

## Ancillaries

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# CHAPTER 1

## The Analytical Frame of Mind

**Overview** In this chapter we define analysis and explain why it is the kind of writing you will most often be asked to do in college and beyond. We explain the characteristics that college teachers look for in student writing and the changes in orientation this kind of writing requires: the analytical frame of mind. The chapter identifies the counterproductive habits of mind most likely to block good writing and offers in their place the book's first set of strategies for becoming a more observant and more confident writer: NOTICE & FOCUS, Free-writing, ASKING "SO WHAT?" and THE METHOD. These strategies are embedded in a discussion of what we call The Five Analytical Moves.

### Writing as a Tool of Thought

Learning to write well means more than learning to organize information in appropriate forms and to construct clear and correct sentences. Learning to write well means learning ways of using writing in order to think well.

Good writing does, of course, require attention to form, but writing is not just a container for displaying already completed acts of thinking; it is also a mental activity. Through writing we figure out what things mean.

This book will make you more aware of your own acts of thinking and will show you how to experiment more deliberately with ways of having ideas—for example, by sampling various kinds of informal, exploratory writing that will enhance your ability to learn.

As this chapter will show, the analytical process consists of a fairly limited set of basic moves—strategies—that people who think well have at their disposal. *Writing Analytically* describes and gives names to these strategies, which are activities you can practice and use systematically in order to arrive at better ideas.

Our attempt to formulate these moves is not without precedent. Long before there were courses on writing, people studied a subject called rhetoric—as they still do. Rhetoric is a way of thinking about thinking. It offers ways of generating and evaluating arguments as well as ways of arranging them for maximum effect in particular situations. This book is a rhetoric in

the sense that it offers methods for observing all manner of data and arriving at ideas. The division of rhetoric devoted to the generation of ideas is called “invention.” *Writing Analytically* is an invention-oriented rhetoric.

In classical rhetoric, procedures and forms that served as aids to discovery were called *heuristics*. The term comes from the Greek word *heuriskein*, which means “to find out” or “to discover.” This book’s analytical methods, such as the ones you will find in this chapter, are heuristics.

You know how in the cartoons when a character gets an idea, we see a light bulb go on over his or her head? That’s the point of view this book opposes, because that scenario dooms you to waiting for the light bulb to go on. Heuristics are more reliable ways of turning on that light bulb than lying around waiting for inspiration.

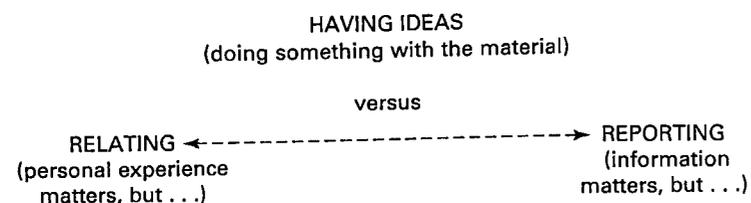
## Why Faculty Want Analysis

For over two decades we’ve co-directed a Writing Across the Curriculum program in which writing is taught by our colleagues from all of the other disciplines. They have helped us to see why analysis is what they expect from student writing. They want analysis because of the attitudes toward learning that come along with it—the way it teaches learners to cultivate curiosity, to tolerate uncertainty, to respect complexity, and to seek to understand a subject before they attempt to make arguments about it.

Overall, what faculty want is for students to learn to do things with course material beyond merely reporting it on the one hand, and just reacting to it (often through like-dislike, agree-disagree responses) on the other (see Figure 1.1). This is the issue that *Writing Analytically* addresses: how to locate a middle ground between passive summary and personal response. That middle ground is occupied by analysis.

## Analysis Defined

To analyze something is to ask what that something means. It is to ask how something does what it does or why it is as it is. Analysis is, then, a form of detective work that typically pursues something puzzling, something you are seeking to understand rather than something you believe you already have



**FIGURE 1.1**  
What Faculty Want from Student Writing

the answers to. Analysis finds questions where there seemed not to be any, and it makes connections that might not have been evident at first. Analysis is, then, more than just a set of skills: it is a frame of mind, an attitude toward experience.

Analysis is the kind of thinking you’ll most often be asked to do in college, the mainstay of serious thought. Yet, it’s also among the most common of our mental activities. The fact is that most people already analyze all of the time, but they often don’t realize that this is what they’re doing.

If, for example, you find yourself being followed by a large dog, your first response—other than breaking into a cold sweat—will be to analyze the situation. What does being followed by a large dog mean for me, here, now? Does it mean the dog is vicious and about to attack? Does it mean the dog is curious and wants to play? Similarly, if you are losing at a game of tennis or you’ve just left a job interview or you are looking at a large painting of a woman with three noses, you will begin to analyze. How can I play differently to increase my chances of winning? Am I likely to get the job, and why (or why not)? Why did the artist give the woman three noses?

## Analysis Does More than Break a Subject into Its Parts

Whether you are analyzing an awkward social situation, an economic problem, a painting, a substance in a chemistry lab, or your chances of succeeding in a job interview, the process of analysis is the same:

- divide the subject into its defining parts, its main elements or ingredients
- consider how these parts are related, both to each other and to the subject as a whole.

In the case of the large dog, for example, you might notice that he’s dragging a leash, has a ball in his mouth, and is wearing a bright red scarf around his neck. Having broken your larger subject into these defining parts, you would try to see the connection among them and determine what they mean, what they allow you to decide about the nature of the dog: possibly somebody’s lost pet, playful, probably not hostile, unlikely to bite me.

Analysis of the painting of the woman with three noses, a subject more like the kind you might be asked to write about in a college course, would proceed in the same way. Your end result—ideas about the nature of the painting—would be determined—as with the dog—not only by noticing its various parts, but by your familiarity with the subject. If you knew little about painting, scrutiny of its parts would not tell you, for instance, that it is an example of the movement called cubism. You would, however, still be able to draw some analytical conclusions—ideas about the meaning and nature of the subject. You might conclude, for example, that the artist is interested in perspective or in the way we see, as opposed to being interested in realistic depictions of the world.

One common denominator of all effective analytical writing is that it pays close attention to detail. We analyze because our global responses, say, to a play or a speech or a social problem, are too general. If you try, for example, to comment on an entire football game, you'll find yourself saying things like "great game," which is a generic response, something you could say about almost anything. This "one-size-fits-all" kind of comment doesn't tell us very much except that you probably liked the game.

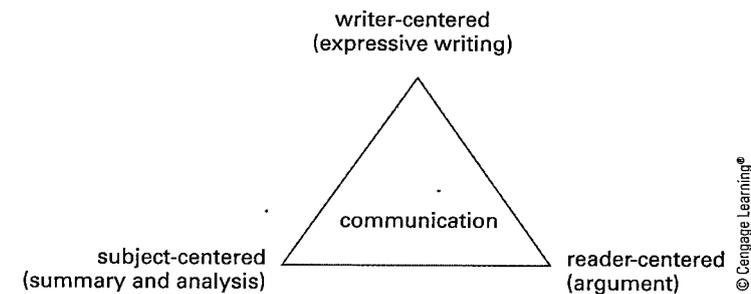
In order to say more, you would necessarily become more analytical—shifting your attention to the significance of some important piece of the game as a whole—such as "they won because the offensive line was giving the quarterback all day to find his receivers" or "they lost because they couldn't defend against the safety blitz." This move from generalization to analysis, from the larger subject to its key components, is a characteristic of the way we think. In order to understand a subject, we need to discover what it is "made of," the particulars that contribute most strongly to the character of the whole.

If all analysis did was take subjects apart, leaving them broken and scattered, the activity would not be worth very much. The student who presents a draft to his or her professor with the encouraging words, "Go ahead, rip it apart," reveals a disabling misconception about analysis—that, like dissecting a frog in a biology lab, analysis takes the life out of its subjects.

Analysis means more than breaking a subject into its parts. When you analyze a subject you ask not just "What is it made of?" but also "How do these parts help me to understand the meaning of the subject as a whole?" A good analysis seeks to locate the life of its subject, the aims and ideas that energize it.

## Distinguishing Analysis from Summary, Expressive Writing, and Argument

How does analysis differ from other kinds of thinking and writing? A common way of answering this question is to think of communication as having three possible centers of emphasis: the writer, the subject, and the audience. Communication, of course, involves all three of these components, but some kinds of writing concentrate more on one than on the others (see Figure 1.2). Autobiographical writing, for example, such as diaries or memoirs or stories about personal experience, centers on the writer and his or her desire for self-expression. Argument, in which the writer takes a stand on an issue, advocating or arguing against a policy or attitude, is reader-centered; its goal is to bring about a change in its readers' actions and beliefs. Analytical writing is more concerned with arriving at an understanding of a subject than it is with either self-expression or changing readers' views.



**FIGURE 1.2**  
The Communication Triangle

These three categories of writing are not mutually exclusive. So, for example, expressive (writer-centered) writing is also analytical in its attempts to define and explain a writer's feelings, reactions, and experiences. And analysis is a form of self-expression since it inevitably reflects the ways a writer's experiences have taught him or her to think about the world. Similarly, analysis is a close cousin of argument in its emphasis on logic and the dispassionate scrutiny of ideas ("What do I think about what I think?"). But as we shall see, analysis and argument are not the same.

### Analysis and Summary

One of the most common kinds of writing you'll be asked to do in college, in addition to analysis, is summary. Summary differs from analysis, because the aim of summary is to recount in reduced form someone else's ideas. But summary and analysis are also clearly related and usually operate together. Summary is important to analysis, because you can't analyze a subject without laying out its significant parts for your reader. Similarly, analysis is important to summary, because summarizing is more than just shortening someone else's writing. To write an accurate summary you have to ask analytical questions, such as:

- Which of the ideas in the reading are most significant? Why?
- How do these ideas fit together? What do the key passages in the reading mean?

Like an analysis, an effective summary doesn't assume that the subject matter can speak for itself: the writer needs to play an active role. A good summary provides perspective on the subject as a whole by explaining, as an analysis does, the meaning and function of each of that subject's parts. So, summary, like analysis, is a tool of understanding and not just a mechanical task. But a summary stops short of analysis because summary typically makes much smaller interpretive leaps.

Laying out the data is key to any kind of analysis, not simply because it keeps the analysis accurate, but also because, crucially, it is *in the act of carefully*

describing a subject that analytical writers often have their best ideas. The writer who can offer a careful description of a subject's key features is likely to arrive at conclusions about possible meanings that others would share.

Here are two guidelines to be drawn from this discussion of analysis and summary:

1. Describe with care. The words you choose to summarize your data will contain the germs of your ideas about what the subject means.
2. In moving from summary to analysis, scrutinize the language you have chosen, asking, "Why did I choose this word?" and "What ideas are implicit in the language I have used?"

### **Analysis and Expressive Writing**

At their extremes, analysis and expressive writing differ significantly in method and aim. The extreme version of expressive writing focuses on the self, with other subjects serving only to evoke greater self-understanding. The extreme version of analytical writing banishes the "I" and, although its insights may derive from personal experience, it foregrounds the writer's reasoning, not his experiences.

In practice, though, the best versions of analysis and expressive writing can overlap a lot. Although most analytical writing done in the academic disciplines is about some subject other than the self, all writing is, in a sense, personal, because there is an "I" doing the thinking and selecting the details to consider. Writing about the self, about one's own memories and defining experiences, is a useful way to stimulate our thinking about words and about the role of detail in shaping our ideas about things.

Virtually all forms of description are implicitly analytical. When you choose what you take to be the three most telling details about your subject, you have selected significant parts and used them as a means of getting at what you take to be the character of the whole. This is what analysis does: it goes after an understanding of what something means, its nature, by zeroing in on the function of significant detail.

**Two Examples of Description as a Form of Analysis** In the two passages below, think about what it is that each writer is analyzing through the use of description. Which sentences and which details reveal the implicit analysis contained in the description?

#### **First student description**

22 Green Hill Road was the most beautiful house I had ever seen. The bricks a light brown, and the ivy growing along the sides reflected the sun with such perfection every afternoon. Everything about it was magnificent, but the best part about it was how it never changed—even from the moment I moved in when I was three, the house itself had always been there for me to come back to.

It was junior year in high school and I was visiting 22 Green Hill Road to pick up a few things, when I noticed something different under the clock that wasn't there when I moved out with my mom months earlier. It was a frame filled with pictures of a woman in the process of rolling down a luscious light green hill. I couldn't stop staring at her: her hair was dark brown and her jeans were a size too big. I had never met her before, and she certainly did not belong in my kitchen—the kitchen that was once so familiar I could recall every detail on every wall. My father walked in.

I turned to him. "Who . . . is this?" I asked him. It took him a while to figure out what to say. He sighed and answered, "That's my friend Beth." He had an ultimate innocence in his voice that never went away; I could never stay mad at him for long.

"Oh," I replied. Then I asked what I wished I had not for a long time afterward. "Did you take this?" He backed away from me.

Whenever I stopped by, from that moment on, he turned the frame around so I could not see the images of a strange yet now so familiar woman in what used to be my kitchen.

#### **Second student description**

I wish I could tell you more about that night, but it's kind of blurry. What do I remember? My father's voice, "Mommy passed away." I know I cried, but for how long I don't remember. My boyfriend was there; he only heard my end of the conversation. He drove me home from college. I guess that took a couple of hours. There was a box of tissues on my lap, but I didn't use any. He smoked a cigarette at one point, and opened up a window. The black air rushed in and settled on me like a heavy cloak.

The following assignment treats the writer's self as the subject of an analysis and calls for the writer to conduct that analysis through the careful selection and arrangement of telling detail.

#### **TRY THIS 1.1: Writing the Self**

Write a brief (two-page) descriptive piece about yourself that you would be willing to read out loud to others engaged in the same exercise. Do this by offering a narrative of some revealing and representative "moment"—perhaps a kind of moment that tended to recur—in your life. Sometimes the most telling moments, those that play a significant role in how we come to be who we are, are subtle, small moments, rather than "big" life-changing experiences. Some of these small but significant moments are barely remembered until we start looking for them with writing. Thus, they engage readers in the writer's process of discovery, which is what good writing should do. Your piece will necessarily be a blend of showing and telling, of description and more explicit analysis, but make sure not to substitute telling readers how you felt for re-creating the experience that made you feel as you did.

## VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

### Habits of Mind in Psychology: A Psychologist Speaks

Psychologists who study the way we process information have established important links between the way we think and the way we feel. Some psychologists, such as Aaron Beck, have identified common “errors in thinking” that parallel the habits of mind discussed in this chapter. Beck and others have shown that falling prey to these counterproductive habits of mind is associated with a variety of negative outcomes. For instance, a tendency to engage in either/or thinking, overgeneralization, and personalization has been linked to higher levels of anger, anxiety, and depression. Failure to attend to these errors in thinking chokes off reflection and analysis. As a result, the person becomes more likely to “react” rather than think, which may prolong and exacerbate the negative emotions.

— MARK SCIUTTO, PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

### Get Comfortable with Uncertainty

Most of us learn early in life to pretend that we understand things even when we don't. Rather than ask questions and risk looking foolish, we nod our heads. Soon, we even come to believe that we understand things when really we don't, or not nearly as well as we think we do. This understandable but problematic human trait means that to become better thinkers, most of us have to cultivate a more positive attitude toward not knowing. Prepare to be surprised at how difficult this can be. Start by trying to accept that uncertainty—even its more extreme version, confusion—is a productive state of mind, a precondition to having ideas. The poet John Keats coined a memorable phrase for this willed tolerance of uncertainty. He called it *negative capability*.

I had not had a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.

— LETTER TO GEORGE AND THOMAS KEATS, DECEMBER 1817

The key phrases here are “capable of being in uncertainties” and “without any irritable reaching.” Keats is not saying that facts and reason are unnecessary and therefore can be safely ignored. But he does praise the kind of person who can remain calm (rather than becoming irritable) in a state of uncertainty. He is endorsing a way of being that can stay open to possibilities longer than most of us are comfortable with. Negative capability is an essential habit of mind for productive analytical thinking.

Tell yourself that you don't understand, even if you think that you do. You'll know that you are surmounting the fear of uncertainty when the meaning of your evidence starts to seem less rather than more clear to you, and

perhaps even strange. You will begin to see details that you hadn't seen before and a range of competing meanings where you had thought there was only one.

### Habit: The Slot-Filler Mentality (Five-Paragraph Form)

Can a format qualify as a counterproductive habit of mind? Yes, if you consider how many high school students have naturalized five-paragraph form as the structure for organizing the writing they do in school.

The shift from high school to college writing is not just a difference in degree but a difference in kind. The changes it requires in matters of form and style are inevitably also changes in thinking. The primary change in thinking for many students demands saying good-bye to five-paragraph form.

Of course it can be anxiety-producing to bid farewell to this one-size-fits-all writing format and replace it with a set of different forms for different situations. But it's essential to let go of this particular security blanket.

So, what's wrong with five-paragraph form? Its rigid, arbitrary, and mechanical organizational scheme values structure over just about everything else, especially in-depth thinking in depth.

The formula's defenders say that essays need to be organized and that the simple three-part thesis and three body paragraphs (one reason and/or example for each) and repetitive conclusion meet that need. They also say that five-paragraph form is useful for helping writers to get started.

But the problem with treating five-paragraph form as a relatively benign aid to clarity is that—like any habit—it is very hard to break. The form actually discourages thinking by conditioning writers to be afraid of looking closely at evidence. If they look too closely, they might find something that doesn't fit, at which point the prefabricated organizational scheme falls apart. And it is precisely the something-that-doesn't-seem-to-fit, the thing writers call a “complication,” that triggers good ideas.

We will return in Chapter 4 to the problems created by five-paragraph form and how to remedy them. For now, keep in mind that if you can't break the slot-filler habit, you'll remain handicapped because five-paragraph form runs counter to virtually all of the values and attitudes that you need in order to grow as a writer and a thinker.

### Learn to Notice

Some people, especially the very young, are good at noticing things. They see things that the rest of us don't see or have ceased to notice. Growing up, we all become increasingly desensitized to the world around us; we tend to forget the specific things that get us to feel and think in particular ways.

But why is this? Is it just that people become duller as they get older? The poet William Wordsworth thought so: he argued that we aren't the victims of declining intelligence, but of habit. That is, as we organize our lives so that we can function more efficiently, we condition ourselves to see in more