Chapter 6

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 form 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 students 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*,Winston Weathers, *An Alternate Style* (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Company, 1980). 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."Winston Weathers, *An Alternate Style* (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Company, 1980), 29. 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 b 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

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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.