

# CHAPTER 3

## Responding to Traditional Writing Assignments More Analytically

**Overview** This brief chapter is a companion to the two previous chapters, applying strategies from them in the service of making your response to traditional kinds of writing assignments more analytical. These frequently assigned types of writing include:

- Summary
- Personal Response (reaction paper)
- Agree/disagree
- Comparison/contrast (DIFFERENCE WITHIN SIMILARITY, similarity despite difference)
- Definition

The chapter argues that as a general rule, you should seek out *live questions over inert answers*. Rather than leading you to a single or obvious answer, an analytical topic aims to define a space in which you can have ideas about (explore the questions in) what you've been learning.

### Interpreting Writing Assignments

One fact of college writing is that someone is usually telling you not only what to write about, but also what form to write it in. This situation is not, however, as straightforward as it sounds. Consider, for example, an assignment to “discuss how a supply-side economist might respond to the idea of eliminating most tariffs on imported goods.” How do you interpret the word *discuss*? Should you confine your response to summarizing (restating) the reading you've done on the subject? Should you analyze the reading, by, for example, drawing out its unstated assumptions or pointing to inconsistencies in its position? Should you write an argument about the reading, revealing the extent to which you agree or disagree with the supply-side view? And what do you do about the other most common writing situation, the open topic, wherein the assignment is essentially to go write your own assignment?

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By the time you reach college, you will have learned to recognize certain kinds of instructions that writing assignments characteristically contain: compare and contrast, define, agree or disagree. The key words of a topic trigger different kinds of writing. Some topics call for *argument*—for taking a firm stand on one side of an issue and making a case for that stand. Some call for *summary*—for restating ideas and information in a focused and concise way. Some call for *personal response*—for testing an idea or attitude or question against your own life experience.

All of these kinds of writing assignments have a significant analytical component, though this fact is often overlooked. This chapter will show you how to make your responses to common kinds of topics more analytical.

## Find the Analytical Potential: Locate an Area of Uncertainty

The best way to become more analytical in your response to topics is to actively search out an area of your subject where there are no clear and obvious answers—to look for something that needs explaining, rather than reiterating the obvious. The analytical component in a topic is often not apparent. You have to actively look for it.

Although disciplines vary in the kinds of questions they characteristically ask, every discipline is concerned with asking questions, exploring areas of uncertainty, and attempting to solve—or at least clarify—problems. An analytical response to a topic calls on you, in other words, to *deliberately situate yourself among sites of potential ambiguity or conflict*, so that your writing can explore the complexity of your subject. In order to learn how to enter this uncertain space, you will first have to get over the fear that you are doing something wrong if you cannot arrive quickly at a clear and obvious answer.

We now turn to six rules of thumb that can help you to discover and respond to the complexities that are there but not always immediately apparent in your subject matter nor explicitly asked for in the writing assignments you encounter. What all of our suggestions have in common is the single requirement that you train yourself to look for questions rather than leaping too quickly to answers. It is this orientation toward topics that will move you beyond merely reporting information and will lead you to think with and about it.

## Six Rules of Thumb for Responding to Assignments More Analytically

The following rules of thumb can help you to discover and respond to the complexities of the topics that you encounter, rather than oversimplifying or evading them.

### Rule 1: Reduce Scope

Whenever possible, reduce drastically the scope of your inquiry. Resist the temptation to include too much information. Even when an assignment calls for

broad coverage of a subject, an effective and usually acceptable strategy is for you to begin with an overview and then analyze one or two key points in greater depth.

For example, if you were asked to write on President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, you would obviously have to open with some general observations, such as what it was and why it arose. But if you tried to stay on this general level throughout, your paper would have little direction or focus. You could achieve a focus, though, by moving quickly from the general to some much smaller and more specific part of the subject, such as attacks on the New Deal. You would then be able to limit the enormous range of possible evidence to a few representative figures, such as Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and Alf Landon. Once you began to compare the terms and legitimacy of their opposition to the New Deal, you would be much more likely to manage a complex analysis of the subject than if you had remained at the level of broad generalization. Typically you will find that some mixture of wide-angle coverage with more narrowly focused discussion is the best way to cover the ground without sacrificing depth.

### **Rule 2: Study the Wording of Topics for Unstated Questions**

Nearly all formulations of an assigned topic contain one or more overt questions, and also other questions that are implied by the topic's wording. Taking the time to ponder the wording and to articulate the questions that wording implies is often the first step to having an idea—to finding an angle of approach.

Consider, for instance, a topic question such as "Is feminism good for Judaism?" The question, itself, seems to invite you simply to argue yes or no, but the wording implies preliminary questions that you would need to articulate and answer before you could address the larger issue. What, for example, does "good for Judaism" mean? That which allows the religion to evolve? That which conserves its tradition? The same kinds of questions, defining and contextualizing and laying out implications, might be asked of the term "feminism." And what of the possibility that feminism has no significant affect whatsoever?

As this example illustrates, even an apparently limited and straightforward question presses writers to make choices about how to engage it. So don't leap from the topic question to your plan of attack too quickly. One of the best strategies lies in smoking out and addressing the unstated assumptions implied by the wording of the topic.

### **Rule 3: Suspect Your First Responses**

If you settle for your first response, the result is likely to be superficial, obvious, and overly general. A better strategy is to examine your first responses for ways in which they are inaccurate and then to develop the implications of these overstatements (or errors) into a new formulation. In many cases, writers go through this process of proposing and rejecting ideas ten times or more before they arrive at an angle or approach that will sustain an essay.

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A first response is okay for a start, as long as you don't stop there. For example, many people might agree, at first glance, that no one should be denied health care, or that a given film or novel that concludes with a marriage is a happy ending, or that the American government should not pass trade laws that might cause Americans to lose their jobs. On closer inspection, however, each of these responses begins to reveal its limitations. Given that there is a limited amount of money available, should everyone, regardless of age or physical condition, be accorded every medical treatment that might prolong life? And might not a novel or film that concludes in marriage signal that the society offers too few options, or more cynically, that the author is feeding the audience an implausible fantasy to blanket over problems raised earlier in the work? And couldn't trade laws resulting in short-term loss of jobs ultimately produce more jobs and a healthier economy?

As these examples suggest, first responses—usually pieces of conventional wisdom—can blind you to rival explanations. Try not to decide on an answer to questions too quickly.

## **Rule 4: Begin with Questions, Not Answers**

Whether you are focusing an assigned topic or devising one of your own, you are usually better off to begin with something that you don't understand very well and want to understand better. Begin by asking what kinds of questions the material poses. So, for example, if you are already convinced that Robinson Crusoe changes throughout Defoe's novel and you write a paper cataloguing those changes, you will essentially be composing a selective plot summary. If, by contrast, you wonder why Crusoe walls himself within a fortress after he discovers a footprint in the sand, you will be more likely to interpret the significance of events rather than just to report them.

## **Rule 5: Expect to Become Interested**

Writing gives you the opportunity to cultivate your curiosity by thinking exploratively. Rather than approaching topics in a mechanical way or putting them off to the last possible moment and doing the assignment grudgingly, try giving yourself and the topic the benefit of the doubt. If you can suspend judgment and start writing, you will often find yourself uncovering interests where you had not seen them before. In other words, accept the idea that interest is a product of writing—not a prerequisite.

## **Rule 6: Write All of the Time about What You Are Studying**

Because interest is so often a product and not a prerequisite of writing, it follows that writing informally about what you are studying while you are studying it is probably the single best preparation for developing interesting topics. By writing spontaneously about what you read, you will accustom yourself to being a less passive consumer of ideas and information, and you will have more ideas and information available to think actively with and about. In effect, you will

be formulating possible topics long before an actual topic is assigned. In any case, you should not wait to start writing until you think you have an idea you can organize a paper around. Instead, use writing to get you to the idea.

**Using Freewriting to Find and Interpret Topics** As we have argued in both of the previous chapters, freewriting offers one of the best antidotes to both superficial writing and writer's block. It also enables you to develop and organize your ideas when you begin drafting more formally because you already will have explored some of the possible paths you might travel and will have rejected others as dead ends.

PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITES (see Chapter 2) are an especially useful way to move from a broad topic to one that is more carefully directed and narrowed. Start by choosing passages in response to the question, "What in the reading needs to be discussed; poses a question or a problem; or seems in some way difficult to pin down, anomalous, or even just unclear?" You can vary this question infinitely, selecting the passage that you find most puzzling or most important or most dissonant or most whatever. Then write without stopping for fifteen minutes or so.

One advantage of PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING is that it forces you to articulate what you notice as you notice it, not delaying—or, as is more common, simply avoiding—thinking in a persistent and relatively disciplined way about what you are reading. There is no set procedure for such writing, but it usually involves the following:

- It selects key phrases or terms in the passage and paraphrases them, trying to tease out the possible meanings of these words.
- It addresses how the passage is representative of broader issues in the reading; perhaps it will refer to another, similar passage.
- It attends, at least briefly, to the context surrounding the passage, identifying the larger section of which the passage is a part.

If you assign yourself several PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITES on a given topic, you can build up, through a process of accretion, the thinking for an entire paper.

The remainder of the chapter offers strategies for upping the analytical quotient in your response to traditional writing assignments.

## Summary

All analytical topics require a blend of two components: a thinking component and an information component. Summary provides the information component. Summarizing is basically a translation process, and as such, it is an essential part of learning. It is the way that not just facts and figures but also other people's theories and observations enter your writing.

Summary performs the essential function of contextualizing a subject accurately. It creates a fair picture of what's there. Summarizing isn't simply the unanalytical reporting of information; it's more than just

condensing someone else's words. To write an accurate summary, you have to ask analytical questions, such as the following:

- 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?

Summarizing is, then, like paraphrasing, a tool of understanding and not just a mechanical task.

When summaries go wrong, they are just lists, a simple “this and then this” sequence. Often lists are random, as in a shopping list compiled from the first thing you thought of to the last. Sometimes they are organized in broad categories: fruit and vegetables here, canned goods there. Lists do very little logical connecting among the parts beyond “next.” Summaries that are just lists tend to dollop out the information monotonously. They omit the thinking that the piece is doing—the ways it is connecting the information, the contexts it establishes, and the implicit slant or point of view.

Writing analytical summaries can teach you how to read for the connections, the lines that connect the dots. And when you're operating at that level, you are much more likely to have ideas about what you are summarizing.

## Strategies for Making Summaries More Analytical

**Strategy 1: Look for the underlying structure.** Use THE METHOD to find patterns of repetition and contrast (see Chapter 1). If you apply it to a few key paragraphs, you will find the terms that get repeated, and these will suggest strands, which in turn make up organizing contrasts. This process works to categorize and then further organize information and, in so doing, to bring out its underlying structure. See also UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS and TRACKING BINARIES in Chapter 2.

**Strategy 2: Select the information that you wish to discuss on some principle other than general coverage.** Use NOTICE & FOCUS to rank items of information in some order of importance (see Chapter 1). Let's say that you are writing a paper on major changes in the tax law or on recent developments in U.S. policy toward the Middle East. Rather than simply collecting the information, try to arrange it into hierarchies. What are the least or most significant changes or developments, and why? Which changes or developments are most overlooked or most overrated or most controversial or most practical, and why? All of these terms—significant, overlooked, and so forth—have the effect of focusing the summary, guiding your decisions about what to include and exclude.

**Strategy 3: Reduce scope to say more about less.** Reducing scope is an especially efficient and productive strategy when you are trying to understand a reading you find difficult or perplexing. It will move you beyond passive



summarizing and toward having ideas about the reading. You can still begin with a brief survey of major points to provide context before narrowing the focus.

If, for example, you are reading Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and start cataloguing what makes it funny, you are likely to end up with unanalyzed plot summary—a list that arranges its elements in no particular order. But narrowing the question to “How does Chaucer's use of religious commentary contribute to the humor of ‘The Wife of Bath's Tale’?” reduces the scope to a single tale and the humor to a single aspect of humor. Describe those as accurately as you can, and you will begin to notice things.

**Strategy 4: Get some detachment: shift your focus from *what?* to *how?* and *why?*** Most readers tend to get too single-minded about absorbing the information. That is, they attend only to the *what*: what the reading is saying or is about. They take it all in passively. But you can deliberately shift your focus to *how* it says what it says and *why*.

If, for example, you were asked to discuss the major discoveries that Darwin made on *The Beagle*, you could avoid simply listing his conclusions by redirecting your attention to *how* he proceeded. You could choose to focus, for example, on Darwin's use of the scientific method, examining how he built and, in some cases, discarded hypotheses. Or you might select several passages that illustrate how Darwin proceeded from evidence to conclusion and then *rank* them in order of importance to the overall theory. Notice that in shifting the emphasis to Darwin's thinking—the *how* and *why*—you would not be excluding the *what* (the information component) from your discussion.

One way to focus on the *how* and the *why*—whether it be a sign on a subway or the language of a presidential speech—is to situate the reading rhetorically. Like analysis in general, rhetorical analysis asks what things mean, why they are as they are, and how they do what they do. But rhetorical analysis asks these questions with one primary question always foregrounded: how does the thing achieve its effects on an audience? Rhetorical analysis asks not just “What do I think?”, but “What am I being invited to think (and feel) and by what means?” See *Noticing and Rhetorical Analysis* in Chapter 1 and *Situate the Reading Rhetorically: THE PITCH, THE COMPLAINT, AND THE MOMENT* in Chapter 2.

## Personal Response: The Reaction Paper

How do you know when you are being asked for a personal response? And what does it mean to respond personally? When asked for your reactions to a particular subject, or for what you think is most important or interesting or revealing in it, you are being asked to select your own starting point for discussion, for the initial impressions that you will later analyze more systematically. You will often discover in such reactions the germ of an idea about the subject.

The biggest advantage of personal response topics is that they give you the freedom to explore where and how to engage your subject. Such topics often bring to the surface your emotional or intuitive response, allowing you

to experiment with placing the subject in various contexts. You might, for example, offer your personal response to an article on the abuses of hazing in fraternity and sorority life in the context of your own experience. Or you might think about it in connection to some idea about in-groups and out-groups that you read about in a sociology course, or as it relates to what you read about cultural rituals in an anthropology course.

Another advantage of personal response questions is that they often allow you to get some distance from your first impressions, which can be deceiving. If, as you reexamine your first reactions, you look for ways they might not be accurate, you will often find places where you now disagree with yourself, in effect, stimulating you to think in new ways about the subject. In such cases, the first reaction has helped to clear the way to a second, and better, response.

Personal response becomes a problem, however, when it distracts you from analyzing the subject. In most cases, you will be misinterpreting the intent of a personal response topic if you view it as an invitation either to:

1. Assert your personal opinions unreflectively or
2. Substitute narratives of your own experience for careful consideration of the subject.

In a sense, all analysis involves your opinions, insofar as you are choosing what particular evidence and arguments to focus upon. But, at least in an academic setting, an opinion is more than simply an expression of your beliefs—it's a conclusion that you earn the rights to through a careful examination of evidence.

When you are invited to respond personally, you are being asked for more than your endorsement or critique of the subject. If you find yourself constructing a virtual list—"I agree with this point", or "I disagree with that point"—you are probably doing little more than matching your opinions with the points of view encountered in a reading. At the very least, you should look for places in the reaction paper where you find yourself disagreeing with yourself.

## Strategies for Making Personal Responses More Analytical

**Strategy 1: Trace your responses back to their causes.** As the preceding discussion of problems with personal response topics suggests, you *need to bring your reactions back to the subject so you can identify and analyze exactly what in the reading has produced your reaction, how, and why*. If you find an aspect of your subject irritating or interesting, disappointing or funny, you will be able to use—rather than simply indulge—such responses if you then examine a particular piece of evidence that has provoked them.

Tracing your impressions back to their causes is the key to making personal response analytical—because you focus on the details that gave you the response rather than on the response alone. In the planning stage, you may find it useful to brainstorm some of your reactions/responses—the



things you might say about the material if asked to talk about it with a sympathetic friend. You would then take this brainstorm and use it to choose the key sentences, passages, etc. in the reading that you want to focus on in your analysis.

Let's say that you are responding to an article on ways of increasing the numbers of registered voters in urban precincts. You find the article irritating; your personal experience working with political campaigns has taught you that getting out the vote is not as easy as this writer makes it seem. From that starting point, you might analyze one (to you) overly enthusiastic passage, concentrating on how the writer has not only overestimated what campaign workers can actually do, but also condescends to those who don't register—assuming, perhaps, that they are ignorant, rather than indifferent or disillusioned. Tracing your response back to its cause may help to defuse your emotional response and open the door to further investigation of the other writer's rationale. You might, for example, discover that the writer has in mind a much more long-term effect or that urban models differ significantly from the suburban ones of your experience.

**Strategy 2: Assume that you may have missed the point.** It's difficult to see the logic of someone else's position if you are too preoccupied with your own. Similarly, it is difficult to see the logic, or illogic, of your own position if you already assume it to be true.

Although an evaluative response (approve/disapprove) can sometimes spur analysis, it can also lead you to prejudge the case. If, however, you habitually question the validity of your own point of view, you will sometimes recognize the possibility of an alternative point of view, as was the case in the voter registration example (see Figure 3.1). Assuming that you have missed the point is a good strategy in all kinds of analytical writing. It causes you to notice details of your subject that you might not otherwise have registered.

**Strategy 3: Locate your response within a limiting context.** Suppose you are asked in a religion course to write your religious beliefs. Although this topic would naturally lead you to think about your own experiences and beliefs, you would probably do best to approach it in some more limiting context. The reading in the course could provide this limit. Let's say that thus far you have read two modern religious thinkers, Martin Buber and Paul Tillich. Using these as your context, "What do I believe?" would become "How does my response to Buber and Tillich illuminate my own assumptions about the nature of religious faith?" An advantage of this move, beyond making your analysis less general, is that it would help you to get perspective on your own position.

Another way of limiting your context is to consider how one author or recognizable point of view that you have encountered in the course might respond to a single statement from another author or point of view. If you used this strategy to respond to the topic "Does God exist?," you might arrive

at a formulation such as “How would Martin Buber critique Paul Tillich’s definition of God?” Although this topic appears to exclude personal response entirely, it in fact does not. Your opinion would necessarily enter because you would be actively formulating something that is not already evident in the reading (how Buber might respond to Tillich).

**Evaluative Personal Response:** *“The article was irritating.”* This response is too broad and dismissively judgmental. Make it more analytical by tracing the response back to the evidence that triggered it.

**A More Analytical Evaluative Response:** *“The author of the article oversimplifies the problem by assuming the cause of low voter registration to be voters’ ignorance rather than voters’ indifference.”* Although still primarily an evaluative response, this observation is more analytical. It takes the writer’s initial response (“irritating”) to a specific cause.

**A Non-evaluative Analytical Response:** *“The author’s emphasis on increased coverage of city politics in local/neighborhood forums such as the churches suggests that the author is interested in long-term effects of voter registration drives and not just in immediate increases.”* Rather than simply reacting (“irritating”) or leaping to evaluation (“oversimplifies the problem”), the writer here formulates a possible explanation for the difference between his or her point of view on voter registration drives and the article’s.

**FIGURE 3.1**  
Making Personal Response More Analytical

## Agree/Disagree

We offer here only a brief recap of this kind of topic, because it is discussed in both Chapter 1 (under Habit: The Judgment Reflex) and 2 (under REFORMULATING BINARIES). Assignments are frequently worded as agree or disagree, but the wording is potentially misleading because you are rarely being asked for as unqualified an opinion as agree or disagree.

Creating opposing categories (binary oppositions) is fundamental to defining things. But binaries are also dangerous because they can invite *reductive thinking*—oversimplifying a subject by eliminating alternatives between the two extremes. And so, in most cases, your best strategy in dealing with agree/disagree questions is to choose *neither* side. Instead, question the terms of the binary so as to arrive at a more complex and qualified position to write about. In place of choosing one side or the other, decide to what extent you agree and to what extent you disagree. You are still responsible for coming down more on one side than the other, but this need not mean that you have to locate yourself in a starkly either/or position. The code phrase for accomplishing this shift is “the extent to which”: “To what extent do you agree (or disagree)?”

We offer here a brief review of these strategies:

Strategy 1: Locate a range of opposing categories.

Strategy 2: Analyze and define the opposing terms.

Strategy 3: Question the accuracy of the binary.

Strategy 4: Change “either/or” to “the extent to which” (“to what extent?”).

Applying these strategies will usually cause you to do one or more of the following:

1. Weight one side of your binary more heavily than the other, rather than seeing the issue as all or nothing (all of one and none of the other).
2. Discover that you have not adequately named the binary: another opposition would be more accurate.
3. Discover that the two terms of your binary are not really so separate and opposed after all, but actually part of one complex phenomenon or issue.

## Comparison/Contrast

Although comparison/contrast is meant to invite analysis, it is too often treated as an end in itself. The fundamental reason for comparing and contrasting is that you can usually discover ideas about a subject much more easily when you are not viewing it in isolation. When executed mechanically, however, without the writer pressing to understand the significance of a similarity or difference, comparison/contrast can suffer from pointlessness. The telltale sign of this problem is the formulaic sentence beginning “Thus we see there are many similarities and differences between X and Y”—as “chaos” and “cream cheese” might fit that formula (both begin with the letter “c”).

Comparison/contrast topics produce pointless essays if you allow them to turn into matching exercises—that is, if you match common features of two subjects but don’t get beyond the equation stage ( $a, b, c = x, y, z$ ). Writers fall into this trap when they have no larger question or issue to explore and perhaps resolve this by making the comparison. If, for example, you were to pursue the comparison of the representations of the Boston Tea Party in British and American history textbooks, you would begin by identifying similarities and differences. But simply presenting these and concluding that the two versions resemble and differ from each other in some ways would be pointless. You would need to press your comparisons with the *SO WHAT?* question (see Chapter 1) in order to give them some interpretive weight.

Comparison/contrast leads to the more sophisticated task of synthesis. Synthesis involves more than two sources, often for the purpose of composing the opening frame of a researched paper or what is known as the “literature review” that typically opens papers in the social sciences. For more on synthesis, see Chapter 8, *Conversing with Sources: Writing the Researched Paper*. For advice on organizing comparison/contrast papers, see Chapter 9.

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## Strategies for Making Comparison/Contrast More Analytical, Including Difference within Similarity

**Strategy 1: Argue for the significance of a key comparison.** Rather than simply covering a range of comparisons, focus on a key comparison. Although narrowing the focus might seem to eliminate other important areas of consideration, in fact it usually allows you to incorporate at least some of these other areas in a more tightly connected, less list-like fashion. So, for example, a comparison of the burial rites of two cultures will probably reveal more about them than a much broader but more superficial list of cultural similarities and differences. In the majority of cases, covering less is covering more.

You can determine which comparison is key by ranking. You are ranking whenever you designate one part of your topic as especially important or revealing. Suppose you are asked to compare General David Petraeus's strategy in the Afghanistan conflict with General Douglas MacArthur's strategy in World War II. As a first move, you could limit the comparison to some revealing parallel, such as the way each man dealt with the media, and then argue for its significance above other similarities or differences. You might, for instance, claim that in their treatment of the media we get an especially clear or telling vantage point on the two generals' strategies. Now you are on your way to an analytical point—for example, that because MacArthur was more effectively shielded from the media at a time when the media was a virtual instrument of propaganda, he could make choices that Petraeus might have wanted to make, but could not.

**Strategy 2: Use one side of the comparison to illuminate the other.** Usually it is not necessary to treat each part of the comparison equally. It's a common misconception that each side must be given equal space. In fact, the purpose of your comparison governs the amount of space you'll need to give to each part. Often, you will be using one side of the comparison primarily to illuminate the other. For example, in a course on contemporary military policy, the ratio between the two parts would probably be roughly seventy percent on Petraeus to thirty percent on MacArthur, rather than fifty percent on each.

**Strategy 3: Imagine how one side of your comparison might respond to the other.** This strategy, a variant of the preceding one, is a particularly useful way of helping you to respond to comparison/contrast topics more purposefully. This strategy can be adapted to a wide variety of subjects. If you were asked to compare Sigmund Freud with one of his most important followers, Jacques Lacan, you would probably be better off focusing the broad question of how Lacan revises Freud by considering how and why he might critique Freud's interpretation of a particular dream in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Similarly, in the case of the Afghanistan example, you could ask yourself how MacArthur might have handled some key decision in dealing with Kabul and why. Or you might consider how he would have critiqued Petraeus's decisions and why.

**Strategy 4: Focus on DIFFERENCE WITHIN SIMILARITY (or similarity despite difference).** Too often writers notice a fundamental similarity and stop there. Asked to compare two subjects, they typically collect a number of parallel examples and merely show how they are parallel. This practice leads to bland tallying of similarities without much analytical edge—a matching exercise. Ideas tend to arise when a writer moves beyond this basic demonstration and complicates (or qualifies) the similarity by also noting areas of difference and accounting for their significance.

The solution is to practice what we call “looking for DIFFERENCE WITHIN SIMILARITY”:

**Step 1:** Decide whether the similarities or differences are most obvious and easily explained.

**Step 2:** Briefly explain the relatively obvious similarity or difference by ASKING “SO WHAT?” Why is this similarity or difference significant?

**Step 3:** Then focus your attention on the less obvious but revealing DIFFERENCE WITHIN THE SIMILARITY or similarity despite the difference.

The phrase “DIFFERENCE WITHIN SIMILARITY” is to remind you that once you have started your thinking by locating apparent similarities, you can usually refine that thinking by pursuing significant, though often less obvious, distinctions among the similar things.

In Irish studies, for example, scholars characteristically acknowledge the extent to which contemporary Irish culture is the product of colonization. To this extent, Irish culture shares certain traits with other former colonies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere. But instead of simply demonstrating how Irish culture fits the general pattern of colonialism, these scholars also isolate the ways that Ireland *does not fit* the model. They focus, for example, on how its close geographical proximity and racial similarity to England, its colonizer, have distinguished the kinds of problems it encounters today from those characteristic of the more generalized model of colonialism. In effect, looking for DIFFERENCE WITHIN SIMILARITY has led them to locate and analyze the anomalies.

A corollary of the DIFFERENCE WITHIN SIMILARITY formula is similarity despite difference—that is, focusing on unexpected similarity rather than obvious difference. Consider, for example, two popular twenty-something TV sitcoms from different generations, *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. At first inspection, these would appear to differ profoundly—one presents a heterosexual group living together in which everyone is straight; the other centers on an all-male group living together in which sexual orientation is—in at least one case—ambiguous.

But how are the two shows similar despite these differences? Both offer the consoling prospect of a comfortable space between the teen years and the specter of adulthood, before the kind of separation that coupling off and having kids incurs. In other words, both suggest that adulthood can be

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comfortably forestalled by offering a group of friends who become family, regardless of male/female or gay/straight binaries.

Regardless of whether you begin by deciding that the similarities or the differences are most obvious, choosing to focus on less immediately noticeable differences or similarities will cause you to notice things that you otherwise might not have noticed. This is what comparison and contrast is designed to reveal. **To sum up:**

- When A & B are obviously similar,  
look for unexpected difference.
- When A & B are obviously different,  
look for unexpected similarity.

## Definition

Definition becomes meaningful when it serves some larger purpose. You define “rhythm and blues” because it is essential to any further discussion of the evolution of rock and roll music, or because you need that definition in order to discuss the British Invasion spearheaded by groups such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Yardbirds in the late 1960s, or because you cannot classify John Lennon or Mick Jagger or Eric Clapton without it.

Like comparison/contrast, definition can produce pointless essays if the writer gets no further than assembling information. Moreover, when you construct a summary of existing definitions with no clear sense of purpose, you tend to list definitions indiscriminately. As a result, you are likely to overlook conflicts among the various definitions and overemphasize their surface similarities. Definition is, in fact, a site at which there is some contesting of authorities—different voices that seek to make their individual definitions triumph.

## Strategies for Making Definition More Analytical

**Strategy 1: Test the definition against evidence.** One common form of definition asks you to apply a definition to a body of information. It is rare to find a perfect fit. Therefore, you should, as a general rule, use the data to assess the accuracy and the limitations of the definition, rather than simply imposing it on your data and ignoring or playing down the ways in which it does not fit. Testing the definition against evidence will evolve your definition. The definition, in turn, will serve as a lens to better focus your thinking about the evidence.

Suppose you were asked to define capitalism in the context of third world economies. You might profitably begin by matching some standard definition of capitalism with specific examples from one or two third world economies, with the express purpose of detecting where the definition does *and* does not apply. In other words, you would respond to the definition topic by



assaying the extent to which the definition provides a tool for making sense of the subject.

**Strategy 2: Use a definition from one source to illuminate another.** As a general rule, you should attempt to identify the points of view of the sources from which you take your definitions, rather than accepting them as uncontextualized answers. It is essential to identify the particular slant because otherwise you will tend to overlook the conflicting elements among various definitions of a key term.

A paper on alcoholism, for example, will lose focus if you use all of the definitions available. If, instead, you convert the definition into a comparison and contrast of competing definitions, you can more easily generate a point and purpose for your definition. By querying, for example, whether a given source's definition of alcoholism is moral or physiological or psychological, you can more easily problematize the issue of definition.

**Strategy 3: Problematize as well as synthesize the definition.** To explore competing definitions of the same term requires you to attend to the difficulties of definition. In general, analysis achieves direction and purpose by locating and then exploring a problem. You can productively make a problem out of defining. This strategy is known as *problematizing*, which locates and then explores the significance of the uncertainties and conflicts. It is always a smart move to problematize definitions, as this tactic reveals complexity that less careful thinkers might miss.

The definition of capitalism that you might take from Karl Marx, for example, will differ in its emphases from Adam Smith's. In this case, you would not only isolate the most important of these differences, but also try to account for the fact that Marx's villain is Smith's hero. Such an accounting would probably lead you to consider how the definition has been shaped by each of these writers' political philosophies or by the culture in which each theory was composed.

**Strategy 4: Shift from "what?" to "how?" and "why?" questions.** It is no accident that we earlier offered the same strategy for making summary more analytical: analytical topics that require definition also depend on "why?" or "how?" questions, not "what?" questions (which tend simply to call for information).

If, for example, you sought to define the meaning of darkness in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and any two other modern British novels, you would do better to ask why the writers find "darkness" such a fertile term, rather than simply to accumulate various examples of the term in the three novels. You might start by isolating the single best example from each of the works, preferably ones that reveal important differences as well as similarities. Then, in analyzing how each writer uses the term, you could work toward some larger point that would unify the essay. You might show how the conflicts

of definition within Conrad's metaphor evolve historically, get reshaped by woman novelists, change after World War I, and so forth.

## Assignments: Responding to Traditional Writing Assignments More Analytically

1. **Analyzing the Wording of an Assignment.** Analyze the following topic for unstated questions.

In a well-written essay, evaluate the truth of the assertion that follows. Use evidence and examples from your reading or experience to make your argument convincing. "It is human nature to want patterns, standards, and a structure of behavior. A pattern to conform to is a kind of shelter."

As we began to do with "Is feminism good for Judaism?" earlier, make a list of all of the questions implicit in this topic. Which words, both in the directions given to students and in the quotation, itself, require attention? When you have compiled your list, write a paragraph or two in which you explain, as specifically as possible, what the question is asking writers to do and how a writer might go about fulfilling these tasks.

2. **Write Two Summaries of the Same Article or Book Chapter.** Make the first one consecutive (the so-called "coverage" model)—that is, try to cover the piece by essentially listing the key points as they appear. Limit yourself to a typed page. Then rewrite the summary, doing the following:

- rank the items in order of importance according to some principle that you designate, explaining your rationale;
- eliminate the last few items on the list or, at most, give each a single sentence; and
- use the space you have saved to include more detail about the most important item or two.

The second half of this assignment will probably require closer to two pages.

3. **Look for Significant Difference or Unexpected Similarity.** Choose any item from the list below. After you've done the research necessary to locate material to read and analyze, list as many similarities and differences as you can: go for coverage. Then, review your list, and select the two or three most revealing similarities and the two or three most revealing differences. At this point, you are ready to write a few paragraphs in which you argue for the significance of a key difference or similarity. In so doing, try to focus on an *unexpected* similarity or difference—one that others might not initially notice.

1. accounts of the same event from two different newspapers or magazines or textbooks
  2. two CDs (or even songs) by the same artist or group
  3. two ads for the same kind of product, perhaps aimed at different target audiences
  4. the political campaigns of two opponents running for the same or similar office
  5. courtship behavior as practiced by men and by women
  6. two clothing styles as emblematic of class or sub-group in your school, town, or workplace
4. **Write a Comparative Definition.** Seek out different and potentially competing definitions of the same term or terms. Begin with a dictionary such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (popularly known as the OED, available in most library reference rooms or online) that contains both historically based definitions tracking the term's evolution over time and etymological definitions that identify the linguistic origins of the term (its sources in older languages). Be sure to locate both the historical evolution and the etymology of the term or terms.

Then look up the term in one—or preferably several—specialized dictionaries. You can also ask your reference librarian for pertinent titles. Generally speaking, different disciplines generate their own specialized dictionaries.

Summarize key differences and similarities among the ways the dictionaries have defined your term or terms. Then write a comparative essay in which you argue for the significance of a key similarity or difference, or an unexpected one.

Here is the list of words: hysteria, ecstasy, enthusiasm, witchcraft, leisure, gossip, bachelor, spinster, romantic, instinct, punk, thug, pundit, dream, alcoholism, aristocracy, atom, ego, pornography, conservative, liberal, entropy, election, tariff. Some of these words are interesting to look at together, such as ecstasy/enthusiasm or liberal/conservative or bachelor/spinster. Feel free to write on a pair, instead of on a single word.

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