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Exploring Perspectives: A Concise Guide to Analysis

Preface for Teachers

Whenever I ask my students to analyze anything, I am usually met with a collective groan. To them, the implied definition of an academic analysis is making something that could be enlightening and fun in a non-scholastic context seem irrelevant and dull. “Why do we have to analyze it? Why can’t we just enjoy it?” the students think, mutter, and sometimes ask outright. What I find strange is that I know that they often talk to each other about many subjects—film, politics, sports—in a highly analytical manner. And they seem to enjoy doing so. I believe the main reason students often dislike analyzing anything in school is because of the dominance of what James A. Berlin and others have labeled “current traditional rhetoric,” an approach that has always “denied the role of writer, reader and language in arriving at meaning” and places truth “in the external world, existing prior to the individual’s perception of it.” By its very nature this approach keeps students from finding their own meaning in the composing process, making analysis seem like an academic game of guesswork to find the answer that the teacher has determined to be correct.

Despite the fact that this approach seems naïve in light of twenty-first century epistemology, where even the hard sciences recognize the role the observer plays in the definition of the subject, it continues to dominate composition classrooms because of its pedagogical efficiency. It’s simply much easier to tell students to come up with the “right” way to look at a given subject than to help them individually to form their own perspectives. In addition, many teachers find that when students have the freedom to write what they think, the results are often disappointing. Instead of thoughtful, unique analyses, they get surface level meanings that retreat to easier modes of writing: summaries, oratories, and tangents. But this is understandable. How can we expect students to write an original analysis, when few of them have ever had the opportunity to do so? I wrote this book to help students with this difficult task, to give them a better understanding of how to discover, develop, and revise an analytical essay.

The first two chapters focus on the nature of an analysis and what’s involved in writing an analytical essay. First I show that analysis consists of a balance of assertions (statements which present their viewpoints or launch an exploration of their concerns), examples (specific passages, scenes, or events which inspire these

views), explanations (statements that reveal how the examples support the assertions), and significance (statements which reveal the importance of their study to personal and/or cultural issues). After showing why each feature should be present throughout an essay, I reveal how to “set the stage” for producing one of their own. I first help students to evaluate their own views on a subject and to examine how these views emerge from their own experiences, values and judgments. I then show them how to research what others have said about the subject and provide suggestions for evaluating and incorporating this research into their own perspectives. Finally I discuss the nature of writing, not as a linear procedure, but as a recursive process in which the discovery and clarification of a concept occur simultaneously.

The remaining three chapters deal with more specific advice on how to develop an analytical essay. In [Chapter 3 "Developing Assertions: From a Close Reading of Examples"](#), I show how to carefully consider the features of a subject to develop a working thesis. In [Chapter 4 "Explanations and Significance: Developing Your Analysis"](#), I reveal how to justify and show the significance of this thesis in light of both purpose and audience. In both chapters, I point out that the thesis will evolve and become more complicated as they consider it further, and, may no longer demonstrate a singular perspective. In the fifth and final chapter, I discuss strategies for putting all of their observations together into effective, deliberate essays and provide an example of how I developed an article of my own. In each of these chapters, I provide students with examples, advice, and exercises that will help them to discover and develop their perspectives through a critical reading of both their subjects and their own drafts, thus demonstrating that we actually do “write to think.”

Before you read further, I should clarify how this text departs from others that focus on analysis. First, the organization does not follow the writing process as traditionally understood (prewriting, composing, revising), but focuses on the process of analysis (careful observation, forming perspectives, justifying, modifying and showing the significance of this perspective). Consequently, the heuristics and exercises are not simply relegated to the first chapter but are scattered throughout the book. For instance, I discuss brainstorming and clustering as strategies for exploring the significance of an essay, and Kenneth Burke’s “Pentad” for helping students to explain and justify their perspectives. I do this so that students will not consider their subjects too quickly, come up with a broad or obvious thesis, and list the most obvious examples to defend it. Instead I encourage them to invent and revise their perspectives throughout the entire composing process.

My advice may contradict what students have been taught in the past not only in regards to how they form their analyses, but also in how they phrase them. For instance, I discourage students from using terms like “the observer” or “the reader”

because they imply that all people see subjects the same way, thus ignoring the transactional nature of rhetoric. Instead, I encourage students to show why they initially see something in a certain light and how their views change as they consider the subject further. Some students may find this advice contradictory to what they may have learned previously—for example, the pedagogy of high school composition, where the use of “I” is often forbidden. I believe the process and methods outlined in this text show a more sophisticated, accurate, and meaningful way to engage in analysis.

Along these lines, I do not provide students with a list of guidelines for analyzing particular disciplines, but rather look at features that are common to many of them. For instance, instead of discussing metaphorical language as something that is unique to literary analysis, I point out how it is also necessary for understanding philosophy, science, politics, and advertising. And in those places where I show students how to explore the metaphorical implications of particular tropes, I encourage you to extend this lesson to those that are central to the particular subjects that your students are examining. Also, I do not include a list of sample readings for students to analyze. I did not design this book to provide all the material for a course, but rather to be a tool for the first two weeks—so that once students gain a general understanding of how to write an analysis, instructors can then move on to their own specific choice of subjects.

Finally, though I use several examples from various disciplines throughout the text, the focus of the book is on essay writing. Other forms of scholastic writing, such as lab reports, fall outside the scope of this book. Nonetheless, I believe that when students develop the ability to write an analytical essay, they learn to think more critically and more precisely in other areas as well. I am confident that after students read this book, the resulting writing on any subject will be far more sophisticated, meaningful, and varied—more challenging yet more fulfilling for the students to write, and far more interesting for their teachers to read.