



This is “Analysis for Multiple Perspectives”, chapter 1 from the book [A Guide to Perspective Analysis \(index.html\)](#) (v. 1.0).

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# Chapter 1

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## Analysis for Multiple Perspectives

## 1.1 The Nature of Analysis

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define **analysis**.
2. Show how we use analysis in everyday situations and in academic writing and discussion.
3. Understand the components of analysis (*assertions, examples, explanations, significance*), and explain why each is a necessary part of any analysis.
4. Show how too much attention to one particular component of analysis makes an essay seem like a different type of writing.

Jeff is not happy. His clock shows 2 a.m., but his computer screen shows nothing. For the last four hours he has tried to get started on an essay on William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but he just doesn't know where to begin. "It's Professor Johnson's fault I'm in this mess," he thinks to himself. "My other teachers always told me exactly what and how to write, but Professor Johnson asked us to focus on what each of us finds important about the play. She even told us that no one knows Shakespeare's real intentions, and that a million ways to analyze the play are possible." Jeff slams his hand down on the table. "If this is true, how do I know when I've found the right interpretation?" And Professor Johnson made it even more difficult for Jeff by instructing her students not to summarize the plot or give unsupported opinions, but to come up with their own interpretations, show why they are important, and justify them through close readings of particular scenes. "No one has ever shown me how to do this," Jeff grumbles to himself as he gulps down his third cup of coffee.

In actuality, Jeff already possesses the ability to write an analytical essay. He would have realized this if he had considered the discussions and activities he engaged in during the previous week. In planning a date, and in thinking of the best way to convince his parents to send him more money, Jeff had to carefully evaluate a variety of situations to develop a point of view that he then had to justify and show why it mattered. In each of these instances, he made plenty of **assertions**<sup>1</sup>, statements which present points of view; used **examples**<sup>2</sup>, specific passages, scenes, events, or items which inspire these points of view; gave **explanations**<sup>3</sup>, statements which reveal how the examples support and/or complicate the assertions; and provided **significance**<sup>4</sup>, statements which reveal the importance of the analysis to our personal and/or cultural concerns.

1. Statements that present an interpretation of a particular piece, event or issue.
2. Specific passages, scenes, events, or items that inspire our assertions.
3. Statements that reveal how the examples support or complicate the assertions.
4. Statements that reveal the importance of the analysis to personal and cultural concerns.

**Analysis**<sup>5</sup> is a way of understanding a subject by using each of these elements, expressing an opinion (making assertions), supporting that opinion (including examples), justifying that opinion (explaining the examples), and showing why the opinion matters (extending the significance). The second letter in the second component (examples) helps create the acronym **AXES**<sup>6</sup>, which is the plural form of both *axe* and *axis*. This acronym provides a way not only to remember the four components but also to visualize them working together. Like an axe, analysis allows us to “chop” our subjects into their essential components so that we can examine the pieces more thoroughly, and, like an axis, analysis inspires insights that become the new reference points around which we rearrange these pieces.

Though a complete analysis always needs to use these elements, the reasons for engaging in it may vary widely. For instance, sometimes the goal is to persuade the reader to accept an interpretation or to adapt a course of action, and other times the goal is to explore several possible interpretations or courses of action without settling on any one in particular. But whether the goal is to persuade, explore, or enlighten, analysis should always spring from a careful examination of a given subject. I always tell my students that they do not need to convince me that their points of view are correct but rather to reveal that they have thought about their subject thoroughly and arrived at reasonable and significant considerations.

The structure and form of an analysis can vary as widely as the many reasons for producing one. Though an analysis should include attention to each of the four main components, it should not be written in a formulaic manner, like those tiresome five-paragraph essays you might recall from high school: “I spent my summer vacation in three ways: working, partying and relaxing. Each of these activities helped me in three aspects of my life: mentally, physically and psychologically.” At best, formulaic essays serve as training wheels that need to come off when you are ready for more sophisticated kinds of writing. Rigorous analysis doesn’t rely on formulas or clichés, and its elements may occur in different orders and with various emphases, depending on your purpose and audience. In fact, individual elements may sometimes blend together because a section may serve more than one function. With practice, you won’t even need to recall the acronym AXES when producing an analysis, because you will have mastered when and how to express each of its components.

Though it would be impossible to outline all the possible manifestations and combinations of these elements of analysis, this book will help you to create, balance, and express each of them with precision, clarity, and voice. The first task is to make certain all these elements are present to some degree throughout your paper, because when any one is missing or dominates too much, the essay starts to drift from analysis to a different mode of writing. Consider, for instance, how Jeff might have gotten off track when trying to respond to the following speech from

5. A way of examining a subject by expressing, supporting, examining and showing the importance of our opinions on it.
6. An acronym for analysis that reminds us to include each of the four components: assertions, examples, explanations, and significance.

*The Tempest*, when the character Prospero becomes morose as the play he is putting on within the play becomes interrupted:

Our revels now are ended. These, our actors,  
  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
  
Are melted into air; into thin air.  
  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision  
  
The cloud capped towers, the great globe itself,  
  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
  
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
  
Is rounded with a sleep  
  
(Act IV, Scene 1: 148-57).

### **Response 1: Review (assertion emphasis)**

This is a very famous speech about how our lives are like dreams. No wonder Shakespeare is such a great playwright. He continuously and brilliantly demonstrates that he knows what life is about; this is why this is such a great speech and I would recommend this play for everybody.

Assertions are necessary to communicate your points of view, but when you make only declarative statements of taste, your essays will seem less like analyses and more like reviews. A review can be useful, especially when considering whether a movie might be worth spending money on, but in an analysis you should not just state your opinions but also explain how you arrived at them and explore why they matter.

### **Response 2: Summary (example emphasis)**

First Prospero gets angry because his play was interrupted, causing his magical actors to disappear. Next, he shows how everything will dissolve in time: the sets of his theater, the actors, and even “the great globe itself.” He concludes by comparing our lives to dreams, pointing out how both are surrounded by sleep.

Like a review, a summary can sometimes be useful, especially when we want the plot of a piece or basic arguments of a policy described to us in a hurry. However, a summary stops short of being an analysis because it simply covers the main aspects of the object for analysis and does not provide any new perspective as to why it is significant. Though you need to provide examples, you should select and discuss only those details that shed the most light on your points of view. Always remember that people want to read your essay to learn *your* perspective on what you are analyzing; otherwise, they could just examine the piece for themselves.

### **Response 3: Description (explanation emphasis)**

In Prospero’s speech, Shakespeare points out how life, plays, and dreams are always being interrupted. He makes a lot of comparisons between these different areas of existence, yet makes them all seem somewhat similar. I never really thought about how they are all so similar, but Shakespeare helps me consider ways they all kind of fit together.

Though you should explain how you derived your assertions from your examples and not just let the piece speak for itself, you should not do so in too general a manner. You do not want to give the impression that you are trying to remember the details of a piece that you are too lazy to pull out and reconsider, but that you

are engaging in a close reading or a careful consideration of all the aspects of an issue. Your analysis should seem like it was a challenge for you to write, and not something that you pieced together from vague recollections.

#### **Response 4: Tangent (significance emphasis)**

This speech reminds me that life is short. My father keeps telling me that life is over before you even realize it, and he should know because he's getting pretty old (he's in his late 40s!). I think it also shows that it's important to be careful about what you dream of because these dreams may affect the way you choose to live your life. I dream about being a famous surfer and that's what makes me try hard to be one.

If an essay had no significance, the reader might constantly think, "So what?" You might provide a very close reading of the piece, but unless you have a reason for drawing our attention to it, your essay will not leave the reader with anything new or important to consider. Be careful, however, not to leave the piece completely behind when discussing why it matters, or your essay will seem less like an analysis and more like an excuse to deliver a soapbox speech or to write about something that is easier for you to discuss.

### Response 5: Analysis (attention to each aspect)

In *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare connects plays, lives, and dreams by showing that while each contains an illusion of permanence, they're all only temporary. The "baseless fabric of this vision" of "cloud capped towers" may immediately refer to the painted sets contained within the "great globe itself," the name of Shakespeare's theater. Yet when we measure time in years rather than hours, we can see that most of the real "cloud capped towers" of the Seventeenth Century have already faded and at some point in the future even the globe we live on will disappear and "leave not a rack behind." Likewise, it is not just the actors who are "such stuff as dreams are made on," but all of us. We are unconscious of the world before we are born and after we die, so our waking lives mirror our sleeping lives. Thinking of it this way leaves me with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I find it a bit disturbing to be reminded that neither we nor our world are permanent and all that we do will dissipate in time. On the other hand, it inspires me to enjoy my life further and not to worry too much about my inability to accomplish every one of my goals because nothing I do will last forever anyway.

Had Jeff not waited until the last minute to write his essay, he might have come up with a paragraph like this last one that gives adequate attention to each of the elements of analysis. The main assertion that our dreams, our lives, and our creative works only provide an illusion of permanence sets the analytical stage in a compelling fashion. The examples are well chosen and intelligently explained. For instance, the analysis shows that whether we see the "cloud capped towers" as actually existing or as paintings on the sets of the stage, they both have succumbed to time. Finally, it reveals the significance of the author's perspective without coming to a trite conclusion or skipping off on a tangent. In general, the analysis reflects the thoughts of a writer who is engaged enough with the text to take the time to carefully consider the quote and reflect on its implications. Though the paragraph could use a more thorough development (especially of the significance) and a more deliberate style, it certainly reveals a more compelling analysis than the previous four paragraphs.

So is it a waste of time to write paragraphs that mostly consist of summaries, opinions, descriptions, or tangents? Absolutely not. Thinking and writing are not separate processes but occur simultaneously, and we often need to produce responses that focus on one of these simpler rhetorical modes before we can understand the underlying complexity that allows us to develop a more thorough analysis. And Jeff will experience essentially the same thinking and writing process

when he switches from his Shakespeare essay to the ones he's composing for his courses in history, political science, and psychology. Understanding an event, an issue, or an aspect of human nature requires careful attention to the details of what happened and to the arguments and theories that make up a particular perspective. But before Jeff can develop his own point of view on any of these subjects, he first needs to consider what might influence the way he sees them, a process that will require him to look at his culture and his experiences while consulting the points of view of others. In the following chapter, I will discuss how to set the stage for analysis by bringing together all of these factors.

### EXERCISE

Write about a time you tried to persuade a friend to see a creative work, issue or subject in the way that you do. What assertions did you make? What examples did you use to back them up? How did you explain how you saw the examples? How did you reveal the lasting significance of the decision that you wanted your friend to make? How did these components take a different form the next time you tried to persuade your friend to see a different subject in a new light?

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- We use analysis many times throughout the day, especially when trying to persuade others to see our points of view.
- Analysis consists of four main components: assertions (our points of view), examples (evidence that supports these points of view), explanations (justifications of these points of view), and significance (discussions of why these points of view matter).
- These components need to be present for an effective analysis, but not in a strictly formulaic manner; they can appear throughout an essay to various degrees and in various orders.