

Understanding Analysis

Virtually every essay assignment you will be asked to complete in college will require you to *analyze* something. But what is analysis? And how do you do it in essays?

Defining Analysis

In college you are expected to *analyze* relevant information and ideas in order to develop your own perspective. Therefore, analysis is what you *do* with evidence; it is how you attempt to examine and explain evidence. In our writing class, we will define analysis using the simple equation below:

$$\text{analysis} = \text{dissection} + \text{interpretation}$$

In other words, when we analyze something, we identify and examine its parts in order to better understand its composition, meaning, purpose, function, effects, relevance, or significance.

Doing Analysis

Analysis is what we do with information and ideas around us in order to learn, understand, and navigate the world around us. For example, when we were children playing with dolls, there was likely some point at which we became curious about the doll in our hands and took it apart (i.e. dissected it) in order to better understand what it was or how it worked (i.e. interpreted it). Notice that it was our *curiosity* that led or prompted us to analyze the doll. This is true of all the analysis we do: it is motivated and guided by questions. Put differently, questions lead us to analyze.

$$\text{questions} \Rightarrow \text{analysis (i.e. dissection + interpretation)}$$

For example, the question that led us to analyze our dolls might have been: *How does this work?* After dissecting the doll and examining how its parts were composed and connected, we would have eventually settled on some sort of answer to that question e.g. *The doll's leg can move around because of the ball at the end that fits perfectly into the ball-shaped hole at the bottom of the doll's torso.* Obviously, our 3-year-old selves won't have used such vocabulary, but the point remains: analysis is what helps us find acceptable answers to our questions. So let us include that in our flowchart of the analytical process:

$$\text{questions} \Rightarrow \text{analysis (i.e. dissection + interpretation)} \Rightarrow \text{answers}$$

Therefore, when we analyze, we dissect and interpret relevant information and ideas in order to discover and develop answers to questions we have.

The Essay Writing Paradox: Doing Analysis vs Representing Analysis

In order to produce a final draft of an academic essay, a writer typically researches and reads credible sources, and drafts multiple versions of their thinking. Why? Because all this work helps a writer attempt, develop, and revise their analysis in order to discover possible answers to the questions they are trying to answer. In other words, in early drafts of an essay, a writer is actively *doing* analysis to explore their subject or topic deeply. As a result, their thinking about their subject or topic often changes, so it is common for ideas in their later drafts to look very different to ideas they initially had—and for them to include that thought process and show their changes in thinking in their draft.

The final draft of the writer's essay will present the strongest answers they found and *represent* the analysis they did to find those answers. In other words, in the final draft, a writer is *showing* how the meticulous analysis attempted in previous drafts led them to a strong answer or thesis. Though it often seems that a writer is actively thinking through a problem or question in a well-written essay, the reality is that the essay skillfully represents the writer's thinking that happened over the process of many previous drafts of that essay. A strong essay shows a writer's mind at work, which is to say that a strong essay represents how a writer analyzes relevant information and ideas to answer questions.

Let's try to represent this paradox in our flow chart. In early drafts of our college essays, the analytical process may look like what we wrote above:

questions (i.e. essay prompt) ⇒ do analysis (i.e. dissection + interpretation) ⇒ answers

However, the final draft of a conventional academic essay is *structured* differently:

questions (i.e. essay prompt) ⇒ answers (i.e. thesis) ⇒ represent (prior) analysis

The thesis a writer typically presents in the introduction of an essay comes from all the analysis done in previous drafts of the essay.