can be brought into a world that has already been completed, making us all seem like those blue or pink pegs in the Milton/Bradley game Life, generic people with generic goals.*

One reason that we often fall victim to erroneous conclusions is that every day we get bombarded with a form of media that pushes us to accept the most absurd phrases—advertising. Take for instance the slogan “things go better with Coke.” What “things”? If I drank a Coke while running a marathon, I might get sick. And some things that actually do go better with Coke, I could do without, such as tooth decay and weight gain. To be fair, the slogans of Coke's chief competitor do not stand up to scrutiny either: “Pepsi, The Choice of a new generation.” Which generation? And how did they determine that it's their choice? Often

advertisers use ambiguous language like this in their slogans to deceive without lying outright. For instance, saying that a detergent *helps* to eliminate stains does not tell us that it actually *will*.

## Arguments and Policies

When analyzing a more articulated argument or policy, we're often tempted to use a phrase either to wholeheartedly agree with a position or to dismiss it entirely. But in doing so, a critical examination often gets lost in a barrage of name-calling and hyperbole. To try to understand the other side of an argument, I like to write an issue dialogue, starting with the most extreme positions and moving toward more reasonable compromises. Consider, for instance, the debate that surrounds whether universities should continue to raise tuition in order to make up for government cut backs to education:

*For: Universities should raise tuition. Why should taxpayers cover the expense? You students want to have a first rate education but you don't want to pay for it. You're just a bunch of lazy young people who feel entitled to every government handout you can get.*

*Against: Not true. Education is an investment. What you greedy old people don't realize is that when a student eventually receives a better job because of his education, he will pay more in taxes. This increased revenue will more than repay the government for what it spent on his education.*

*For: That's assuming that a student will get a better job because of his education; many people, like Bill Gates, have done pretty well without a degree. And even if you can prove that students will make more money, that doesn't mean that they will remain in the community that invested in their education.*

*Against: True, but most probably will, and anyway, the university invests a lot of its money in these surrounding communities. As for your second point, for every Bill Gates, there are thousands of college dropouts who are flipping burgers or living on the streets.*

*For: But why should someone who doesn't have children or live near a university town have to support an institution that doesn't give anything back to them? Would you want to have to spend your hard earned money to support a senior center's golf course?*

Against: Studies have shown that when governments do not spend money on education, they have to spend more on prisons so it's not as though cutting funding for education will benefit those taxpayers you describe. However, I agree that certain families should pay more for their children's education, as long as they can afford it.

*For: And I will concede that governments should continue to provide access to education for those who can't afford it, but I think even children of poor families have an obligation to give back to the community that supported them when they finish their degrees.*

Though this could continue for several more pages, you can see that both sides are starting to move toward more reasonable characterizations of each other. Again, when writing an issue dialogue, it is tempting to ridicule those on the other side with stock phrases to make it easier to dismiss their views (especially when looking at perspectives from different cultures and eras). But the more we can reasonably state the opposing view's arguments, the more we can reasonably state our own, and we should apply the same amount of scrutiny to our own beliefs that we do to those who disagree with us.

Part of this scrutiny may involve raising questions about the author's period, culture, and biases (see the previous chapter, regarding analysis of sources). In addition, you should consider the strength of the arguments, evaluating how well the author supports the main assertions with sound evidence and reasoning while paying particular attention to whether they rely on any fallacies—errors in reasoning. For instance, does the author make any hasty generalizations? Consider someone who attempts to argue that global warming doesn't exist on the basis that the weather has been quite cold for the last few days. Obviously the person would make a stronger case for her argument by presenting more encompassing evidence. Another common fallacy is the faulty syllogism (i.e. all cats die; Socrates is dead; therefore Socrates was a cat). Just because two items under considerations have a certain quality in common, does not mean that these items are the same. Perhaps the most common fallacy that I see students make is "guilt by association." This may be due to the fact that politicians use it all the time. For instance, in the 2008 presidential election, many tried to associate Barack Obama with terrorists simply because his middle name (Hussein) was the same as the deposed leader of Iraq. John McCain's significant personal wealth was seen as evidence that he would be insensitive to the needs of the poor, even though liberals



like Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy were also very well off. Also, be aware of the opposite fallacy—success by association. Go to any tennis shoe commercial on YouTube and you will see famous athletes performing incredible acts, as though the shoes, and not years of practice, are responsible for their success.

## Metaphorical Language

Not all the details you analyze will suggest a literal action or point of view; many will be of a metaphorical, or symbolic, nature. Though there are many different types of tropes (words or phrases that point toward a figurative meaning)—such as metaphor, simile, and synecdoche. The basic function of each is to allow someone to literally “see what you mean” by comparing an abstract concept to something concrete. One reason the metaphor “love is a rose” is so well known is that the object and the concept match extremely well. A rose, like love, may manifest in many different forms and have several complex layers when examined closely. Roses show the cheerful side of love because they look nice, smell sweet, and inspire warm fuzzy feelings. However, they also show the dangers of love by having thorns, and being difficult to care for. Like the different people you love, a rose requires just the right amount of attention and care—neither too much nor too little.

The need to extend metaphorical implications is especially apparent when analyzing a poem or a song. For instance, in her song “China,” Tori Amos explores the different metaphorical significance the central term has on a crumbling relationship: a far away location that represents the distance couples often feel between each other, a place with a Great Wall that can refer to the figurative barriers we build to protect ourselves emotionally, and fancy plates that, on closer examination, have cracks (just like those who seem to have the perfect relationship and then suddenly announce that they are breaking up).<sup>[4]</sup> In this case, understanding the metaphorical significance can give us an even greater appreciation of the song. When we say that a song (or any piece of art) “strikes a chord,” we mean that it resonates with our thoughts, feelings, and memories, and an understanding of its central metaphors allows us to relate to it in even more ways.

Metaphorical language does not come up only in the arts, but also in other disciplines, especially theology and philosophy. Nearly all religious texts are filled with parables and analogies because they provide us

with concrete images to explain spiritual concepts. Perhaps the most famous analogy from antiquity is Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," in which Socrates compares human understanding to people locked in chairs and forced to look at the shadows of themselves, cast by the light of candles against a cave wall. In time, they confuse that reality for the true reality that lies above them. When one brave soul (read Socrates) escapes these confines and leaves the cave to discover the true reality, he returns to the people left behind to tell them of their limited existence. Instead of being grateful, they choose not to believe him and have him put to death because they prefer to accept the reality to which they've become accustomed.

While this analogy continues to be told in various forms, it still needs to be examined critically. For instance, you might ask who put them in the cave and why? Is our reality set up as a training ground to move on to more satisfying forms of existence, as proposed in the film *The Matrix*? Or is it a cruel joke in which we're allowed only a glimpse of the way things should be while wallowing in our own inability to effect change? In addition, many have argued that the analogy relies on a transcendent notion of Truth that cannot be communicated or realized—that Socrates believes that there is a greater place outside of our natural existence only because he has a vivid imagination or a need to prove his own importance. If this is true, then we might do better to improve the existence we actually experience than to stagnate while hoping for a better one.

But while poets, philosophers, and songwriters use metaphorical language to entertain and enlighten, many others use it primarily to manipulate—drawing off of the symbolic value of certain terms. Again, advertisers are masters of this, helping companies to embed their products with metaphorical significance, beginning with what they choose to call them. Car companies often use the names of swift predatory animals to associate their products with speed, control, and power. And advertisers love to use analogies because they don't have to be proven. For example when stating that a product works "like magic," they get all the associations with a mystical process that offers quick, painless solutions without having to demonstrate its actual effectiveness. Be particularly on guard for inappropriate analogies when analyzing arguments. For instance, people may attempt to justify violent acts to advance their version of the public good by using the analogy that "you have to break a few eggs to make a cake." A person is far more valuable than an egg, and the analogy is simply inappropriate. The analogy would be far more

appropriate and effective if used to justify how you might need to give up smoking or sleeping late in order to get back into shape.

## Images, Sounds, Tastes, and Smells

Images, like words, are often imbued with metaphorical significance and thus can be manipulated in a similar manner. For instance, the politician who stands in front of a flag while giving a speech is attempting to feed off of the patriotic implications associated with it. Likewise, fast food companies often use images of clowns and cartoon figures to associate their products with the carefree days of childhood when we didn't have to worry about gaining weight or having high cholesterol. But images we see in painting, sculpture, photography, and the other arts offer more subtle and variant interpretations and deserve more careful examination.

In fact, we can look at certain paintings more than a hundred times and continue to discern new patterns of meaning. For me, this is especially true of Van Gogh's "The Starry Night." In his song "Vincent," singer-songwriter Don Mclean describes the painting as "swirling clouds in violet haze" that reflect the eyes of an artist who suffered for his sanity because the people around him could not understand or appreciate his vision. <sup>[5]</sup> Sometimes I see the painting this way, and other times I see it as a joyous dance of the stars moving in constant circles unencumbered by human misery (if you want to consider what the painting might mean to you, go to <http://www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/starryindex.html>).

Music can also create feelings of triumph, joy, or despair without the need for any words to convey a direct message. Again, sometimes this can happen in a way that seems apparent and universal, (such as how the theme song from the film *Star Wars* evokes feelings of heroism, excitement, and adventure) or in ways that are more subtle and complex. Jerry Farber, Professor of Comparative Literature, explains that the aesthetic appeal of Mozart's *Violin Concerto in A Major* emerges through the contrast among the various musical themes within it:

*Now there are moments when many listeners, I think, are likely to get isolated in the music immediately at hand, losing much of their awareness of the whole structure. Particularly during one section, a so-called 'Turkish' episode in a different time signature and a minor key, the*

*listener is likely, once having adjusted to this new and exotic atmosphere, to be swept far away from the courtly minuet. Still, the overall structure is the context in which we hear this episode and is likely, if only by effect of contrast, to help shape our resonant response.*<sup>[6]</sup>

Which of these details you analyze depends on the unique features of the subject's particular genre. For instance in analyzing both a poem and a song, you can consider the major metaphors, key terms, and actions. But with a song, you should also consider how it's sung, which instruments are used, and how the music underscores or contrasts with the lyrics. Likewise, an analysis of both a painting and a film requires attention to the color, composition, and perspective of the scene. But with a film, you should also consider the dialogue, background music, and how each scene relates to the ones that come before and after it. Keep in mind that although different kinds of texts tend to stimulate particular types of responses, sometimes it is fruitful to think about pieces in light of seemingly incongruous perspectives. For instance, you could look at a love song as reflecting cultural attitudes about gender roles or a political speech as encouraging psychological disorders such as paranoia.

When your analysis focuses on personal experiences, decisions, and encounters, you can discuss those details that correspond with the other senses as well. In fact, taste and smell can play a crucial role in our experiences, as they have the strongest connection to memory. In *Swann's Way*, the first part of his prolific novel *In Search of Lost Time*, French author Marcel Proust describes how dipping a pastry in tea helped him to recall a period of his life that he might have otherwise permanently forgotten. Though at first he couldn't recall why the taste had such a powerful effect on him, he eventually remembered that it was something his grandmother gave him as a child when the family visited her in the summer. The taste helped him to recall not only his moments with his grandmother but the details of the house and town itself. As he puts it:

*But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.*<sup>[7]</sup>

Though the personal experiences you write about do not have to be as significant to you as this was for Proust's narrator, you still need to recall the details as best you can. When doing so, take a step back and try to look at yourself as you might a character in a novel. Detaching yourself like this can be very hard to do, especially when you have a vested interest in seeing yourself in a certain light. However, you often get your best insights when you try, to paraphrase the poet Robert Burns, to see yourself as others see you. To illustrate, I will show how I can both present and analyze a recent visit to my gym.

*As I swiped my card at the entrance, the gentleman at the front desk greeted me with a friendly, "Hi Randy." I felt the usual twang of guilt because I can never remember his name and have to respond with a generic and slightly overenthusiastic, "Hey, how's it going?" Inside, the YMCA has its usual mix of old and young, most of whom are trying to get back into shape as opposed to other gyms where the main motivation for coming is to show off the body you already have.*

*I take a bitter sip from the rusty drinking fountain and head to the weight room where I see a young man completing his set on the first machine. He is definitely impressed with himself, periodically looking in the mirror with an expression that would make Narcissus ashamed. When he gets off, I wait until he turns around so he can see me move the key down to include more weight than he was just using. The satisfaction I get from this action comes partly from deflating some of his ego and partly from inflating my own. However, my own smugness is short-lived, because as soon as I get up, a much older man with a noticeable beer belly and smelling of Ben Gay sits at the machine and lowers the key much further than where I had it.*

*I go through my weight routine with a bit more humility and then wander over to the elliptical for the aerobic portion of my workout. I pull out my iPod and click to Credence Clearwater Revival, the only group with a happy enough sound to take my mind off my aching feet. After enough time, I leave the same way via the guy at the front desk (only now I return his, "Bye Randy," with a generic and slightly over enthusiastic, "See you later; have a good day").*

Though there was no text to consult this time, I can still interpret the experience by recalling and focusing on the key details that make it up. I could discuss why I find it embarrassing to admit any personal weakness, whether it stems from my bad memory for trying to recall names or from my inability to lift as

much weight as others. I could discuss the key in the weight machine metaphorically, and how I warped it in my mind from a simple tool to a larger symbol of competition. I could also discuss the effect of music and how it takes a lot of sting out of exercise by allowing me to focus on something other than the painful routine that stretches out before me. Finally, I could discuss how the rusty taste of the drinking fountain water or the smell of Ben Gay and sweat will always remind me of this particular gym.

When looking at a relationship or a decision, the analytical process is essentially the same as when you examine a specific event; you still need to consider, recall, and imagine various moments—just more of them. Whereas a relationship with another person is the sum total of all the time you’ve already spent with that person, making a decision involves imagining what might come about as a result of our choices. Oftentimes our analysis inspires thoughts that leap around in time as we reconsider past patterns to predict likely future events. For instance, if I were to analyze whether I should get a kitten, my mind may race through a string of potentially good and bad memories of having had cats in the past: images of soft, cuddly, purring little creatures that also like to destroy drapes and meow in my ear at five in the morning. Of course no matter how long and hard we think about something, we can never be sure that the outcome will work out for us in the way we hope and expect. Still, to be satisfied that we at least tried to make an informed, intelligent, and aware decision, we must slow down and reconsider all the relevant moments that we’ve already experienced.

### EXERCISE 1

Think of four concrete words, those which represent something we can see, touch, taste, or smell (for example, desk, willow, seaweed, or sidewalk), and four abstract words, those that represent concepts, feelings, or attitudes (for example, jealousy, freedom, fear, or arrogance), and then think of how each of your concrete words illustrate an aspect of your abstract ones. For instance, you might consider how fear is like a willow. Both may spread a lot of shade over our lives. At times fear may keep us in the dark, “rooted” like a willow from moving forward to places we need to go. However, at other times our fears may protect us from those dangers we are not yet ready to face.

### EXERCISE 2

Write an issue dialogue on a policy that is important to you. First freewrite on your own position, considering all of the places where you got your information from in the first place; then freewrite on the opposite point



of view, again, considering all the places where you have heard these perspectives articulated. Write a dialogue in which you take both sides seriously by fully considering the merits of each argument. How did your own position change as you considered other points of view? What possible compromises did you come to?

### EXERCISE 3

Select something in your own life that is important to you at the moment. It could be the desire to recall a past experience, to reflect on an important relationship, or to analyze a decision that you must make. Now, take a moment to freewrite on all the significant details and factors that are involved. Reflect further on what you just wrote. To what extent do/did you have choices regarding the outcome? To what extent does/did it seem predetermined and by which people and what circumstances? What can you still learn or do about the situation to maximize its benefits? How can you better accept those aspects of it that are not likely to change?

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. A close reading of a subject involves understanding the implications of the actions, terms, phrases, arguments, and images that make it up.
2. Metaphorical language can help us to understand a concept further as we extend how something concrete compares to something abstract.
3. An analysis of personal experiences, decisions, and relationships necessitates a certain level of detachment and a close reading of the relevant details.

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[1] Mike Judge, dir., *Office Space* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1999).

[2] U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *100 Things You Should Know About Communism in the USA* (80th Congress, 2d Session), 1.

[3] J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston, MA: LB Books, 1951), 8.

[4] Tori Amos, "China," *Little Earthquakes* (Atlantic Records, 1992).

[5] Don McClean, "Vincent," *American Pie* (United Artists Records, 1971).

[6] Jerry Farber, *A Field Guide to the Aesthetic Experience* (New York: Forwards, 1982), 106.

[7] Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Killmartin (New York: Random House, 1981), 50–51.



## 3.2 From Interpretations to Assertions

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Reveal the kinds of assertions that block a successful analysis.
2. Discuss how to produce meaningful assertions.
3. Explain how to unite meaningful assertions into a working thesis.
4. Show how to evaluate and modify a working thesis.

A close reading of the key details of a subject should help you to discover several intriguing interpretations about an array of different subjects: the consequences of an event, the motivations of a character, the effectiveness of an argument, or the nature of an image.

### Interpretations

An assertion differs from an interpretation by providing *perspective* on an underlying pattern, a perspective that implies what it means to you and why you think it's significant. Without such a perspective, an interpretation merely becomes a statement with no potential for development. Just as one might utter a statement that kills the mood of a particular situation ("What a romantic dinner you cooked for me! Too bad I'm allergic to lobster and chocolate..."), so one can make types of statements that block any possibility for further analysis. What follows are some of the most common:

#### 1. Statements of Fact

Factual statements might help support an analysis but should not be the main force that drives it. I might notice that Vincent Van Gogh used twenty-five thousand brush strokes to create *Starry Night*, that global warming has increased more rapidly in the polar regions, or that Alfred Hitchcock used erratic background music throughout his film *Psycho*. But what else can I say about any of these statements? They simply are true or false. To transform these factual statements into assertions that can be explored further, you need to add your own perspectives to them. For instance, you could argue that the erratic music in *Psycho* underscores the insanity of the plot and results in a cinematic equivalent to Edgar Allen Poe's frantic short sentences, or that global warming in the polar regions will result in higher sea levels that will cause enormous damage if we don't do anything to keep it in check.



## 2. Statements of Classification

It is not enough to simply assert that the focus of your analysis fits into a pre-established category like “modernism,” “impressionism,” “neo-conservativism,” or “first wave feminism.” Of course it can be useful to understand the nature of these broader categories, but you still need to explore why it is important to see your subject in this light. For instance, rather than simply point out that *Family Guy* can be seen as a satire of the American family, you should also consider what this perspective reveals about the show’s development and reception. It might also be worthwhile to consider how a work transcends the standard notions of its period or genre. You might point out that while most of the time the *Family Guy* characters are shown as broad and ridiculous, they can sometimes act in ways that are familiar and endearing. Similarly, when looking at a policy or argument, you should not simply categorize it as belonging to a particular social attitude or political party, but consider it on its own merits. Though political pundits often use terms associated with their opposition as curse words and summarily dismiss anything they advocate, you want to appear much more reasonable in an academic analysis.

## 3. Statements of Taste

Similarly, an analysis is not just a review in which you simply state how you feel about a piece or dismiss an argument or policy as being “distasteful.” A good assertion will not only reveal how you feel about the focus of your analysis but will also inspire you to explore why it makes you feel that way. In her article, “*Babe*, *Braveheart* and the Contemporary Body,” Susan Bordo, Professor of Media Studies, explains that the reason she liked the film *Babe* much better is that it shows the need for self-acceptance and connection to others in a society that overly values conformity and competition. <sup>[1]</sup> This assertion allows her to explore different aspects of contemporary American culture that may have inspired each of these films. Had she simply stated her opinion without stating why her subject, the films, made her feel this way, her article would not have been as compelling or convincing.

## 4. Statements of Intention

When looking at creative works, we often want to assert that our point of view is the one the author intended, yet when we equate our perspective with the author’s, we (rather arrogantly) assume that we



have solved the mystery of the piece, leaving us with nothing more to say about it. And even if we can quote the author as saying “I intended this,” we should not stop exploring our own interpretations of what the piece means to us. John Lennon tells us that his song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” was written in response to a drawing given to him by his son, Julian. Others suspect that his real intention was to describe a drug trip brought about by LSD, the initial letters in the words of the title of the song. <sup>[2]</sup> I have never seen his son’s drawing, and I don’t use psychedelic drugs, so neither interpretation means much to me. I love the song because it guides me through a kind of *Alice in Wonderland* fantasy of “looking glass ties” and “tangerine trees.” To be able to show why a given interpretation matters to us, we should not phrase our assertions as being about what we think the author intended but what it causes us to consider.

Likewise you should be careful to avoid simply stating that you know the “real intentions” behind a work of non-fiction, a social policy, or a particular action or decision. For example, consider if a business decides to move its operations overseas to save money. This may inspire some to say that the company’s real intention is to destroy the American economy or to exploit workers overseas, but it would sound far more persuasive and reasonable to actually show how these concerns could come about, even if they were never the stated intentions.

## Worthwhile Assertions

In short, worthwhile assertions should reveal a perspective on your subject that provides possibilities for further exploration. Statements based on facts, classifications, opinions, and author intentions provide only inklings of perspectives and should be revised to inspire more prolific and meaningful analysis. Once you come up with some initial interpretations of your subject, reconsider it in light of what it means to you, perhaps by asking some or all of the following questions:

- What memories does it spark?
- How does it cause you to react emotionally and intellectually?
- What personal decisions/relationships does it cause you to ponder?
- What social, political, or intellectual concerns does it make you consider?
- How does it confirm or contradict your morals and beliefs?



Questions like these will help you to reflect on the subject further, enabling you to transform the aforementioned problematic statements into meaningful assertions. For instance, consider how the interpretation, “The CEO is moving his company’s operations overseas because he hates America and wants to exploit the workers of the third world” can be revised: “Though the CEO’s stated intention for moving the company’s operations overseas is to save money, the end result could be disastrous for both the local economy and the new country’s employees who will have to work under unsafe conditions.” Similarly, the statement “John Lennon’s real intention in writing ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ is to promote the use of LSD” can be revised: “Whatever John Lennon’s real intention, I see ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ as being about the power of the imagination to transcend the deadening routine of daily life.”

Once you have made several assertions like these, you can combine your favorite ones into a working thesis, your initial argument or center of focus for your essay. It’s called a “working” thesis because your point of view is likely to evolve the more you consider each aspect of your subject. Contrary to what you may have heard, the thesis does not have to be set in stone before you begin to write, guiding all the ideas that follow. When you revisit your responses, your point of view will evolve to become more precise, more thoughtful, and more sophisticated. For example, sometimes your thesis may start off as a brief and somewhat vague notion: “This ad manipulates through patriotic images of our country’s nature,” and later becomes more developed and clear: “Though this ad appeals to the patriotic spirit by showing images of our cherished countryside, it attempts to sell a product that will cause harm to the very environment it uses in the background for inspiration.” Each time you return to your thesis, you will think about it in a more nuanced manner, moving from the initial simplicity of a gut reaction to the complexity of a thoughtful and sophisticated response.

For this reason, you do not always need to state your thesis as a definitive argument that shows how you feel in no uncertain terms. Instead, it is often desirable to show your ambivalence about your position as long as you are clear about why you feel this way. For example, you might feel uncertain as to whether your school should build a new football stadium. Although you might think the money could be spent on more pressing educational needs, you might also want to have a more safe and comfortable place to watch the games. You can discuss the advantages and disadvantages of such a proposal, making it clear that you



haven't yet decided which side to support. Some of the most intriguing essays are exploratory, highlighting the mysteries of a subject, rather than persuasive, trying to convince us of a particular point of view.

While a thesis does not need to be limited in terms of argument, it should be limited in terms of scope. Perhaps the most common mistake I see students make is to choose a thesis that encompasses too many aspects of the subject. Remember that it is almost always better to write “a lot about a little” than “a little about a lot.” When you discuss too many aspects of your subject, it becomes difficult to provide any new perspectives. Challenge yourself to write about an aspect of your subject that may appear too small to inspire even a page response. Then think about the nature of your perspective a bit further, putting it to the following tests before you put too much more time into it.

## 1. The Evidence Test

Before engaging in further analysis, look again at your subject and ask yourself, “Is there really enough evidence here to support my point of view?” If I were to write about the film *Office Space* as showing just how much employees love to go to work in the Tech Industry, I might have a very difficult time finding enough scenes to match my perspective. You should also research the details surrounding your subject to see if your assertion needs to be modified, for instance by considering the historical circumstances that were in place at the time the event happened or the piece was created. One student, when writing about the speech from *The Tempest*, (quoted in Chapter 1), wrote that when Prospero's actors disappear into “thin air,” they must have been projected on film with the camera suddenly switching off. Of course, Shakespeare could not have had that in mind given that he wrote three hundred years before we had the technology to carry this out. Still, one could argue that the scene might best be performed this way now. If a statement cannot be justified or at least modified to match the evidence, then you may have even more problems with the next category.

## 2. The Explanation Test

Oftentimes when there isn't enough evidence to support a thesis, writers will be accused of stretching their explanations. I once heard a talk on how technicians assigned terms associated with women to parts



of the computer to give themselves an illusion of control. Some of the assertions made sense—for instance that “mother” in motherboard shows how men may want to recall/dominate the nurturing figure of their childhoods. However, when the speaker pointed out that the “apple” in Apple Computers recalls the forbidden fruit that Eve handed to Adam, I started to squirm. The speaker even tried to argue that the name Macintosh was chosen because it’s a “tart” apple, and “tart” is a derogatory term that men use to refer to women of ill repute. Nonetheless, I would rather see a stretch than an analysis in which the explanation isn’t even necessary because the thesis is so obvious: “Othello reveals the destructive consequences of jealousy,” or “Beavis and Butthead’s stupidity often gets them into trouble.” Ideally, the assertion should require some explanation of the relevant details within or directly implied by the thesis. Remember that the goal is not to come up with an answer to the question “what’s THE meaning of the piece?” But rather to explore dimensions of the subject that do not have definitive answers, allowing us to consider our own subjectivities.

### 3. The Significance Test

You should also try to avoid wasting time on a thesis that does not have any significance by applying what many teachers call the “so what?” test. If your assertions do not lead to a deeper consideration of any of the questions for further thought raised earlier, then it probably will be boring for both you to write and for your audience to read. Oftentimes to make an assertion more interesting, we simply need to add more to it. For instance, I could argue that Peter feels beaten down by the soulless routine of his workplace throughout the film *Office Space*. But I need to remember that Peter is just a character in a film and cannot benefit from any of my conclusions. To make this more significant, I also need to consider how Peter represents the attitude of many contemporary workers and reveal the broader consequences of this attitude.

All of these considerations will help your thesis to become clearer, nuanced, and unique. In addition, it will allow your research questions (discussed in the previous chapter) to become more precise and fruitful as you compare and contrast your points of view with those of others. If there is one thing that I hope that I made clear throughout this chapter it is that the goal of a careful examination should not be to arrive at the same conclusions and have the same thoughts as everyone else. If we all came to the same conclusions



when looking at a subject, then there would be no reason to write a new essay on it. I always tell my students that I know what I think and sometimes what most experts think when I look at a subject; I want you to tell me what you think instead of presenting opinions that have already been stated by someone else. Developing a perspective that is both unique and worthwhile takes time, and although carefully examining a piece may help you to form an initial understanding and lay the cornerstone for your analysis, you still need to build the rest of the essay. In the next chapter, we'll look at ways to do this, first by helping you to explain more thoroughly how you arrived at your perspective and second by helping you to explore the significance of your perspective in a manner that moves beyond the most obvious lessons.

### EXERCISE

Look over the exercises you have completed so far in this chapter. Choose one and list the main assertions that you came up with on your subject. Cross out those that reveal only statements of fact, classification, taste, or intention and then consider what the remaining ones have in common. Try to construct a working thesis that presents a point of view that implies all of these perspectives. Put this working thesis to the evidence, explanation, and significance tests, and modify it accordingly. Remember the thesis does not have to be stated as a definitive argument but can reveal your ambivalence about your subject.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Certain statements do not lead to productive essays, especially if they reveal only a fact, an individual taste, or a particular classification.
2. The remaining worthwhile assertions should connect to each other through a working thesis or center of focus.
3. This thesis may reveal a definitive perspective or an exploration of ambivalence, as long as it is justifiable, clear, and worthwhile (passes the evidence, explanation, and significance tests).

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[1] Susan Bordo, *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 1999.

[2] John Lennon and Paul McCartney, "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds," *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Apple Records, 1967).



## Chapter 4

# Explanations and Significance: Developing Your Analysis

### 4.1 Explaining Your Perspective

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Introduce Kenneth Burke's Pentad as a means for focusing on the essential aspects of the subject.
2. Discuss how to provide background information for clarification and further analysis.
3. Show how a consideration of audience helps to determine which explanations should be included and which ones can remain implied.
4. Discuss how to expand explanations through comparison/contrast and personal experience.

*To see a world in a grain of sand  
And Heaven in a wild flower  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour* <sup>[1]</sup>

As one of the more mystical poets of the Romantic period, William Blake may have been thinking about the transformative power of the imagination when he wrote these lines, but his words apply equally well to how analysis can open up new perspectives that give greater understanding and appreciation for our subjects. In this chapter, you will learn how to both explain and show the significance of your initial assertions by looking again at the key aspects of the examples that first inspired them. In doing so, your point of view will evolve as your assertions become increasingly clear and complex. Always keep in mind that the more deeply you think about one area of analysis, the more fully you can understand the other areas. To illustrate, let's take a fresh look at one of the most well known movies of all time.

For those of you who have not seen *The Wizard of Oz*, <sup>[2]</sup> the 1939 film based on the novel by L. Frank Baum, here is a brief synopsis. Dorothy, a young girl from Kansas, is bored with the life that she leads on her uncle and aunt's farm and spends much of her time dreaming of running away to a



magical place “over the rainbow.” Besides her fantasies, she gets most of her happiness from taking care of her dog, Toto, but soon a mean yet influential woman takes the dog away from her and threatens to drown him in a river. Though Toto escapes and returns to Dorothy, Dorothy decides to run away to protect her pet and seek more exciting adventures. She doesn’t get far, however, before she feels guilty for causing her Auntie Em so much worry and returns home, only to get caught in a tornado that takes her, her dog, and her house to the magical land of Oz.

At this point, the movie changes from black and white to color as Dorothy leaves her home to explore these strange new surroundings. Immediately we see that the house has landed on the Wicked Witch of the East, much to the gratitude of the Munchkins, strange little people whom the witch oppresses. Unfortunately for Dorothy, the witch’s sister (the Wicked Witch of the West) is not at all pleased by this and threatens revenge. Before the Wicked Witch of the West can carry this out, however, Glenda, the Good Witch from the North, protects Dorothy by placing the deceased witch’s magical ruby slippers on her feet. Glenda tells Dorothy to follow the Yellow Brick Road to the Emerald City where the Wizard of Oz lives, the only man wise and powerful enough to protect her and help her to return home.

On the way there, Dorothy encounters a scarecrow, a tin man, and a cowardly lion who accompany her on her journey in the hopes that they too will get something from the wizard: a brain, a heart, and courage.

When they finally reach the wizard, he appears as a disembodied head emerging out of fire and speaking with a booming voice of authority. He refuses to help them until they return with the broom of the Wicked Witch of the West, which eventually they do, but on their return they discover that the fiery wizard is merely a projection of a “smoke and mirror” machine. The real wizard, whom Toto finds operating the machine behind a curtain, is an ordinary man with no more power to grant wishes than the rest of them. Nonetheless, he points out to the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Lion that they already performed deeds that showed intelligence, compassion, and courage—proving to them that they already possessed the qualities that they thought they lacked. He is not, however, so successful in helping Dorothy, and it seems as though she will never be able to return to Kansas.



Just when all seems lost, Glenda returns and tells Dorothy that she can return home simply by clicking the heels of her slippers together and repeating the phrase: “There’s no place like home.” The resulting magic returns Dorothy to Kansas where she wakes up in her own bed. When she tells her family about her adventure, they believe that it was only a dream brought about by a concussion caused during the storm. Dream or not, Dorothy tells her family that she’s happy to be back and that if she ever feels the urge to look for happiness and fulfillment again, she doesn’t need to look any further than her own backyard.

## The Pentad

There are many different ways to analyze this film, but let’s just focus on two common perspectives. Certain feminist analyses have taken issue with how the film might be seen as a warning to women to avoid the dangers of having too much power or straying too far from their “proper” role in the home. Yet others argue the exact opposite and instead see the film as a reminder to trust our own thoughts and feelings over those of questionable authorities. If you tried to explain each of these perspectives by simply summarizing the general plot, your explanation would seem too broad or too obvious. To fully justify your interpretation, you need to look again at the film with a more critical eye, concentrating on those features that validate your main assertions. To determine which details are the most significant and how they relate to each other, I recommend that you use a heuristic (derived from a concept by the social philosopher Kenneth Burke) called “the Pentad”. The Pentad helps you to break apart any scene, whether real or fictional, into five interrelated components that determine its overall shape and direction:

**Act:** What generally happens.

**Agent:** Those involved in what happens.

**Agency:** The means through which it happens.

**Scene:** When and where it happens.

**Purpose:** Why it happens.

Of the five areas, the “purpose” is the most difficult to define. It can be understood as the motivation for the actions within the subject itself or it could be stated in terms of what it means to you as spelled out in your working thesis. When defined the second way, the Pentad can help you to explain your thesis more thoroughly by helping you to select the most relevant details and consider how they relate to each other. But, of course, this can happen only after you have taken the time to consider the subject long enough to come up with a working thesis in the first place. To illustrate, consider how the Pentad helps us to look again at *The Wizard of Oz* in light of the two perspectives mentioned.

If the **Purpose** is to show how the film may discourage women from leaving the home to pursue careers or take on prominent positions in society, then the way you delineate the other aspects of the Pentad may look like this.

**Act:** Dorothy’s attempts to leave her home are shown as short lived and irresponsible. She finds satisfaction only at the end of the film when she decides to wander no further than her own backyard, thus preparing her for her inevitable future as a stay-at-home wife and mother.

**Agent:** Powerful women in both Kansas and Oz are shown as “wicked” and abusive. In contrast, Auntie Em and Glenda are considered “good” because of their feminine and homespun qualities. Glenda knows magic but uses it only in small ways and primarily acts as a nurturing figure.

**Agency:** Objects of power that fall into women’s hands (the broom, the ruby slippers) are either misunderstood or misused. Dorothy learns to disregard these objects, giving away the broom and using the slippers only to get back to a place where they no longer contain power.

**Scene:** Though Oz is certainly more “colorful” than Kansas, it’s also shown as more dangerous and unsatisfying, which is why Dorothy chooses to leave it almost as soon as she gets there. At the time the film appeared, women were mostly expected to stay at home and any desire to have a career was often seen as strange or unnatural.

After considering all of these elements, you can then explain your perspective more thoroughly:

*For many generations **The Wizard of Oz** has not only served as entertainment but also as subtle propaganda for rigid gender roles. When the film was released in 1939, few women felt that they could pursue careers outside of the home. Those who wanted to do something else with their lives were often viewed as abnormal or irresponsible. The film clearly reinforces this attitude. Throughout, the women who seek more powerful positions are shown as “wicked” and crazy whereas those who are simply content to look after the home or look pretty are shown as good and stable. Though Dorothy is at first unsatisfied with her role as future homemaker, she eventually decides to embrace it, trading in magical objects like the ruby slippers and witch’s broom for her peaceful yet static rural existence.*

This is clearly a valid perspective, one that justifies the main assertion with clear and appropriate examples. But while it brings to light something that should be seriously considered, it is not the only permissible way to see the film. Let’s consider the other perspective that the **Purpose** of the film might be to encourage a questioning of the traditional family structure along with other beliefs passed down by reason of tradition or authority. As the purpose behind our analysis changes, so do the other corresponding elements of the Pentad:

**Act:** The characters eventually come to accept their own traits and abilities without any need for external validation. Because the authority figures prove to be unreliable, phony, or just plain wicked, the characters eventually learn to rely on themselves.

**Agent:** Dorothy’s three companions eventually learn that they don’t need a wizard to grant them the qualities that they already possess. Dorothy too learns to stand up to a witch, to call a wizard a phony, and to eventually tap the power within her that she needs to get back home.

**Agency:** The wizard uses his “smoke and mirror” device to enhance his authority. Though he tries to create a persona that is “all powerful” and frightening, he is only a little man with no more power or ability to grant wishes than the rest of them.

**Scene:** Oz is a place for personal enlightenment. And while the film may reflect the cultural attitudes of its time, it may also have inspired future generations to question authority and challenge existing norms.

As before, evaluating these different elements leads to a stronger explanation:

*While the characters in the film **The Wizard of Oz** do not wear buttons stamped with the phrase “Question Authority,” the film as a whole strongly suggests that we do so. Though the characters Dorothy encounters look to the wizard to grant them a brain, a heart, and courage, they already show plenty of intelligence, feeling, and bravery. It’s only after Toto inadvertently exposes the real wizard’s “smoke and mirror” contraption that they see the phony behind the curtain and realize that they don’t need his validation to prove their self-worth. Likewise Dorothy learns to stand up to questionable authorities, and though she chooses to remain in the home, she has helped inspire countless others to say “no” to the rigid roles that restrict them.*

Even though these perspectives are very different, each paragraph reveals a reasonable position arising from a close and thoughtful viewing of the film. And perhaps the most useful aspect of the Pentad is that it not only helps you to reexamine the details of your subject in light of your purpose but also to see how the other elements relate to each other. For instance, it helps us to see how exposing the agency of the wizard’s machine inspires the agents to stand up for themselves. As you apply the Pentad, you might also be surprised by how many details you picked up on subconsciously when you arrived at your initial working thesis, justifying your perspective to yourself as well as to others.

## **Providing Background Information**

Doing extra research and providing more background information can open up even more areas for analysis of *The Wizard of Oz*. For instance some scholars have argued that the story is based on the political situation at the turn of the Twentieth Century, the time of the novel’s release, and chronicles the rise of the Populist Party, as represented by Dorothy, that attempted to take on the more established Democrat and Republican Parties, as represented by the two wicked witches. You might also want to read interviews with L. Frank Baum, the author, or Victor Fleming, the director, to find out what inspired them to create the book and the movie.

In addition to suggesting new avenues for interpretation, providing background information and research can help you to explain certain aspects of your subjects that might seem unclear because the terms, sounds or images are abstract, dated or specialized. For instance, to explain the quote from *The Tempest* in the first chapter you might first need to provide modern versions of some of the more archaic

terms or reveal how a “baseless fabric” might refer to the painted sets on a stage. Likewise, if you are considering a historical event or a political speech, you should provide information about the surrounding circumstances and the key people involved in the outcome. For instance, to explain why President Bush decided to invade Iraq, you would need to know something about the potential threat Saddam Hussein posed, American economic interests in the Middle East, President Bush’s character and personal motivations, and the general mood of the American public after 9/11.

## Considering the Audience

Just how much background you need to provide mostly depends on what you know about the people who will be reading your essay. For instance you will not need to review the basic principles of Sigmund Freud’s theory of id/ego/superego when writing for your psychology professor. But you might want to explain this when writing to your peers. On the other hand, when writing for your professors, you might need to explain references to popular culture that would be unnecessary if you were writing only to your friends. Despite what you may have been taught in the past, you should never assume that your audience doesn’t know anything because you do not want to bore them by explaining obvious references any more than you want to confuse them by withholding important background.

For this reason, you should also take the context of your writing into account before developing your explanations. If, for instance, you were writing an essay for a class about a book that was previously assigned, you would not have to begin with a general synopsis, but could jump straight to the section that corresponds most closely with your assertions. If, however, you were writing to a broader audience, you should first provide them with a general background or a summary of the piece before examining the sections that specifically stood out for you.

Likewise the tone and style of your essay will vary depending on context, audience, and purpose. When writing to a friend on Facebook, you might use vocabulary, abbreviations, and icons that you would never use when writing a more formal essay for your instructor. Even among teachers your tone and style will vary depending on how formal they expect your writing to appear. Teachers, like everyone else, have their own subjective impressions as to what constitutes effective writing. But try not to let this bother you too



much because in learning how to communicate effectively to the various audiences you find in school, you will gain a greater rhetorical flexibility to communicate outside of it.

## Explaining a Subject Through Comparison and Contrast

Once you provide enough background information for your specific audience, you can further explain your subject through comparison and contrast with others that relate to it. For instance, to lend validity to the feminist perspective on *The Wizard of Oz*, you might compare the film to others of the same period that also show powerful women in a negative light. Consider, for instance, how the evil queen in Walt Disney's 1937 film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*<sup>[3]</sup> uses her magic to get what she wants, while Snow White, the ideal of femininity, simply waits for a man to come along and rescue her.

You could also underscore how a subject is influenced by cultural attitudes through contrast. For example, if you wanted to explain why a show like *South Park* or *Family Guy* has particular appeal to young people today, you might contrast these shows with coming of age television series from other periods. For instance, you could contrast an episode of *South Park* with an episode of *Leave it to Beaver*, an iconic series from the 1950s. Though the main characters, Beaver and Wally Cleaver, often get into trouble, it is never anything like the kind that Eric Cartman gets into, and, unlike Cartman, who is spoiled by his single mother, the Cleaver kids are always able to talk out their difficulties with their father who helps them to learn from their mistakes at the end of each episode. Again, the conclusions you draw from this contrast could vary. You might assert that this reveals the necessity of a strong father figure to keep children in check, or you might suggest that the tightly controlled patriarchal family structure of the 1950s inspired rebellion and ridicule in the decades that followed.

Along these lines, you might also consider explaining your subject by contrasting it with how it could have been different by calling our attention to the details that were deliberately omitted. For instance you might analyze an advertisement by revealing what it doesn't show about the product. Advertisements for fast food restaurants usually show families sitting together, relaxed, and having a good time, but they never show how people usually eat at these places, quickly and alone. And these ads certainly do not reveal the negative effects that eating too much fast food can have on the body, such as heart disease or obesity. Similarly, we can tell a lot about how people feel about something or someone not only by the



terms they use but also by the ones they refuse to use. For instance, if the first time you say “I love you” to your significant other only garners the response “thank you,” you might begin to suspect that your feelings run more deeply than those of your partner.

## Explaining a Subject Through Personal Values and Experiences

As discussed in the first chapter, the process through which we discover meaning takes place in the interaction between the subject **and** the viewer/reader/listener. So to fully explain how and why you came up with your assertions, you should also consider how your experiences, your values, even your mood at the moment of encounter can shed light on how you see your subject. As the above examples indicate, you might begin by considering how your surrounding culture influences your response. For instance, Thomas de Zengotita argues that Americans have become so used to media constructions of reality that they often get bored with the real world that is unmitigated by it. To illustrate, he points out that if you were to see wolves in the wild, you might at first be fascinated, but then will quickly lose interest because the sight cannot measure up to the ones that you are used to seeing in movies and on television:

*And you will get bored really fast if that ‘wolf’ doesn’t do anything. The kids will start squirming in, like, five minutes; you’ll probably need to pretend you’re not getting bored for a while longer. But if that little smudge of canine out there in the distance continues to just loll around in the tall grass, and you don’t have a really powerful tripod-supported telelens gizmo to play with, you will get bored. You will begin to appreciate how much technology and editing goes into making those nature shows.* <sup>[4]</sup>

Other times, your response may emerge from what is going on in your life at the moment of encounter. Consider, for instance, how time and experience might change how we view a subject. When I first heard the song “Time” from Pink Floyd’s album, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, I came across a line that confused me, “And then one day you find ten years have got behind you /No one told you when to run; you missed the starting gun.” At fifteen, I could not understand how ten years could just get “behind you.” That amount of time was pretty much my entire conscious life. But now at fifty, I understand the line much

better. It often seems as though the last ten years have zoomed by, and I have missed “the starting gun” on so many things that I wanted to accomplish.

But we need to be careful here. One reason many teachers do not allow students to use the word “I” is that they often overuse it. If every sentence began with the phrase “I see it this way because” the essay would soon become monotonous and repetitive. Most of the time, you do not need to write this (or similar phrases like “in my opinion”) because it is implied that as the writer you are expressing your point of view. However, like most rules of writing that teachers pass down this one can be taken too far. Often, using “I” will make your writing clearer, more accurate, and more meaningful than constructions that begin with generic subjects like “the reader,” “the viewer” or “one.” These terms can make it tempting to not justify our perspectives, because they can give the impression that all people see a subject in the same way; this simply isn’t true, as evidenced by the fact that we can use these terms to make contradictory assertions: “the reader sees the poem as about the renewal and energy the life force brings to both people and nature”; “the reader views the poem as about the destructive consequences of time.” Think of how much more accurate, meaningful, and clear it is for me to write: “when I was younger I understood the poem to be about the mystery and power that creates life in people and nature, but now (having just turned fifty) I see it as revealing the inevitable decay of both.”

Those teachers who tell their students to never use “I” expect them to seem like objective and indifferent scholars. Yet according to Joan Didion, one of the most prolific and respected essayists of our time, the nature of writing is never like this:

*In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying **listen to me, see it my way, change your mind.** It’s an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating but there’s no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer’s sensibility on the readers most private space.* <sup>[5]</sup>

Michel de Montaigne, the man credited with inventing the essay form, would clearly agree with Didion's assessment because he frequently used the personal pronoun to acknowledge the subjective nature of his perspectives. Consider this excerpt from "Of Idleness": "Lately when I returned to my home,...it seemed to me that I could do my mind no greater favor than to let it entertain itself in full idleness and stay and settle in itself, which I hoped it might do more easily now, having become weightier and riper with time." <sup>[6]</sup> Imagine if he had been expected to write these lines without the use of the personal pronoun: "when one returns to one's home, it seems to a person....". So don't be afraid of including that vertical line when it adds accuracy, clarity, or depth to your explanations.

Whether you choose to explain your subject through background information, cultural influence, personal experience, comparison and contrast with other subjects, or some combination of these, you should never ignore this area of analysis. Your interpretation of a subject may seem apparent to you, but your reader may see it very differently and not understand how you derived your perspectives. By providing explanations, you show that you took the time to pay careful attention. Though not everyone will agree with your point of view, most will at least respect it if they see that you derived your assertions from a close consideration of the subject and did not just rely on a gut reaction based on a brief glance.

### EXERCISE 1

Think of an important event that happened to you, one that you can vividly recall. First consider how the details of it correspond with the Pentad. What generally happened? Which key people were involved? Through what means did it happen? When and where did it happen? And, finally, why did it happen? In answering the last question, you might think of different reasons; for instance, what motivated the actions at the time and what lessons it may have taught you down the road. Now think of how these various aspects relate to each other. For example, if the scene where it took place was unfamiliar to you at the time, how did that shape your response as an agent? Freewrite on these various aspects and on how each relates to the other and then consider how this process gave you a better understanding of both the event and its consequences.

### EXERCISE 2



Look over the event that you just analyzed and write a brief letter about it to two different audiences: to a friend who experienced it with you and to a stodgy older person. Consider the difference in content, how you provide more or less background information to explain what happened and include various considerations as to why and how it happened. Notice, also, the difference in the overall tone, vocabulary and voice. Now think of how you might write the letter to a friend who was not there with you or to a more mellow open-minded older person.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A closer examination of a particular aspect of a subject can lead to a more thorough justification of how we derived our assertions from it.
- Background information can reveal the surface meaning of a subject but should not substitute for a more thorough justification of an interpretation.
- You can explain a subject further by comparing and contrasting it with others (actual or hypothetical), and by relating how your personal beliefs and experiences cause you to see it in a unique light.
- Understanding the needs of the audience who will be reading your essay can help you to determine what additional information you need to provide about both the subject and yourself.

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[1] William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" *The Mentor Book of Major British Poets*, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: The New American Library, 1963), 40.

[2] Victor Fleming, dir., *The Wizard of Oz* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939).

[3] David Hand, dir., *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Walt Disney Productions, 1937).

[4] Thomas de Zengotita, "The Numbing of the American Mind," *Harpers* (April 2002), 37.

[5] Joan Didion, "Why I Write" (*New York Times Magazine*, December 5, 1976).

[6] Michael de Montaigne, "Of Idleness" *Montaigne's Essays and Selected Writing*, trans. Donald M Frame (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1963), 7.



## 4.2 Considering the Broader Significance

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss how to reveal the broader significance of the analysis—personal, cultural, and scholarly.
2. Explain how to avoid clichés and broad declarative statements.
3. Reveal heuristics that help us explore the significance.

By now you should have a pretty good idea of how to look carefully at your subject, come up with key assertions, find specific examples to illustrate these assertions, and justify your point of view through a close reading. Yet there is still one more area of analysis that we need to discuss: the significance. Sadly, this is the area most often overlooked in school because the answer to the question “Why are you writing the essay?” is so obvious—“Duh, because my teacher told me to.” However, without significance an essay simply becomes an interpretation, which by itself may not mean anything other than an excuse to show off how clever you are. Just as spices give flavor to food, significance is the ingredient that turns an interpretation into a perspective that is meaningful for both the writer and the audience. In fact, outside of school, the primary motivation for engaging in analysis is not to simply show off the ability to discern patterns in a subject, but to call attention to something of wider importance. In exploring the significance, you reveal how the process of analysis engenders new insights about your personal beliefs and experiences as well as the wider cultural concerns that surround both you and your subject.

Whether you choose to explore the personal, cultural, or academic significance of your subject, you will move in the reverse direction from how you derived your explanation. To illustrate, let’s return to *The Wizard of Oz* for a moment. If I were to use a personal experience to explain how I see one of the key scenes, it might write:

*When I was a kid, I always felt intimidated by my teachers. To me they seemed like the fiery machine version of Oz—powerful, untouchable, and all knowing. However, when my mom became friends with my third grade teacher, and I got to know her outside of class, I discovered that she didn’t know everything and had problems just like the rest of us. So when Toto exposes the man behind the curtain, it reminds me of how quickly authority can vanish in the harsh light of reality.*



However, to make my analysis significant, I would need to discuss the implications of this further:

*You might think that I lost respect for my teacher as I got to see more of her imperfections, but in fact I ended up liking her more, just as I've always preferred the humble, human version of Oz to his fiery alter ego. I wish that more authority figures would stop pretending and admit that they don't know everything. In my experience, people who talk and act with absolute certainty tend to be mediocre teachers and leaders; I have much greater respect for those who aren't afraid to utter the phrase "I don't know" once in a while.*

In short, while your explanations justify your perspectives through a discussion of the relevant details contained within your subject, the significance reveals the insights this leads you to discover in other related areas.

## **Thinking Beyond Clichés and Obvious Classifications**

Though there are no hard and fast rules concerning how much you should explore the significance, you should at least take your observations beyond the obvious and cliché. Sometimes clichés don't make any sense at all; we just repeat them ourselves because we hear others constantly utter them. When I was a child, anytime I would complain that something isn't fair, my parents would often respond with the cliché "life isn't fair." Though I often repeated the phrase myself (especially when I started teaching), I have since decided that it doesn't really make any sense. "Life" is too big to be broadly characterized as "fair" or "unfair"; instead we all experience countless moments of both justice and injustice. And even if life isn't fair, that's no reason for us to act unjustly. We may not have the ability to fix all the seemingly random sufferings that come with living, but we can at least strive to behave in a reasonable manner ourselves.

Other times, clichés become clichés because they are often true, but this does not mean that they are always true for all occasions. In fact, for every cliché you can come up with, you can find another that has the opposite meaning. "Absence can make the heart grow fonder," but often loved ones who are "out of sight are out of mind." "Good things may come to those who wait," but "it's the early bird that gets the worm." "The grass may be greener on the other side," but, as Dorothy reminds us, "there's no place like home." And not only can clichés seem contradictory, but also suggest a person's desire not to think. For

instance, if you were having problems with a long distance relationship and asked your roommates for advice, you probably would not want them to simply reply “absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Such a response would imply that they didn’t care enough about you to take into account the specific concerns of your particular situation. Likewise, readers often feel the same way when a cliché substitutes for more detailed significance.

Along with a tendency to overuse clichés, the other factor that prevents writers from thinking very deeply about the implications of their subject occurs when they rely too much on those statements of classification and taste discussed in the previous chapter. When exploring the significance, try not to simply label your subject as “ironic,” or “absurd,” and leave it at that, but also consider why it matters that we see it this way. For instance, you could discuss how certain aspects remind you of an absurdity in your own life that needs correcting. In short, try to move beyond simply showing that you understand the surface meaning of these terms to fully exploring the wider insights that they helped you to discover. If you only rely on a cliché or broad declarative statement, the significance of your essay may disappoint your reader like an unsatisfying punch line to a joke that took forever to set up.

One way to move beyond simple declarative statements or clichés is to brainstorm on what you already know about the significance of your focus. “Brainstorming” or “listing” is a widely used heuristic in which you quickly write down all the thoughts and associations that you have on a subject to see where the ideas may lead you. To give your mind free reign, you should not pause to censor any of the ideas because sometimes the ones that seem the most bizarre initially can lead to your most profound insights. Consider, for instance, the following brainstorm on the nature and implications of advertisements for laptops:

*It’s easy to look like I’m working*

*Work anywhere I like*

*Better than carrying a stack of heavy books*

*Always connected to my friends and fun stuff*

*Make it my favorite color and it’ll look cool*

After doing this for several minutes, you should then look over your jottings to see if any patterns appear. For instance, from my notes above you can see how these commercials might let students think that laptops make it easy for them to look intellectual and do their work in bits and pieces. In addition, this implies that they can use this one product to manage the “lighter side” of their lives—social interactions and relaxation (reading, watching movies).

For those of you who tend to think in concepts before considering the concrete details, you might try clustering (sometimes referred to as “looping” or “a spider diagram”), a variation of brainstorming in which you move in the opposite direction, from categories to specific instances (and, again, list everything that comes to mind without censorship). In this version, you first write down the main topic you wish to examine in the middle of a piece of paper, surround this topic with the major issues and concerns that come to mind when you think of it, and then surround these issues with the concrete details that they consist of. For instance a cluster around the topic of commercials for laptops might look like this:



Notice that while the layout is different, the considerations appear similar to the ones that emerged while brainstorming. It doesn't really matter which form you use or how you use it, as long as it sparks new insights.

After taking time out to explore the significance, you can then return to your analysis to integrate your new insights about the broader implications of your piece:

*There's little doubt that laptop advertisements work—or companies wouldn't continue to use these same tired plots. Typically we see a group of “with it” people— young students at a desk, on the grass or at a coffee shop; well-groomed professionals having success at a business meeting; young children looking at movies or educational learning programs. The laptops may be coordinated to their style or type of clothing (for instance, black or gray for a businessman; red for a college student; pink for a little girl). While people may like what they “see”, the ads don't necessarily focus on what a laptop really helps you do—preparing work, researching and rewriting presentations or conducting appropriate due diligence on research findings. This same focus on style over substance permeates much of our culture, from politicians who say that they are against government spending while increasing their personal salaries and staff to the students who paste “Go Green” bumper stickers to their unnecessarily large, gas guzzling cars.*

The paragraph is much more intriguing than it would be if you tried to sum up the significance too quickly by relying on a cliché: "Buyer Beware." If you think carefully about both the piece and the issues it raises before writing about it more formally, you will develop a much more satisfying discussion of its significance.

## **The Personal Significance**

When looking at the personal significance, it's helpful to remind yourself that you need to be careful of not overdoing it. A reason that teachers often tell students not to use “I” is that it often encourages them to only talk about themselves and leave the subject behind, leading to the dreaded “tangent” discussed in the first chapter. The temptation to go off course can be very great because it is usually easier to write about yourself than to sustain the close attention a successful analysis requires. For instance, one of my students had a difficult time understanding Woody Allen's film *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, so instead of challenging himself to think about it further, he decided to begin his paper this way: “In the film the main character behaves in a manner that is naïve. I too behaved naively once....” And the rest of the paper was about a trip he took to Las Vegas where he lost all the money he needed for college that semester. This might have been fine if he had chosen to write about this experience in the first place; however, he didn't really analyze what happened to him during the trip either but simply reported on it. Too much attention to the

significance leads to tangents, but ignoring it altogether makes the paper seem like a bland academic exercise with no lasting meaning.

Though you might think that it would be easier to discover the personal significance of something that you yourself are involved in, it can often be quite challenging, as anyone who has spent a sleepless night thinking about what a relationship or job means to them can testify. In fact, even something as simple as the trip to the gym that I wrote about in the previous chapter can lead to several complex insights:

*So here I am, taking a break from working in front of the computer in order to go to a place where I am surrounded by even more machines, devices to work out on and devices to listen to as I go about it. I sometimes miss being a kid when I hardly relied on technology at all (I grew up before video games, iPods and the Internet). I would go out and play with other kids and we would create our own fantasies, games and exercises. I guess, however, that it is pretty unrealistic to assume that I would have the time to do that now, even if I could find friends my age that would be willing to take a break in the middle of the day. But maybe a change of setting wouldn't hurt either. Perhaps I can go for a hike tomorrow instead of working out on the elliptical. It may take more time to get to my destination and be less efficient at burning calories, but I'm sure it will be a lot more fun.*

None of these insights would have occurred to me if I hadn't stopped to think about why I felt in such a rut every time I considered working out. I had to challenge myself to think beyond the obvious fact that exercise can sometimes feel like a chore to discover the more specific reasons I felt this way and what I could do to make it better.

## **The Broader Significance**

When looking beyond the personal significance of your subject, you can examine a variety of related topics, depending on what you learned in the course of your analysis. However, the basic question you always need to ask is: how does your analysis offer a more complete and satisfying examination of your subject than those that have been done in the past, and how does this understanding lead to more appropriate insights about the discipline or situation from which your subject emerged? For instance, in

his book *The Ecology of Fear*, environmentalist Mike Davis shows why it is important to reexamine the policies that have guided the city planning of Los Angeles for the past several decades:

*For generations, market-driven urbanization has transgressed environmental common sense. Historic wildfire corridors have been turned into view-lot suburbs, wetland liquefaction zones into marinas, and floodplains into industrial districts and housing tracts. Monolithic public works have been substituted for regional planning and a responsible land ethic. As a result, Southern California has reaped flood, fire, and earthquake tragedies that were as avoidable, as unnatural as the beating of Rodney King and the ensuing explosion in the streets. In failing to conserve natural ecosystems it has squandered much of its charm and beauty.* <sup>[1]</sup>

By revealing the disastrous consequences of basing city-planning decisions solely on short-term profits, Davis underscores the importance of his own, environmentally focused, analysis.

For Davis this perspective opens up an entire book outlining how Los Angeles (and by implication other cities) should use ecology, rather than short-term profit as the main guide for how it should develop. But sometimes the significance of your subject will seem so blatantly obvious that it feels like there just isn't anything left to discuss. This does not necessarily mean that your focus is overly simplistic because many of the most powerful works gravitate toward very definitive points of view. Almost all critics agree that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain is one of the greatest American novels and yet there is nothing subtle or ambiguous about how it shows slavery as an evil institution, particularly in one key scene. Huck, the narrator, has been helping Jim, a runaway slave, to escape. All his life Huck has been told that slaves are property and that anyone who helps a slave to escape is committing a deadly sin, one that will surely send him to Hell. Finally, Huck's conscience gets the better of him and he writes a letter to Miss Watson, Jim's "owner," alerting her of their location. At first Huck claims, "I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life..." but on further reflection Huck begins to recall all the great things Jim had done for him, how he was the best friend that Huck had ever known, how he was much kinder to Huck than his own father. At that moment Huck sees the letter and makes his decision: "'All right, then, I'll go to hell'—and tore it up." <sup>[2]</sup> Even if the point is obvious, that Jim is not just property, that slavery is an evil institution, and that Huck's personal experience is a better guide for his

conscience than a warped social morality, the emotional impact of this scene always brings a tear to my eyes.

Yet there are still ways to examine the significance of this scene that take us beyond the obvious: for instance, to discuss how people often distort religious maxims to justify profitable social conventions. Many people who lived at the time the novel takes place argued that slaves were property and The Bible commands us not to steal, and, therefore, helping a slave to escape is breaking one of the Ten Commandments. However, a closer reading of The Bible may lead us to see that the dignity of the individual should matter more than following rules that preserve an unjust social system. After all, Moses, the man who delivered the Ten Commandments in the first place, helped a whole country of slaves to escape. Along these lines we might also consider what issues we currently face that could potentially create conflicts between individual and social morality. Though all reasonable people should now agree that slavery was wrong, we can still speculate as to which actions, behaviors, or beliefs that we embrace today might seem repugnant to future generations.

Of course we can only speculate on future trends, but it isn't necessary when exploring the significance to come to definitive conclusions. Just as your assertions on a given subject may express ambivalence, so might your discussion of what it implies. It is fine, even desirable, to express ambivalence as long as you do not do so in a vague manner. For example, if you were to consider a current issue that instigates a moral dilemma for you that's similar to the conflict felt by Huck, you don't want to simply sound confused: *I guess we need to protect the environment, but I don't know it seems like a hassle sometimes, though I guess I could do more, but I'm really busy right now and the bus is often late, so it's easier to drive.* Instead you might write: *If people survive for the next hundred years, they may look back at our generation and shudder about how badly we treated the environment. I wish I could say that I am as dedicated as Huck in defying social convention, but I am just as guilty as most in choosing what is convenient over what is responsible.* While the first sentence seems like the jumbled thoughts of one pondering the issue for the first time, the second reads like an intelligent consideration that acknowledges ambivalence.



If you still have trouble articulating what makes your subject significant, I suggest that you go back over the questions for initial consideration raised at the beginning of the last chapter. We are often driven to consider a particular subject because of the meaning it suggests to us, even when we have not yet fully grasped the implications of that meaning. This happens to me all the time. When I go to an art gallery or when I listen to an album, I will focus on a particular painting or song before I realize why it commands my attention. Only later when I've had time to really think about it, do I discover that it reminds me of something that happened in the past or helps me to clarify an issue that I'm currently pondering.

Though I've broken apart a way to consider analysis into particular elements to discuss each of them more clearly, when we actually begin to write on a subject, it will seldom follow such a neat and linear order. Instead our consideration of these aspects will take place recursively and sometimes in the reverse order of how I presented them, for when we think through the **significance**, we often come up with more precise **assertions**, which inspire us to choose more appropriate **examples**, which we can then **explain** more thoroughly. This takes time and effort but ultimately what we end up writing will be much more interesting than if we had simply jotted down the first thesis that came to mind and quickly tried to prove it. As we continue to think about our ideas, writing them down, considering them, modifying them, we eventually arrive at perspectives that are clear, reasonable, and worthwhile.

### EXERCISE

Consider a cliché or aphorism that you often heard when you were a child. It could be something that your parents or teachers used to say to motivate you to work or to stop you from complaining. For example, I used to hear "life isn't fair" to my frequent pointing out of familial injustices. Brainstorm or cluster on ways this cliché has been true in your life and on ways that it has been false or misleading. For example I might first make note of the inevitable injustices that come with living and then list ones that we have the ability to change. Try to fit your ideas into broader categories and then write a paragraph in which you more thoroughly examine the significance suggested by the cliché.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A discussion of the significance of our interpretations can provide greater insight into our selves, our culture, and our core beliefs.

- Broad declarative statements and clichés should be avoided because they do not provide a satisfying exploration of why a particular perspective matters.
  - Certain heuristics like brainstorming and clustering can help us to consider the broader implications of our subjects more thoroughly.
  - A close examination of one aspect of analysis leads to a better understanding of the other areas as well.
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[1] Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 9.

[2] Mark Twain, *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Michael Patrick Hearn (New York: Norton, 2001), 344.



# Chapter 5

## The Analytical Essay: Expressing Your Points of View

### 5.1 Focusing, Developing, and Synthesizing

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss how to focus and develop the essay.
2. Reveal how to convey an effective organization through transitions.
3. Suggest strategies for producing effective opening and closing paragraphs.

After discussing general strategies for analysis and applying these strategies to specific examples in class, I inevitably encounter a student asking, “This has all been well and good, but when are we going to actually learn how to write?” The student’s confusion most likely emerges from how he was taught in the past. In most school assignments, writing does not require thinking so much as the stuffing of obvious considerations or memorized material into formulated structures, like a five-paragraph essay or a short answer exam. However, in less restrictive writing situations the specific way we articulate our analysis emerges from what we think of it, and thus our best writing comes through our most careful considerations. The good news, then, is that if you have been following the advice I’ve given throughout this book about coming up with your analysis, then you will have already finished most of the work on your essay. The bad news is that there is no easy formula for putting it all together. However, we still can examine general strategies that successful analytical writers tend to use, though the specific way you enact these strategies will depend on the ideas that you have already discovered.

#### Focusing Your Analysis

If you have taken the time to examine your subject thoroughly and read what others have written about it, then you might have so much to say that you will not be able to cover your perspective adequately without turning your essay into a book. In such a case you would have two options: briefly cover all the aspects of your subject or focus on a few key elements. If you take the first option, then your essay may seem too



general or too disjointed. A good maxim to keep in mind is that it is better to say a lot about a little rather than a little about a lot; when writers try to cover too many ideas, they often end up reiterating the obvious as opposed to coming up with new insights. The second option leads to more intriguing perspectives because it focuses your gaze on the most relevant parts of your subject, allowing you to discern shades of meaning that others might have missed.

To achieve a stronger focus, you should first look again at your main perspective or working thesis to see if you can limit its scope. First consider whether you can concentrate on an important aspect of your subject. For instance, if you were writing an essay for an Anthropology class on Ancient Egyptian rituals, look over your drafts to see which particular features keep coming up. You might limit your essay to how they buried their dead, or, better, how they buried their Pharaohs, or, even better, how the legend of the God Osiris influenced the burial of the Pharaohs. Next, see if you can delineate your perspective on the subject more clearly, clarifying your argument or the issue you wish to explore. This will help you move from a “working” thesis, such as “Rituals played an important function in Ancient Egyptian society,” to an “actual” thesis: “Because it provided hope for an afterlife, the legend of Osiris offered both the inspiration and methodology for the burial of the Pharaohs.”

Once you have focused the scope of your thesis, revise your essay to reflect it. This will require you to engage in what is usually the most painful part of the writing process—cutting. If something does not fit in with your perspective, it has to go, no matter how brilliantly considered or eloquently stated. In the course of writing this book, I’ve had to cut several sections simply because they no longer corresponded with the main perspective I wanted to convey. But do not throw away the parts you cut. You never know when you might find a use for them again. Just because a particular section does not fit well with the focus of one essay does not mean that you won’t be able to use it in another essay down the road.

## Expanding

After cutting your essay down to the essential ideas, look it over again to make sure that you have explored each idea adequately. At this point it might help to recall the AXES acronym I introduced in the first chapter to ask yourself the following questions:



- Are there clear assertions throughout the essay that reveal your perspectives on the subject?
- Do you provide the specific examples that inspired these assertions?
- Do you explain how you derived your assertions from a careful reading of these examples?
- Do you explore the significance of these assertions as they relate to personal and broader concerns?

If any long sections seem lacking in any of these areas of AXES, you might explore them further by taking time out from your more formal writing to play with one of the heuristics recommended in various sections throughout this book (freewriting, metaphor extension, issue dialogue, the Pentad, brainstorming, and clustering). You can then incorporate the best ideas you discover into your essay to make each section seem more thoughtful and more thorough.

Now that we've looked at each of these areas of analysis more carefully, let's go back to the main example from the first chapter, the passage from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. At the end, I provide an example of a paragraph that includes each aspect of analysis, but while these aspects are all present, none of them are developed fully enough for even a brief essay on the passage. Beginning with the examples, the paragraph makes brief reference to the "baseless fabric of the vision of cloud capped towers" and to the "great globe itself," pointing out how these phrases refer to items associated with Shakespeare's theater as well as the world outside of it. But we could also discuss other terms and phrases that appear in the quote. For instance, we could discuss the implications of the word "revels" in the first line. These days we probably wouldn't say "revels" but instead "celebrations," or, less formally, "partying," but the word clearly refers back to the play within the play that comes to an abrupt end. In this context, the implication is that above all, the purpose of plays should be for enjoyment, a sentiment reflected in the epilogue when Prospero speaks directly to the audience: "gentle breath of yours my sails/Must fill, or else my project fails,/Which was to please."

As we further consider the implications, we might be reminded of past teachers who made reading Shakespeare feel less like a celebration and more like a task, as something to be respected but not enjoyed. We could then explain how the word "revels" serves as a reminder to enjoy his plays, and not because they are "good for us" like a nasty tasting vitamin pill, but because if we're willing to take the effort to understand the language, the plays become deeply entertaining. Looking back over the passage and seeing



how plays are equated to our lives outside the theater leads to an even more significant insight. We should try to see life as a celebration, as something to be enjoyed before we too disappear into “thin air.” In discussing the significance of this, we wouldn’t simply wrap it up in a cliché like “I intend to live only for today,” but explore more responsible ways we can balance fulfilling our obligations with enjoying the moments that make up our lives.

Now we can go back and expand the main assertion. Instead of simply writing, *In The Tempest, Shakespeare connects plays, lives and dreams by showing that while each contains an illusion of permanence, they’re all only temporary*, we might also add, *But this does not mean that we should waste the time we have on earth or in the theater lamenting that it will all soon be over. Instead we should celebrate, in a responsible manner, our remaining moments*. And because all of these insights came about from examining the implications of only one word, “revels,” the essay will continue to expand as we consider more details of the passage and consult related research. Eventually, however, we will need to stop expanding our analysis and consider how to present it more deliberately.

## Introducing the Essay

When revising your essay, you do not have to write it in the exact order that it will be read, as any section you work on in a given moment may appear anywhere in your final draft. In fact, many times it’s best to write the first paragraph last because we may not know how to introduce the essay until we’ve discovered and articulated the main perspectives. However, eventually you will need to consider not only what your analysis consists of, but also the effect you want it to have. An essay that commands attention seems like a discussion between intelligent and aware people, in which ideas are not thrown out randomly but in a deliberate manner with each thought leading logically to the next.

For this reason, the opening paragraph should be the place where you invite your readers into this discussion, making them want to read what will follow without delineating the main content in a rigid manner. Again, imagine being at a party, but this time instead of meeting someone who bores you by reciting irrelevant details of the past, he tells you exactly what will follow in the near future: “Over the next ten minutes we will discuss three things: work, politics, and leisure activities. During the course of our discussion, we will raise relevant personal experiences, draw from a bevy of beliefs and morals, and



reflect on the current state of international affairs.” Again, most likely you and everyone else this person approaches will find an excuse to move to the other side of the room as quickly as possible. Similarly when writers begin their essays with a step-by-step announcement of what will follow, we don’t feel the sense of anticipation that we do when the perspective unfolds more organically. Successful analytical essay writers do not begin by blatantly spelling out the main points that they will cover, but rather create “leads,” openings that hook the reader into wanting to read further.

One way to capture the reader’s attention is to share a story or anecdote that directly relates to the main perspective. For instance, in the first chapter, I created a story about a hypothetical student named Jeff who was having difficulty writing an analytical paper on *The Tempest* in order to reveal a situation that not only was widely familiar but also allowed me to introduce the various components of analysis.

You can also capture your reader’s attention with a quote: *“Oh what fools these mortals be” has become one of my favorite Shakespeare quotes since I began working in a restaurant. I am always amazed by the litany of ridiculous questions and requests I have to entertain during each of my shifts.*

Or you might try a joke: *Once there was a small boy who lost the key to his house. Though he dropped it in the front yard, he chose to look for it near the sidewalk because they light was much better there. Like him, many people look for the easiest solutions to their problems even when they know the truth is far more complicated and obscure..*

Or perhaps you can startle the reader with an unexpected twist: *The best day of my life occurred last summer. First, I was fired from my job, next my girlfriend dumped me, and finally I was kicked out of my parent’s house. All this motivated me to find a better job, a better girlfriend, and a better place to live. History is full of days like this, ones that seem tragic yet turn out to have positive consequences in the long run.*

Finally, you might begin with an analogy: *Trying to write a perfect essay all at once is like attempting to ride a bike while juggling and singing opera. You are likely to crash unless you take on each task separately: invention, drafting, revising, and editing.*

These are just a few suggestions for grabbing the reader's attention and many other possibilities exist (though try to avoid beginning with a dictionary definition unless you want to provide your own twist on it). Whichever way you decide to open your paper, make certain that you go on to relate your lead-in to the main perspective or thesis you have on your subject. For instance, you wouldn't want to start an essay by telling a joke that has nothing to do with the subject of your analysis, just to get an easy laugh. However, it would be fine if you were to write:

*There's an old Sufi joke that points out that "the moon is more valuable than the sun because at night we need the light more." Of course the joke's humor arises from the fact that without the sun, it would be night all the time, and yet it does seem to be human nature to take advantage of that which is constant in our lives, the people and things that add warmth and light on a daily basis. In applying this to the television show, Mad Men, it's easy to see how Donald Draper, the main character, undervalues his wife Betty in order to chase after other women. Though these other women are as inconstant as the moon, disappearing and reappearing in new forms, they give him light during the dark times in his life when he needs it the most. His affairs, however, do not provide lasting satisfaction, but only a fleeting illusion of happiness, much like the advertisements he creates for a living.*

Notice how this paragraph leads the reader from the hook to the main focus of the essay without spelling out what will follow in a rigid manner. The Sufi joke is not simply thrown out for a chuckle, but to set up the thesis that the main character of the show prefers illusions to reality in both his personal life and his work. As a result, this paragraph is likely to engage our attention and make us want to read further.

## Organization of the Body Paragraphs

Once you've led your readers into your essay, you can keep their attention by making certain that your ideas continue to connect with each other by writing transitions between your paragraphs and the main sections within them. At the beginning of a paragraph, a transition functions as a better kind of assertion than a topic sentence because it not only reveals what the paragraph will be about but also shows how it connects to the one that came before it. Take this paragraph you are currently reading as an example. Had I begun by simply writing a topic sentence like "A second strategy for effective writing is to develop effective transitions," I would not only have ignored my own advice, but also would have missed an



important point about how transitions, like opening paragraphs, function to lead readers through various aspects of our perspectives.

Before you can write effective transitions, you need to make certain that your paper is organized deliberately throughout. To insure this, you might try the oldest writing trick in the composition teacher's handbook, the outline. But wait until after you have already come up with most of your analysis. To begin a paper with an outline requires that you know the content before you have a chance to consider it. Writing, as I've argued throughout this book, is a process of discovery—so how can you possibly put an order to ideas that you have not yet articulated? After you have written several paragraphs, you should read them again and write down the main points you conveyed in each of them on a separate piece of paper. Then consider how these points connect with each other and determine the best order for articulating them, creating a reverse outline from the content that you've already developed. Using this outline as a guide, you can then reorganize the paper and write transitions between the paragraphs to make certain that they connect and flow for the reader.

An excellent method for producing effective transitions is to underline the key words in one paragraph and the key words in the one that follows and then to write a sentence that contains all of these words. Try to show the relationship by adding linking words that reveal a causal connection (however, therefore, alternatively) as opposed to ones that simply announce a new idea (another, in addition to, also). For example, if I were to write about how I feel about having to pay taxes, the main idea of one paragraph could be: *Like everyone else, I hate to see so much of my paycheck disappear in taxes.* And the main idea of the paragraph that follows could be: *Without taxes we wouldn't have any public services.* My transition could be: *Despite the fact that I hate to pay taxes, I understand why they are necessary because without them, we wouldn't be able to have a police force, fire department, public schools and a host of other essential services.* If you cannot find a way to link one paragraph to the next, then you should go back to your reverse outline to consider a better place to put it. And if you cannot find any other place where it fits, then you may need to cut the paragraph from your paper (but remember to save it for potential use in a future essay).



This same advice works well for writing transitions not only between paragraphs but also within them. If you do not provide transitional clues as to how the sentences link together, the reader is just as likely to get lost:

*I love my two pets. My cat, Clyde is very independent. My dog, Mac, barks if I leave him alone for very long. I can leave Clyde alone for four days. I'm only taking Clyde with me to college. I have to come home twice a day to feed Mac. Mac does a lot of tricks. Clyde loves to purr on my lap.*

The reason that reading this can make us tired and confused is that we can only remember a few unrelated items in a given moment. By adding transitional phrases and words, we store the items in our memory as concepts, thus making it easier to relate the previous sentences to the ones that follow. Consider how much easier it is to read an analysis with transitions between sentences:

*I have two pets that I love for very different reasons. For instance, I love when my cat, Clyde, sits on my lap and purrs, and I also love when my dog Mac performs many of the tricks I've taught him. But when I leave for college, I plan to take only Clyde with me. Unfortunately I can only leave Mac at home for a few hours before he starts to bark; however, Clyde is very independent and can be left in my dorm for days without needing my attention.*

This revision not only is much easier to read and recall but also gives a sense of coherence to what previously seemed like scattered, random thoughts.

## Ending the Essay

Once you've led your readers all the way through to the closing paragraph, try not to sink their enthusiasm by beginning it with the words "in conclusion." Not only is this phrase overused and cliché, but it also sends the wrong message. The phrase implies that you have wrapped up all the loose ends on the subject and neither you nor your readers should have any need to think about it further. Rather than close off the discussion, the last paragraph should encourage it to continue by stressing how your analysis opens up new avenues for thinking about your subject (as long as these thoughts emerge from your essay and are not completely unrelated to what you wrote about before). This is the place where you should stress the

significance of your analysis, underscoring the most important insights you discovered and the implications for further thought and action.

However you choose to stress the importance of your analysis in your final paragraph, you can do so without simply repeating what you wrote before. If you have effectively led your readers through your paper, they will remember your main points and will most likely find a final summary to be repetitive and annoying. A much stronger choice is to end with a statement or observation that captures the importance of what you have written without having to repeat each of your main points. For example, in his book, *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis ends his discussion of how Southern Californians do not care to preserve their past by calling attention to a junkyard full of zoo and amusement park icons:

Scattered amid the broken bumper cars and ferris wheel seats are nostalgic bits and pieces of Southern California's famous extinct amusement parks (in the pre-Disney days when admission was free or \$1); the Pike, Belmont Shores, Pacific Ocean Park, and so on. Suddenly rearing up from the back of a flatbed trailer are the fabled stone elephants and pouncing lions that once stood at the gates of Selig Zoo in Eastlake (Lincoln) Park, where they had enthralled generations of Eastlake kids. I tried to imagine how a native of Manhattan would feel, suddenly discovering the New York Public Library's stone lions discarded in a New Jersey wrecking yard. I suppose the Selig lions might be Southern California's summary, unsentimental judgment on the value of its lost childhood. The past generations are like so much debris to be swept away by the developers' bulldozers. <sup>[1]</sup>

Imagine, if instead of this paragraph, he had written: *In conclusion I have shown many instances in which Southern Californians try to erase their past. First I showed how they do so by constructing new buildings, concentrating especially on the Fontana region. Second I showed...* Can't you just feel the air leaving your sails?

In light of this advice, you have probably already discerned that certain parts of your essay will emphasize various aspects of analysis. The beginning of the paper will announce your main assertion or thesis and the transitions in subsequent paragraphs will present corollary assertions. The bulk of your paper will most likely center on your examples and explanations, and the end will focus more on the significance. However, try to make certain that all of these elements are present to some degree throughout your essay.

A long section without any significance may cause your readers to feel bored, a section without assertions may cause them to feel confused, and a section without examples or explanations may cause them to feel skeptical.

## EXERCISE

Write a lead paragraph for a potential essay on a subject that you've already developed a strong perspective on. Begin with one of the strategies I mention in this section—an anecdote, a quote, an analogy, a story, an unexpected twist—and connect your lead to your thesis or question that you wish to explore. Consider, too, how you might end this essay. Think further about what you find to be the most significant aspect of your subject and what key images or thoughts you want to leave lingering in the minds of your readers.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The writing process begins when we first start to consider a subject because we form, develop, and articulate our thoughts recursively.
- It is important to focus your analysis on the essential features of the subject and to make sure that each of these features receives adequate development.
- Effective essays subtly lead us into the key perspective, provide transitions between the main sections, and leave us with something important to consider.

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[1] Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 435.



## 5.2 Creating an Effective Style

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss ways to make the style more effective and compelling.
2. Discuss how to fix common mistakes in editing.
3. Provide two contrasting example essays for review.

Once you've adequately explored your subject and laid out your analysis with an effective structure, you can focus more deliberately on the style. Though content and style are difficult to separate, the focus of our attention tends to shift in later drafts from discovering new ideas to considering more effective ways to convey them. The process, however, is not linear but recursive—because a thorough analysis leads to clarity of expression and clarity of expression will in turn lead to a more thorough analysis. Often when you can find a more precise term, it will give you new insights on the entire section and lead to a more sophisticated approach in general.

### Finding the Most Vivid Terms

For this reason, I recommend that after you've finished writing a draft of your essay go back and underline all the vague and general terms to see if you can replace them with more precise diction, words that are clear and specific. Especially look out for the “s” word, and no, I do not mean the one that comes to almost everyone's lips when they look in the rear view mirror and see flashing police lights. I mean “society.” By itself it can mean anything—the entire world, the specific part of the country you live in, the people who make the rules, the counter culture that resists the people who make the rules, to name just a few. If you can specify which “society” you are referring to, you will not only clarify your analysis but also discover new insights concerning the significance of your perspective to a specific group. And also try to avoid all the variations of society that do not provide additional clarity, such as: “in today's society” or “in today's modern complex industrial society.”

Consider also looking out for these vague terms and phrases: “The Government.” Try to specify if this term refers to state, local, or federal representatives, the people who vote them in, or to those who get paid through tax dollars, such as public school teachers, policeman, and armed service personal. “Since the



beginning of time.” Try to specify when something actually begins. Personal computers, for instance, have not been around since the beginning of time, as one of my students wrote, but only since the late 1970s. “All people want to have...” No matter how you finish that sentence, you probably won’t discover something that all people want to have. Again, specify which group of people and why they want to have it. You should also be on the lookout for words like, “stuff,” “things,” or “items,” if you can replace them with more concrete terms like, “scattered papers,” “empty oil cans,” or “half finished plates of food.”

Give the same care and attention to your choice of verbs. You should especially avoid overusing the passive voice, in which the subject of the sentence does not perform the action as in “Tina was asked to go to the prom by Jake.” Usually the active voice sounds more vivid and more compelling, “Jake asked Tina to go to the prom.” And it would be even better if you could replace the verb “asked” with one that gives a more specific account of the action: “Jake begged Tina to go to the Prom.” But don’t feel the need to eliminate the passive voice entirely. Sometimes you may not know who performed the action implied in the sentence, “my car was scraped” or you don’t want to admit responsibility for your own actions, “mistakes were made.” Just make certain that when you use a form of the verb “to be,” you do so for a reason and not in place of a verb that suggests a more vivid account.

## **Avoiding Wordiness**

In advising you to find more precise and compelling words, I do not mean that you should search your thesaurus to find the longest and most complicated terms. Nothing makes students sound like they are trying too hard to impress their teachers than when they use words that appear unnecessarily complicated, dated, or pretentious to make the analysis seem more sophisticated. Though students often think that they impress their teachers by using the most complex term, it usually leaves the opposite impression that you are spending too much time with the thesaurus and not enough with the actual substance of the essay.

Along these lines, avoid the other common trick of adding unnecessary words just to lengthen the essay out to the required number of pages. Instead always look for ways to state your point of view more succinctly. Sometimes you can do this by using a term that implies several others. For instance, you do not

need to write, “Sue is like those people who always put off doing what they are supposed to do until much later than they should have done it in the first place,” when you can simply say, “Sue procrastinates.”

## Writing Compelling Sentences

Once your essay has a precise, natural diction, you can jazz it up even further by creating sentence variety. A series of sentences of the same length and type tends to get hypnotic (in fact, hypnotists use rhythmical tones and repetitious phrases to put people into trances). Your essay should “flow” in the sense that the ideas connect to each other, but not in the sense that the style seems like listening to the waves of a lake lapping against the shore at steady intervals. A style that commands attention seems more like a river that changes at every bend. To achieve this effect, try to juxtapose sentences of various lengths and types. If you have a long sentence that is full of subordination and coordination, moving through the complexities of a section of your analysis, then try to follow it up with a short one. Like this.

An excellent way to achieve more variety, provide more coherence, and reduce wordiness is to combine some of the sentences. Take the following series: *I wanted some ice cream. There are ice cream shops downtown. I have to drive to get to downtown. I don't have time to drive downtown. I've been putting on weight lately. I decided to eat a carrot. Carrots are healthier than ice cream.* Even if these sentences were full of more intriguing observations, we would have to struggle not to fall into a hypnotic trance while reading them. Consider how much more engaging it is to read: *I wanted some ice cream. But when I realized I had to drive all the way downtown to get some, I decided to settle for a carrot instead, a much healthier choice for me anyway. I've put on weight lately.* The combination of short and long sentences keeps our attention by jolting us out of a monotonous flow; the elimination of excess words keeps us from having to sort through the clutter; and the coordination and subordination provides a sense of coherence to the previously scattered thoughts.

## Editing

Once you have an effective structure and style, make sure to proofread your essay carefully. Try to imagine going out on a date, in which you took the time to work for the extra money to go to a nice restaurant and spent hours trying on outfits to look your best, but then when the food arrives, you dig into it with your



hands, chew with your mouth open, and reach over to eat your partner's food, too. Sounds ridiculous, right? Then why do I often get papers from students who took the time to write engaging analyses but did not bother to eliminate similar distractions in editing etiquette? No matter how intelligently you express your point of view, no one will take your essay seriously if it is riddled with errors in punctuation, sentence structure, and spelling.

To avoid these problems, I recommend that when you finish your essay try reverse editing, a method in which you check the essay a sentence at a time backwards. In other words, read the last sentence first and work your way back to the first. This way you will not get so involved in the content that you overlook the problems with grammar, spelling, and punctuation. If you have trouble recognizing these problems, I suggest that you get a hold of a handbook and dictionary instead of relying on your computer to solve all the problems for you. For instance, spell check cannot catch all errors, especially when you use the wrong homonym, or when a typo transforms the word you intend into one that's different, such as when you forget to type the "t" in "the" and it becomes "he."

## Review

To underscore all the advice I have given throughout this book, consider the ways that you might revise and edit the following piece entitled "Those Misleading Manhattan Friends" that I wrote as a parody of bad essay writing. While producing it, I had the joy of ignoring every piece of advice I've given throughout this book. It contains no developed analysis; a five paragraph essay structure; vague, repetitive, archaic, and inappropriate terms; monotonous sentences of the same type and length; errors in punctuation, parallelism, and logic; and oodles of misspellings that spell check will not catch. Before you attempt to revise it, you might want to first review the advice given throughout this chapter about transforming topic sentences into transitions, choosing appropriate diction, combining sentences for variety, and editing the finished draft by reading it a sentence at a time backwards.

### Those Misleading Manhattan Friends

Television. According to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, television is a system for transmitting images and sound into a receiver. Television influences how we think. As part of the media, it shows us



ways to consider the ways we see the world. In the show *Friends* three major contradictions can be found that can be seen by the desecrating viewer. As this paper proceeds each of these contradictions will be made more clearer.

The first of these contradictions has to do with the economics of the major characters within the show *Friends*. Manhattan is an expensive place too live. It is expensive because the rents are very high their. My friend lives in Manhattan. My friend pays a lot for rent in Manhattan. My friend pays over 2,000 dollars a month for a studio apartment in Manhattan. My friend has a good job in Manhattan and still has difficulty making ends meet in such an expensive city as Manhattan. Ross is a teacher. He teaches at the University. Ross lives in a nice apartment. Teachers make very little money. Even University teachers make very little money. Phoebe is a masseuse. She gets paid per job. She lives in a nice apartment. She makes 50 dollars per job. She is always at the coffee shop with her friends. How many jobs can she do in a week? Rents are just too high overall.

Another contradiction within the show *Friends* is there relationships. Ross and Rachel date each other. Ross and Rachel indubitably break up. This usually happens at the end of each season. They are still friends. I cannot be friends with anyone I break up with. My feckless girlfriend and I dated for six years. Then she changed 360 degrees into a different person. She brook my heart. I do not wish to talk to he anymore. Rachel and Ross have a kid together. There kid is very cute. They were once married to each other. They still get together and go two movies as if they simply have a causal relationship. This is a contradiction to. I think now Joey and Rachel are dating. I am sure that they will brake up to.

Another contradiction within the show *Friends* has to do with the modern, complex, ever-changing, technological, fast paced world that we live in today. Few people stay in one place anymore. People move a lot. Only 1 friend from my high school steal lives in the same area. Ross, Rachel, Joey, Chandler, Phoebe, and Monica never move. Except when they move in and out of each others apartments. They also never make gnu friends. Except when they date other people for about half a season and then get board and come back and end up dating each other again.

In conclusion, *Friends* is full of mini and varied contradictions. It is knot a very realistical show. For one, the characters live in Manhattan and they would not be able to afford to live their especially Ross and

Phoebe. For two they date each other and have kids together and the brake up but they still remain friends. And for three and finally they never move or make new friends in eleven years!!! Yet the show is popular. I suppose there are many reasons why it is popular any weigh.

This essay took less than an hour to write. I started with an outline for each of the five paragraphs and followed it precisely and quickly, throwing in the main ideas without further thought, revision, or editing (okay, I did challenge myself to include several common misspellings that spell check would not catch). Even still the piece is not completely hopeless. The notion that a show like *Friends* can lead audiences to accept false impressions of reality could have proven intriguing to explore, and if this essay were not written by me as a parody but by a student in earnest, I would try to help her to focus the paper around this theme and to further develop her relevant ideas.

When you respond to the writing of your peers, keep in mind that we all have to write drafts and that it is always better to focus on the positive, how the writing could become more effective, rather than the negative, explicating what is wrong with it at the moment. In fact, when running writing workshops, I insist that all the feedback be stated in terms of what we like (so the writer knows what to keep or expand in subsequent drafts) and how it can be improved (so the writer has specific advice as to how to make the essay better). This helps writers to get excited about the potential of their essays rather than depressed about their current shortcomings. Ultimately it's our attitude about our writing that causes us either to give up on it entirely or to continue to try to improve it.

The difference between the previous essay on *Friends* and the following one that I wrote on a strange museum in Los Angeles did not emerge from the potential interest of the subject matter but from the time and effort that I put into the writing of each. The piece that follows took several days and many drafts as I integrated experience, research, and critical examination to develop my analysis. When writing it, I used the advice I've given you throughout this book, so for the sake of review, I will explain how I created it before providing you with the finished draft.

When I first visited The Museum of Jurassic Technology I was dumbfounded by what awaited me inside the building. Stumbling through the dark building, I discovered a series of dioramas on such odd and diverse subjects as spores that take over the brains of ants, bats whose radars can pierce through lead,

artifacts found in American trailer parks, illustrations of archaic beliefs and superstitions, and a convoluted and bizarre theory of how memory functions by a man I'd never heard of named Geoffrey Sonneabend. Later, when I discovered that parts of the collection were made up (including both Sonneabend and his theory of memory) and other parts were simply unremarkable, I felt the need to write about the experience in my journal:

*How could I have been so stupid? "Museum of Jurassic Technology?" There was no technology in the Jurassic period, just a bunch of dinosaurs stomping around. I let the word "museum" lead me to think that the rest of the title made sense. And I should have realized when I entered that the items in the collection have nothing in common with each other, have no remarkable characteristics, are scientifically impossible, or just don't make any sense. I consider myself a critical thinker but maybe I'm just as conditioned as everyone else to accept institutional authority.*

As I reflected further on the significance of my visit, I decided that the museum is not the only place where questionable information gets passed off as objective and factual. In school, teachers often ask students to simply repeat information and seldom encourage them to critically examine it, a trend that has become even more common since standardized testing has dominated so much of the current curriculum. This emphasis on memorizing answers does not encourage us to think past the obvious, leading us to accept provisional theories as though they are universal truths. The museum makes us aware of this by using academic sounding phrases to get us to momentarily accept even the most ridiculous claims.

With this working thesis in mind, I set the stage for writing my essay. I researched the museum and related issues, evaluated each aspect of my visit in light of the Pentad, and brainstormed on the museum's wider significance. I then collated and reviewed all of my observations and notes into a first draft, focusing mostly on developing this thesis. I then wrote a second draft in which I included stronger transitions and more deliberate opening and closing paragraphs. Then I produced a third draft, in which I tried to make the style more accurate and varied. I showed this draft to some of my colleagues who gave me excellent suggestions concerning other sources to consult, which parts I should cut and which I should develop, and how it might be reorganized. After this, I submitted it to the online journal, *Americana*, where, after completing more revisions suggested by their editors, it was originally published. When

reading it, think about the process that went into creating it, how it didn't spring out of the blue but developed slowly through careful consideration and deliberate revision.

## The Museum of Jurassic Technology

From Wonder into Wonder Experience Opens <sup>[1]</sup>

The Museum of Jurassic Technology, located in Los Angeles, is a place that is easier to describe by its effect than by its content. According to Lawrence Weschler, who wrote about the museum in his highly acclaimed book *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, a visit gives one a feeling of being "a bit out of order, all shards and powder." This reaction springs from two opposing impulses; the first is to trust that everything in the museum is true (since after all it is a museum) and the other is a gnawing feeling that something doesn't seem quite right. The best reason for trusting the latter impulse is that most of the collection is, to varying degrees, false. To be specific, the museum consists of dioramas revealing different aspects of "life in the Lower Jurassic," including some that are completely made up (a series on the life and theories of a fictional psychologist), some that are made up but believed true (a series on common superstitions), some that are true but unremarkable (a series on the European mole and the night flying moth), and a few that are both true and remarkable (a series on tiny carvings that fit into the eye of a needle).

Although there are no direct statements on the museum's walls which let the visitors in on the secret, the museum does have copies of Weschler's book available, so the extra confused and curious can discover the attraction's "true" nature. I was one of those who, after my first visit, purchased the book in the hopes that it would guide me out of my own confusion. It did, but it also left me repeating "of course" just as I do when I discover the solution to a riddle that seems simultaneously complicated and simple.

There is something fishy about a museum with an oxymoron in its title. Yet to be perfectly honest, I never even considered this a problem because in my mind the term "museum" eclipsed any notion to question the words that followed. I assumed that there must be a special use of the term "Jurassic" which was unfamiliar to me, a use that allowed it to be appropriately paired with the term "technology." This tendency to ignore one's personal reasoning in favor of a greater authority is only partly a result of the respect we attribute to museums in general; it is even more a result of years of academic conditioning to

accept that information offered from an acknowledged authority must be true, significant, reasonable, and, in some way, good for us. Everything in the museum seems designed to make us feel uncomfortable with this trust.

At the entrance, there is a short video that introduces the visitor to the museum's mission, a mission placed within a historical context. On closer inspection, the video contains oblique expressions and historical inaccuracies; however because its style and narration has a "measured voice of unassailable institutional authority," as Weschler put it, and because there are truths mixed with the fiction, it seems reasonable enough on first examination:

*The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, California, is an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic. Like a coat of two colors, the museum serves dual functions. On the one hand, the museum provides the academic community with a specialized repository of relics and artifacts from the Lower Jurassic, with an emphasis on those that demonstrate unusual or curious technological qualities. On the other hand, the museum serves the general public by providing the visitor a hands-on experience of "life in the Jurassic."*

The first thing that struck me was the strange use of the phrase "the Lower Jurassic." However, the claim that the museum serves the academic community led me to believe that there must be a new use of the phrase with which I was unfamiliar. I figured that if it were simply an error, someone long before would have informed the curator that he was confusing a term that describes an ancient time period for one that depicts a modern area. My inclination to trust was furthered by the second mission, to provide a "hands on experience" for the general public, which assured me that the museum was designed with models of effective learning in mind. The video goes on to describe the museum's place in the history of other such institutions, including what it claims to be the first natural history museum, Noah's Ark. This mixture of truth and legend is preparation for what lies in the main collection.

The first exhibits one encounters after leaving the video room are a series of dioramas which focus on the life and theories of Geoffrey Sonnabend. Don't bother looking him up, or you will end up just as frustrated as Weschler, who, after his first visit, looked for references to Sonnabend in several library databases,

publishing houses and historical societies before realizing that he was chasing a phantom. Like Weschler, I too fully believed that Sonnabend was a real person, partly because of the vast amount of details about his life and theories and partly because next to the dioramas of him is one of Marcel Proust tasting the tea soaked madeleine that invokes the memories of his childhood. My fondness for Proust increased my desire to learn about this more obscure theorist who also seemed to be interested in the nature of memory.

After looking through several dioramas that focus on a series of unremarkable events from Sonnabend's life, I finally got to the one that deals with his theory of memory, the gist of which is:

*All living things have a Cone of Obliscence by which the being experiences experience. This cone is sometimes also known as the Cone of True Memory (and occasionally the Characteristic Cone). Sonnabend speaks of this cone as if it were an organ like the pancreas or spleen and like these organs its shape and characteristics are unique to the individual and remain relatively consistent over time. This cone (occasionally referred to as a horn) is composed of two elements—the Atmonic Disc (or base of the cone) which Sonnabend described as “the field of immediate consciousness of an individual” and the hollows (or interior of the cone). A third implied element of the Characteristic Cone is the Spelean Axis, an imaginary line which passes through the cone and the center of the Atmonic Disc.*

Neither the explanation nor the equally obscure model that accompany it make any sense; however, both echo the rhetoric of academic discourse so well that I convinced myself that my confusion came from my inability to grasp the theory and not from the theory itself. In giving some of the parts different names, it seemed as if many other theorists had arrived at similar conclusions but quibbled with Sonnabend over terminology, and by using complex sounding terms with both certainty and consistency, I was inspired to trust those who were smart enough to invent and use this jargon. However, despite its impressive look, when summarized and translated into common usage, the whole theory boils down to an obvious point: events that affect us deeply are more likely to be remembered than those that are everyday occurrences.

Perhaps if the theory was written out and I had more time to consider it, I might have arrived at this conclusion. However, the recording speeds past with no accompanying text except for the above model.

This results in an effort of silent desperation to make sense of the whole thing, an effort that for me went something like this: *Cone of Obliscence? I don't know this term but it sounds like it's related to "obsolescence," so I assume it has to do with memories we no longer need and discard into a what? Spelean Axis! This is completely unfamiliar, but maybe it only intersects the cone at an angle because most experiences are not kept with us as memories; perhaps that is why he calls this part "the Hollows" since these particular experiences do not have a lot of substance.*

Though the exhibit did nothing to enlighten my understanding of the nature of memory as a concept, it did inspire a few memories from my early undergraduate days when I would sit in lecture halls and listen to a professor pontificate through jargon, graphs, models and theories which I did not understand but which I assumed made sense to those who were smart enough to use them. That I began to recall these classroom experiences was quite appropriate, for, as I discovered later, the whole Sonnabend spiel began in lecture form prior to the museum's establishment when its eventual founder and curator, David Wilson, was explaining these "theories" to high school and university students in the Los Angeles area. One of these lectures was attended by art critic, Ralph Rugoff, who describes a classroom scene in which:

*Everybody there was taking notes furiously, as if this were all on the level and was likely to be on the test--the Falls, the cones, the planes, the whole thing, It was amazing. And at one point I leaned over to Diana [David Wilson's wife] and whispered, "This is the most incredible piece of performance art I have ever seen." And she replied, "What makes you think it's performance? David believes all this stuff."*<sup>[2]</sup>

Wilson's belief notwithstanding, I know that many would consider it outrageous that he is passing off lies as truth in front of students who don't know any better. I wonder, however, if the content of most lectures today will seem equally outrageous in a few years to come. Consider that a student in the early 1950s could come out of a day at school believing that a person will never walk on the moon, that Columbus was the first to discover America, and that the meaning of a literary text can be ascertained through codes completely contained within the piece itself. Isn't it arrogant to believe that much of what currently gets taught won't seem just as ridiculous in the not too distant future?

Wilson sees his museum as a filter through which layers of explanations become obscured, allowing us to acknowledge the mysterious nature of the subjects they attempt to explain. He states, “Certain aspects of this museum you can peel away very easily, but the reality behind, once you peel away those relatively easy layers, is more amazing still than anything those initial layers purport to be.” In short, a large part of the Museum’s purpose is to inspire the kind of confusion that leads to a healthy skepticism of institutional truths. For it’s only when people question established knowledge that new ways of seeing the world can come into existence, or as Lao Tzu put it in the Tao Te Ching, “from wonder into wonder experience opens.”

Creating an essay like this takes time, but it is time well spent. Even if you never write another analytical essay after you finish school, the resulting mental stimulation will both enable and encourage you to think about your own life more deeply and help you discover ways to make it better. And analysis can also lead us to create a better world in general. Given the problems we face stemming from environmental damage, nuclear proliferation, and economic instability, we will need a massive amount of critical thinking spread throughout the entire world to insure our very survival. Because for many years I have studied just how creative and resourceful people can be, I believe we have the ability to solve these problems and live more fulfilling lives as we do so. This can only happen, however, when more of us take the time to slow down and analyze the world around us, so that we can add our perspectives to the written and spoken conversations that make up our culture, our history, and our lives.

## EXERCISE

Consider the differences between the two essays in this section. List all of the problems with the “Misleading Manhattan Friends” piece and think of why these problems did not manifest in the piece on the “Museum of Jurassic Technology.” Now go back over the piece on *Friends* and consider how you could revise it. Begin with the content. How could the focus be more precise? What parts should be cut and which expanded? How could each aspect of analysis be further developed? Now think about the structure. How might you revise the opening and closing paragraphs? What transitions could be added? Finally, consider the style and editing. Try combining sentences for variety, finding more accurate terms, and fixing the problems in spelling and grammar.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS



- An effective style can be achieved through providing sentence variety, precise (but not needlessly complicated) diction, and a personal voice.
  - Careful editing can best be achieved by reading the essay a sentence at a time backwards to see more clearly the errors in grammar and spelling.
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[1] This article was first published in *Americana* by Randy

Fallows. [http://americanpopularculture.com/archive/venues/jurassic\\_technology.htm](http://americanpopularculture.com/archive/venues/jurassic_technology.htm)

[2] Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 41.



## Chapter 6

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### Appendix: Frequently Asked Questions About Analysis

*Why should I have to learn to write analytically when most of my teachers just want me to repeat their interpretations back to them in a succinct manner?*

I understand this concern since the lecture/memorize/test format tends to rule in many classrooms. This format appears to be an efficient and objective process. But many instructors, along with your teacher (who is wise enough to ask you to buy this book) disagree. We know that analysis is not an objective process. You cannot necessarily uncover the author's intentions or reveal the one correct conclusion just by thoroughly understanding specific relevant facts. Instead, consider that the goal of an analysis is more to examine and interpret an event, piece of art, book, etc. It is your opinion on the subject, backed by supporting data, that is important. Now remember, no matter how carefully we examine a piece, there are no consistent hidden messages—no specific words, images, or sounds that give away a hidden meaning. For example, while I might understand the history and nature of Impressionism, a Monet painting will still mean something different to me than it will to anyone else. And, if there were only one correct way to study a text, then people would not disagree with each other's interpretations as much as they do. Do you want to see something interesting? Go to Google Scholar and type in the words "*Hamlet*: interpretations of." You'll find about 1,600, 000 results. Clearly there's more than one way to interpret this play. Similarly, when we analyze events or policies or even personal decisions, we find that there are many ways on interpret "signals." There is no one way to reach a universal decision, even when trying to—say—bring an end to war or slavery. If people can't agree on one solution to such policies, then how can we agree on how to solve less blatant issues? So, just for this reason, it's important for you to share what you think about a topic—to analyze it in terms of your perspective. Remember there are many different ways to interpret a scenario; there is never just one point of view.



*So if there is no single, correct way to look at something, then will all opinions have equal value? So, no matter what I write my teacher will have to simply accept it as just one of the many possible ways to see the subject?*

As I've argued throughout this book, just because multiple interpretations may exist for a particular scenario does not mean that "anything goes" when you write an essay. In the absence of one objective answer, some of my students try to convince me that all opinions have equal merit. Yet just as it does not require much thought to agree with your instructor, neither does it show effort to simply jot down the first response that occurs to you about your subject. If you cannot show how you arrived at an interpretation or discuss why it matters, then it probably isn't worth writing about in the first place. You still need to fully develop and construct your essay for it to be taken seriously. While your readers may not always agree with what you write, they ought to at least respect the time, thought, and care you put into writing it.

It does take time, thought and care to produce something worthwhile. Try not to get too discouraged if your essay is not as good as you would like it to be when writing your first, second or even third draft. It usually takes time to be satisfied with a piece of writing. And it's hard to look at what you've written and see how to make it better. Real revision means that you may have to rethink as well as rewrite. But that's what will make you a better writer. Remember what Thomas Edison said about genius. He claimed that it's one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration—and that is true for writing as well. This is why I don't recommend waiting until the last minute to start your essay. If you are someone who works best under pressure, then try to imagine that the deadline is a week or two earlier than it actually is. This way you will motivate yourself to finish a draft, yet you will still have time to consider all the ways you might continue to improve it.

*All of this advice may help me to analyze a given subject, but what if I can't think of any that I want to analyze in the first place?*

Often times a teacher may give you several options for what you can write about, specifying a general topic but leaving the choice of the actual subject up to you. For instance, you may be asked to analyze an aspect of popular culture (a film, song or television show), but you can choose the specific piece to

analyze. While many students see this as an opportunity to write about something that matters to them, others become frustrated because they can't think of anything worth examining. If this happens to you, take a step back. Start by considering what is happening in your own life. What issues are important to you? Take ten minutes to jot down whatever thoughts occur to you in the moment.

After doing so, think about specific pieces that may relate to or directly address these concerns. For instance, assume it's election season and you find yourself increasingly irritated by negative political advertising. You might want to write about the problems with a certain ad, or you might discuss a commentary on the problems with political advertising in general, or you might analyze a song that deals with a relevant social issue that is being ignored through all the mudslinging. Which direction you take will depend on the topic of the course and the nature of the assignment, but if you take the time to really think about what you find important then you'll be able to identify something worthy of analysis.

*So, if I find a topic, how do I figure out what questions to ask? What are "good" questions?*

Once you have found your topic, how will you know what questions to ask about it? A good analysis starts with the right questions. To uncover your point of view, you need to identify the dilemma or confusion in the scenario. And then you need to ask a question that requires more than a summary or objective answer. So, asking why Hamlet killed Polonius is not necessarily an analytical question. The answer could just be... "because he thought it was the king".

A good analytical question can highlight connections or implications by focusing on "how" or "why". So, perhaps a better question would be to ask how the character of Hamlet reflects views of madness in Shakespeare's time, or how it reflects the modern-day view of madness.

*But if I write about something that I like, won't it ruin it for me? Doesn't analysis always take away from enjoyment?*

Usually, you enjoy a movie, sporting event, or concert even more when you talk to your friends about it after it's over. Of course, that's not quite like sharing a term paper. When you analyze a book or a

movie or a scenario in school, you always have to measure it against others and against what your instructor thinks. There's a competitive aspect as well as concern about a grade. And that can add stress to the process. Remember, though, that when you develop your own analysis, you may find new ways to enjoy something that you might have otherwise dismissed if you had only given it a cursory glance. For instance, the first time I read Dante's *Inferno*, from his epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, I hated it. First of all, I was raised not to believe in Hell, and, second, I thought he put way too many people in it (especially his enemies). On closer examination, however, I found a way to look at the text that enabled me to appreciate it more deeply. Rather than describing an actual place, I saw a representation of how we often create Hell for ourselves on Earth.

This is not to say that analysis will always make you enjoy a subject more thoroughly. For example, you might be moved by an advertisement because it appeals to your sense of humor or plays off your emotions. Yet, on further reflection, you might find that the ad has no substance, but just a lot of vague and manipulative images and words. In this case, a closer examination might later save you money—say, your analysis saves you from buying a faulty product. So, in some sense, you've gained satisfaction from the analytical process; after all, it did save you money and likely aggravation down the road.

*Besides the standard academic essay, are there other types of writing that can demonstrate my ability to analyze a subject?*

One of the best ways to show that you fully understand a particular piece is to create a similar one of your own. First, you need to evaluate the rhetorical choices that went into creating the original. Consider the circumstances that inspired the piece and highlight those that are still important to you or your culture. Then, analyze the style, making note of the recurring phrases, ideas and attitudes that are presented. Then modify the piece for your own purpose, changing some of the details while keeping the style and overall flavor of the original.

For example, after reading *The Bald Soprano* by Eugene Ionesco, a student was inspired to write a piece in the same style, yet placed within a more familiar setting. Ionesco's play revolves around characters living in the suburbs of London in the 1950s, characters who have lost all their



individuality by conforming to the proper British behaviors of the period. To show how the need for conformity persists, this student set her version in a fraternity and sorority party. Her play parallels the original in that her characters are also alienated and shallow, the only difference being the social conventions they choose to follow. If you wish to explore this type of analysis, you might consider turning in a “statement of intent.” This will explain how your understanding of the original piece guided you to produce their own version.

Another option is to write a piece in grammar b, sometimes known as an anti-essay. This form was first explained by Winston Weathers in his book *An Alternate Style*,<sup>[1]</sup> and emphasizes the uncertain aspects of various subjects. Grammar B is an entirely different approach to “writing”. It tries to convey a “feeling” of something, rather than a specific idea.

The form also tends to highlight the emotional reactions that a particular subject inspires in us, as opposed to the more traditional essay’s emphasis on the intellectual or clinical approach. For instance, if you were to write about going to the library in a traditional manner, it might look like this: *“I am going to the library after class in order to explore the many and varied books it has to offer and to take the time to organize the rest of my daily activities.”* In grammar b, it might look like this: *“Moving slowly from the warm afternoon sun to the cold neon lights of the library. A few important books hidden away like Easter Eggs. Cubicles full of desks littered with dusty books.”* Lists of fragments like these tend to reflect how our minds usually think—not through complete logical sentences, but through scattered thoughts and images.

Besides creating lists of fragmented associations, there are many other options for grammar b. You can use repetition to reveal things that won’t go away or to show the emotional impact something has, as D.H. Lawrence does in an essay he wrote on Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, “Melville knew. He knew his race was doomed. His white soul, doomed. His great white epoch, doomed. Himself, doomed. The idealist, doomed. The spirit, doomed.”<sup>[2]</sup> Or, instead of showing how fragmented something feels, you can show how complicated it is by using conjunctions, subordination and the occasional semi-colon to produce a long, complicated sentence. You might also explore different ways to layout your ideas on the page. For instance, you might split it into two or more parts to give



equal weight to conflicting thoughts or to show how what you say to someone differs from what you actually think.

Of course, you should ask your teacher before turning in an essay in grammar or one that's an imitation of an original work. These are very challenging and are best tackled after you've had success at producing a more traditional analysis. After all, this is what will be required of you in most of your other classes. On the other hand, many students find the challenge to be worthwhile because of the creative insights that these forms tend to inspire.

*How does my understanding of the nature of analysis help me to respond more effectively to other students' papers?*

Many teachers require or at least encourage students to partake in peer editing, where you help each other to write more effective essays. You can first utilize the advice given throughout this text as a basis for your evaluation.

- Does the writer do an adequate job of expressing and developing the main assertions, examples, explanations and significance? Are any of these areas given too little or too much attention?
- What of the structure, organization and style? Are there places where the essay seems choppy, vague or off-topic?.
- Finally, can you see and mark any recurring problems with the grammar, spelling, or punctuation? (Keep in mind, however, that this should not be your main concern, especially in earlier drafts, and try not to get so caught up in proofreading that you lose sight of the actual content.)

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When communicating your evaluations to the other writers, try to see their essays as works in process and not as finished products. First point out what they did well, where you thought they made good insights or grabbed your attention through effective use of detail. Doing so isn't simply sugarcoating the truth. Rather, it helps your peers know what to keep, focus on, and develop in



subsequent drafts. Next, provide your opinion as to how their essays might best be improved. Do not simply state what's wrong with a piece of writing; that often inspires feelings of resentment or inadequacy. By focusing on how they can make their writing better, you give your peers something to work toward and help them to become excited about the potential of their essays to become more effective. Finally, be specific. Don't simply write a vague comment like "vague" in the margins, but show them where you're confused and what details they might include to make their writing more clear. Remember that we all benefit from advice. No one can improve their work without meaningful feedback. You can provide that while being sensitive and respectful.

*How can learning to write analytically help me in my future career?*

First of all, nearly all professions require their employees to do a lot of writing. An engineer recently told me that he spends as much time in his office writing proposals, memos, and reports as he does at the actual construction sites. He also told me that he wished he had worked harder in his undergraduate writing classes because the contracts don't always go to those with the best ideas but to those who can articulate their visions the most thoroughly and effectively. And I have heard similar testimonials from friends in business, medicine, law, and, of course, education. In each of these professions, the people who write well tend to get noticed, praised, and promoted and are taken far more seriously than those who have difficulty articulating their perspectives.

In addition, the ability to think through the elements of analysis can help you even when you are not directly engaged in writing. If you become a doctor, for example, you will be required to make assertions (diagnoses), explain how you derived your assertions from the evidence (symptoms), and reveal the significance of what might happen if the patient does not follow your prescribed form of treatment. If you become a lawyer, you will also need to make assertions (guilty/not guilty), justify these assertions through an explanation of the available evidence, and discuss the significance of your position in your opening and closing statements. The ability to come up with meaningful recommendations based on close readings of the pertinent details can only make you more effective in whichever profession you choose to pursue.



*How can I continue to exercise my analytical muscles once I'm finished with school and no longer have essays to write?*

First and foremost, you can keep a journal in which you reflect on the details that make up your life. A journal is more than just a diary where you simply record what happened to you throughout your day (got up, read the newspaper, put in eight hours of work, watched television, went to bed). It's a place to consider the more significant events, reevaluate your long-term goals, or think about ways to improve your relationships. You can also produce an original poem, story, or brief analysis of a movie, book or historical event. Be creative with it because you're more likely to continue to write in your journal if you try different kinds of entries. One day you may wish to write an imaginary dialogue with someone you wish you could be more open with; another day you might make a list of your favorite films of the year accompanied with a brief explanation as to why each one moved you. You shouldn't feel required to write in your journal every single day but try to be somewhat regular with it or you might eventually give up on it.

If you wish to share some of your more important insights, there are many places where you can do so. If you feel particularly ambitious and have time to carefully craft your response, you could submit your analysis to a magazine, academic journal, or newspaper. Don't be too discouraged if you get a few rejection notices. It often has nothing to do with the quality of your writing but with the nature of the publication and with what the editor needs at the time. Of course, thanks largely to the internet, you can share your views more immediately and less formally through blogging, product reviews, or even by responding to a friend's profile on Twitter, MySpace, or Facebook. Whatever the means or genre, try to stay in the habit of writing analytically because the more practice you get, the more likely it will continue to help you to not only have a successful career but also a more fulfilling life in general.

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[1] Winston Weathers, *An Alternate Style* (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Company, 1980).

[2] Winston Weathers, *An Alternate Style* (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Company, 1980), 29.

