

Analysis

BASICS: WHAT ANALYSIS IS AND HOW TO DO IT EFFECTIVELY

SUNY POTSDAM COLLEGE WRITERS' BLOCK

Understanding Analysis

Part of the word analysis - lysis - means 'breaking apart'. It means explaining the importance of each part to communicate the point of view. The goal of analysis is taking something like a book or poem, breaking it down into smaller pieces, and looking at those pieces critically to show what they are and how they express an important theme. Once you start looking at your assigned text critically, you can break it down, detect patterns, and make comparisons. The most important thing is that you don't just passively read it – you think about what different aspects of the text mean, and then explain them. Stay focused on your biggest point and use evidence to support.

In an analysis essay, you would give reasons for your thesis, and a lot of specific evidence to back those reasons up.

Analysis vs. Summary

A lot of students confuse analyzing and summarizing. A summary is a record of the plot. An analysis is your thoughts about how the plot works. Take *The Hunger Games*. If you were asked for a **summary** of *The Hunger Games*, you might say something like this:

In a dystopian world where children are forced to fight for sport once a year, two children are selected from each area to compete. When Katniss Everdeen's sister is selected, Katniss volunteers to take her place, and tries to survive the Games and return to her family.

That summary provides an overview of the plot. If you were asked for a **literary analysis** of *The Hunger Games*, you might say something like this:

The character of Katniss shows bravery throughout the book. The act she is most famous for is volunteering in her sister's place, but there are many other instances that demonstrate her courage. Some of these include how she illegally hunted for food when her family couldn't pay for it, as well as how she was willing to die to end the popularity of the Games.

This is an analysis of Katniss. It includes plot points, but the focus is on a specific trait of one character. For an analysis essay on Katniss, you would give good reasons for your thesis (that Katniss shows bravery throughout the book). With this example, you would discuss the reasons she is brave, with a lot of specific evidence to support those reasons.

PIE

“PIE” is an acronym you can use to remember the 3 main steps in analysis:

Point – identify the point you’re trying to prove

Illustrate – use specific evidence to support your point

Explain – describe how the evidence supports your point, in your own words

Analyze the Assignment

Each writing assignment asks you to communicate something specific. The teacher wants you to show your understanding of the assignment in your voice, with a clear thesis and evidence to support it.

You might be able to write a phenomenal essay detailing the times Katniss showed how brave she was. But if you keep it at that level, and just report on exactly what happened, you aren’t actually analyzing anything. You have to include your thoughts and interpretations of her actions.

You also have to make sure to analyze whatever elements your teacher puts in the assignment. If your assignment is to look at how a character has changed over time, doing an essay on how Katniss was brave throughout the book won’t cut it. You might provide a great analysis – but you haven’t done what your teacher wants. You missed the change part of the prompt.

Make sure you analyze the assignment before you start it, to avoid an error like this. A lot of teachers have rubrics to make sure you do everything you’re supposed to. If they don’t, ask.

RESPONSE EXERCISE ONE

Complete the following statement:

My family makes the best _____ (type of food).

Support this claim. Make an outline of your main points. What aspects make that food the best? Break down the ingredients, the way it’s made, etc., and think about how they support the claim.

Types of Analysis

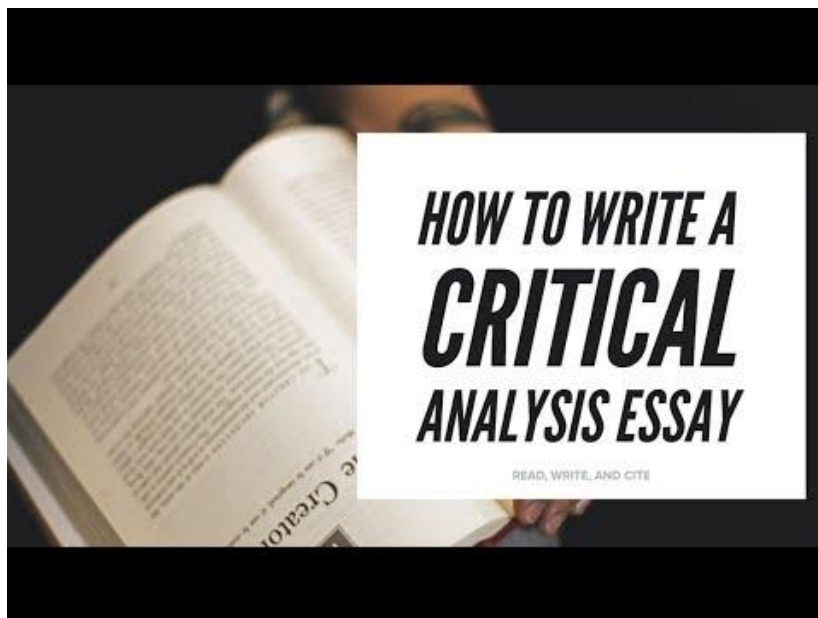
There are a few types of analysis papers. Two of the major ones are rhetorical and critical analyses.

- Rhetorical/Literary Analysis:

How did the author...? These assignments ask you to focus on something the author does in the work. Usually they include ethos, pathos, and logos. They also include classic literary techniques like imagery, metaphor, and parallelism. Your focus is on the story.

➤ Critical Analysis:

What did the text...? These assignments require you to consider the text and evaluate it. You might relate it to the world, and analyze how it acted as a political commentary (or how it missed the mark). Your focus is on what techniques the text included, and how effective they were. Ex. The first person perspective in *The Hunger Games* was effective because it made readers identify with Katniss quickly.



Watch this video on the basics for writing a critical analysis essay. Start at 2:11.

How Do You Select a Topic?

Sometimes a teacher will give you a specific prompt. Analyze how the author uses rhetorical appeals, discuss how Character A changes over time, etc. Other times, you have to create your own topic. Here are a few tips for how to start a literary analysis:

- Think about themes in the work you want to analyze. Is it a story about family?
- Look for symbolism.
- Think about how the work relates to the real world. Was it written to comment on social policy?
- Look at the characters. Determine what drives them, what their main purpose in the story is.

For other types of analysis, consider these questions:

- How does the author try to convince the reader of a main point?
- Why does the author believe that main point?

- What new perspective is the author offering to add to what others have said?

These should help you get into the analytic mindset if you aren't given a specific prompt.

Structure of an Analysis Paper

The format should be familiar: Intro, with thesis. Body paragraphs that provide evidence/support for thesis. Conclusion that summarizes and concludes. So why do these papers seem so hard?

It's easy to pick something too small or too large to adequately cover in a paper. If you wanted to do an analysis of Katniss's sister based on the first book alone, you wouldn't have much to talk about. She isn't in very much of the book. Conversely, if you wanted to do an analysis of the 12 districts in the book, you might need a lot more space than the page limit you have – which means your analysis will be under-developed. Picking a topic that is manageable is important.

Your thesis and introduction can be revised as you go, so don't feel pressured to pick something perfect. It's natural for your ideas to evolve.

Once you think of something to focus on, find evidence to support your interpretation (remember that this might change and improve as you reread). **Using quotes is a great way to show your understanding.** Try to have at least one quote for each supporting point, to supplement your argument.

RESPONSE EXERCISE TWO

Why do you like your favorite book or movie so much? Is there a character you like? Is the plot fascinating? Outline a paper analyzing why you like it so much. Be detailed, and really think about the book/movie. Make sure it's something you can support with evidence (evidence here could be other things you've liked in the past ("X is like Y, which is another favorite"), or insights from the book/movie ("Character A is just like my brother").

Synthesis: The Next Step

If you're comfortable with analysis, try the opposite. Synthesis is drawing works together to prove a larger point. Basically, you need to analyze each work and see how it compares with others, and then identify common elements or major differences. Learning how to write an analysis of one reading will help prepare you for more challenging synthesis writing, when you discuss multiple sources. A lot of upper division classes ask you to synthesize – make sure you know how to analyze!

MORE INFORMATION

Basic guideline for [structure](#)

[Breakdown](#) of developing an analysis paper

[Step-by-step](#) sample analysis and tips

Video on [planning an analysis paper](#). Stop at 3:47.

Video on [ways to analyze](#)