



This is “Developing Assertions: From a Close Reading of Examples”, chapter 3 from the book [A Guide to Perspective Analysis \(index.html\)](#) (v. 1.0).

This book is licensed under a [Creative Commons by-nc-sa 3.0](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) license. See the license for more details, but that basically means you can share this book as long as you credit the author (but see below), don't make money from it, and do make it available to everyone else under the same terms.

This content was accessible as of December 29, 2012, and it was downloaded then by [Andy Schmitz](#) (<http://lardbucket.org>) in an effort to preserve the availability of this book.

Normally, the author and publisher would be credited here. However, the publisher has asked for the customary Creative Commons attribution to the original publisher, authors, title, and book URI to be removed. Additionally, per the publisher's request, their name has been removed in some passages. More information is available on this project's [attribution page](http://2012books.lardbucket.org/attribution.html?utm_source=header).

For more information on the source of this book, or why it is available for free, please see [the project's home page](#) (<http://2012books.lardbucket.org/>). You can browse or download additional books there.

Chapter 3

Developing Assertions: From a Close Reading of Examples

3.1 A Close Reading of the Details

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how to provide a close reading of different types of details.
2. Explain how to provide a close reading of creative works, non-fiction, and personal experiences.
3. Discuss how to extend the implications of loaded words, metaphorical language, images, and sounds.

Everywhere we turn, we hear people engaging in analysis. Sitting in a coffee shop, we overhear fellow caffeine addicts discussing diet fads, politics, and the latest blockbusters. Watching television, we listen to sports commentators discuss which team has the best chance to win the Super Bowl, comedians rip on the latest cultural trends, and talk show hosts lecture their guests on the moral repugnance of their actions. Still most of the time I find myself dissatisfied with the level of these conversations. Too many people throw out blanket judgments they can't defend while too many others mindlessly nod in agreement. If more people actually took the time to carefully examine their subjects, they might discover and articulate more satisfying and worthwhile perspectives. This chapter will help you to consider the components that make up your subject in a way that avoids the traps of a closed mind—trying to make everything fit into a ready-made interpretation—or an empty mind—giving your subject a fast read or a cursory glance.

The best way to begin your analysis is with an attentive, open mind; something that is more difficult than most of us care to admit. Our analytical muscles often grow flabby through lack of use as we rush from one task to the next, seldom pausing long enough to consider anything around us. From an early age, overwhelmed by school, scheduled activities, and chores, we discovered that it is much easier to accept someone else's explanations than to think for ourselves. Besides, original thinking is rarely encouraged, especially in school where deviating from the teacher's perspective seldom results in good grades. It should therefore come as no surprise that the ability to slow down long enough to fully consider a subject is, for most of us, difficult, and not something that comes naturally. It is, however, definitely worthwhile to do so. Remember how Jeff, the frustrated student from [Chapter 1 "Analysis for Multiple Perspectives"](#), wasted hours staring at his computer screen because he did not think very deeply about *The Tempest* when he first read it? Paying close attention when you first encounter a subject will save you time down the road.

Learning to prioritize the details on which to focus is just as important as learning how to pay close attention to a subject. Each detail does not warrant the same amount of consideration. Consider, for example, meeting someone at a party who relates every single detail of what happened to him throughout the day (I woke up at 6:58 a.m., brushed each of my teeth, had breakfast consisting of two thirds cereal and one third milk....). Who would not try to find an excuse to move to the other side of the room? Likewise, sometimes teachers will tell students to make sure that they use plenty of concrete details in their essays. Yes, concrete details are good to include and examine, but only if they matter. You risk boring your reader if you simply include details for their own sake without exploring what makes them important. When you read this section, keep in mind that you do not have to pay equal attention to all the kinds of details presented. Instead, focus on those that are most essential to your subject and purpose.

Events, Plots, and Actions

Usually the first detail we relate when someone asks us “what’s new?” is an important event or recent action we’ve taken in our life: “I ran a marathon on Sunday, found out I got into law school, got engaged to my girlfriend.” Events and actions also tend to be the first things we consider about our subjects. Sometimes actions are overt—we see a movie about a superhero who saves a city; sometimes they’re implied—we see a painting of a distraught face and we assume that something bad must have recently happened. Events and actions tend to consume the majority of our attention, whether they happen on a small scale to us individually or on a large scale to an entire city, country, or culture.

The subject that focuses the most closely on this type of detail is, of course, history. Certain events are so central to a particular era that they are studied again and again, often with different perspectives and conclusions. Take, for example, the big event of 1492. Up until I got to college, I was told that this was the year Columbus discovered America. Later I discovered that many historians disagree with this assessment of what happened. First of all, you can’t discover a place that has already been found, yet the fact that people were living in America already was always brushed aside in my high school history texts. Given that many Native Americans had more sophisticated forms of government and agriculture than their European counterparts makes this oversight seem particularly troubling. And even if we were to revise the assessment to state “Columbus was the first European to discover America,” that too would be wrong. New discoveries of Viking settlements in southern Canada and the northern United States suggest that they beat Columbus by several decades. Understanding the event in light of these facts may cause us to revise the assessment of the event to “Columbus introduced the Americas to the people of Europe,” or, less charitably, “Columbus opened up the Americas to modern European imperialism.”

This is not to say that we should now consider Columbus a nefarious figure (at least from the Native American's point of view). He could not have anticipated the centuries of conquest that would follow his arrival. Often in history, people are caught up in forces they don't completely understand. The same holds true when you examine the actions of fictional characters. For instance, sometimes characters create the condition for their own downfall, which inspires us to learn from their mistakes. Other times, characters may act nobly yet come to bad ends anyway. Such plots may encourage us to try to change the system that rewards bad behavior and punishes good, or they might leave us feeling frustrated with the seemingly random nature of our existence.

In the first ten minutes of Mike Judge's film *Office Space*, all the actions solidify into a very definitive attitude about the problems with the modern workplace. Mike Judge, dir., *Office Space* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1999). Angry music plays as we see an above shot of a typical Southern California traffic jam. We now see it from the perspective of Peter Gibbons, one of the unfortunate drivers attempting to get through the jam. He moves a couple of feet, brakes; moves a couple of more feet, brakes. He tries to switch lanes, but whenever he does the one he just left begins to move and the one into which he moved comes to a grinding halt. All this time, an elderly man with a walker, who was once behind him on an adjacent sidewalk, has caught up and passed him. Peter responds with a momentary flare of anger that ends with a sigh of resignation. After the camera switches to a few of his colleagues stuck in the same jam, we see Peter arrive at his place of work, "Initech." He sighs again with resignation as he gets the usual electrical shock from the brass doorknob that opens into a large room made up of a sea of office cubicles. Once again, the camera shot is from above, showing Peter lost among the crowd of workers.

Before he has a chance to get much work done, his boss comes by his cubicle to talk to him. He begins by asking Peter "how's it going?" in a tone of voice that makes it clear that he doesn't really care about the answer, and before Peter can respond the boss interrupts to chastise him for not using the correct cover sheet for the "TPS Report" he sent out the previous day. Two other bosses visit Peter repeating their predecessor's instruction and tone. During all of this, Peter continues to reveal the same look and sigh of resignation, until finally he begs two of his friends to take a coffee break out of fear that he might "lose it."

All of these actions inspire us to ask the question: Does it have to be this bad? I don't think so. A more critical analysis could provide solutions to both the social and personal concerns touched on in the film. It could lead us to create much better systems of public transportation that get us to work in a more timely, less stressful manner. It could also lead bosses to discover better ways to encourage enthusiasm and dedication from their employees.

Understanding the implications of recent events and actions can be much more difficult than evaluating those that occur in the distant past or in fiction. At what point, for example, do the seemingly inappropriate actions of one country justify another to declare war on it? At what point do the actions of an individual justify another to call the police? Like everything else, most of this is a matter of interpretation, but success in professional settings often requires the ability to justify your point of view through a close reading of what actually occurred. Take for instance the proverbial story of a woman stealing a loaf of bread to feed her starving children. You could look at this action as extremely noble, as the mother puts herself in danger to keep her children healthy. The baker, however, may not share this sentiment, particularly if he too is struggling to survive.

Loaded Terms and Stock Phrases

Though actions may speak louder than words, words are what usually inspire the actions to occur in the first place. In addition, we often base what we know of the world on what people tell us rather than on our direct experiences. Thus, unless we are able to discern how language may be manipulated, we stand a good chance of being manipulated ourselves. For instance, consider how politicians often ignore their opponent's actions and simply repeat **loaded terms**¹, words infused with negative associations like “bleeding heart liberal” or “heartless conservative,” to characterize an opponent as being against the public good. I came across a particularly blatant example of this when writing my dissertation on the Red Scare in America that followed World War II. The Red Scare was a period when the fear of the spread of communism abroad inspired a great deal of domestic suspicion and conformity. In a series of pamphlets released by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (often referred to as HUAC), the members attempted to feed this fear in the manner in which they explained the nature of communism to the American public. The pamphlets were set up in a question/answer format, similar to the FAQ sections of websites today. Several of the answers attempted to show communism as a warped view from its inception by going after the man whom we often credit with inventing it: “What was Marx’s idea of a Communist World?” HUAC’s answer: “That the world as we know it must be destroyed—religion, family, laws, rights, everything. Anybody opposing was to be destroyed too.” U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *100 Things You Should Know About Communism in the USA* (80th Congress, 2d Session), 1. The repetition of “destroyed” clearly inspires a feeling of dread, and presents an overly simplistic, and nearly cartoonish duality: melodramatic socialist villains twirling their mustaches while planning the destruction of their own families versus the warm-hearted capitalistic politicians in Washington who are only out to serve the public’s best interests.

1. Words that imply strong, sweeping attitudes that are often used in place of more accurate descriptions, such as “bleeding heart liberal” or “heartless conservative.”
2. Sayings that people often repeat without fully considering their implications, such as “winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.”

When loaded terms combine into **stock phrases**², aphorisms that people often repeat without fully considering their implications, you should be especially careful

to look beyond the obvious meaning that's usually attached to them. Take the phrase, often attributed to legendary football coach Vince Lombardi: "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." First of all, does this mean that we can never engage in sports for fun, exercise, or friendship? On the contrary, in sports and in all of life, we often learn best from our mistakes and our failings. If we only play it safe and try to win all the time, then we don't get to experiment and discover anything new. As Thomas Edison pointed out, he had to allow himself to fail over a thousand times when trying to invent the light bulb in order to discover the right way to do it. Clearly, winning isn't the *only* thing, and I doubt that it should even be the most *important* thing, at least for most of us.

Be especially attentive when analyzing creative works to make note of any stock phrases or loaded terms the characters repeat, as it often reveals insights about how they see themselves and the world. In J.D. Salinger's novel *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield, the troubled teenage protagonist, has just been expelled from his high school and goes to see his old history teacher, Mr. Spencer in his home. After a polite exchange, Mr. Spencer asks Holden to repeat what Dr. Thurmer, the principal, said to him just before giving him the boot:

"What did Dr. Thurmer say to you, boy? I understand you had quite a little chat?..."

"Oh...well, about Life being a game and all. And how you should play it according to the rules. He was pretty nice about it. I mean he didn't hit the ceiling or anything. He just kept talking about life being a game and all. You know."

"Life **is** a game, boy. Life *is* a game that one plays according to the rules."

"Yes, sir. I know it is. I know it." J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston, MA: LB Books, 1951), 8.

Though Holden agrees with Mr. Spencer out of politeness, he goes on to narrate:

"Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right—I'll admit that. But if you get on the *other* side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game."

What disturbs me even more about the phrase is that it leaves absolutely no room for creativity because nothing new can be brought into a world that has already been completed, making us all seem like those blue or pink pegs in the Milton/Bradley game *Life*, generic people with generic goals.

One reason that we often fall victim to erroneous conclusions is that every day we get bombarded with a form of media that pushes us to accept the most absurd phrases—advertising. Take for instance the slogan “things go better with Coke.” What “things”? If I drank a Coke while running a marathon, I might get sick. And some things that actually do go better with Coke, I could do without, such as tooth decay and weight gain. To be fair, the slogans of Coke’s chief competitor do not stand up to scrutiny either: “Pepsi, The Choice of a new generation.” Which generation? And how did they determine that it’s their choice? Often advertisers use ambiguous language like this in their slogans to deceive without lying outright. For instance, saying that a detergent *helps* to eliminate stains does not tell us that it actually *will*.

Arguments and Policies

When analyzing a more articulated argument or policy, we’re often tempted to use a phrase either to wholeheartedly agree with a position or to dismiss it entirely. But in doing so, a critical examination often gets lost in a barrage of name-calling and hyperbole. To try to understand the other side of an argument, I like to write an **issue dialogue**³, starting with the most extreme positions and moving toward more reasonable compromises. Consider, for instance, the debate that surrounds whether universities should continue to raise tuition in order to make up for government cut backs to education:

3. An imaginary dialogue between people representing opposing sides of an issue that moves toward more reasonable positions and characterizations of the opponent.

For: Universities should raise tuition. Why should taxpayers cover the expense? You students want to have a first rate education but you don't want to pay for it. You're just a bunch of lazy young people who feel entitled to every government handout you can get.

Against: Not true. Education is an investment. What you greedy old people don't realize is that when a student eventually receives a better job because of his education, he will pay more in taxes. This increased revenue will more than repay the government for what it spent on his education.

For: That's assuming that a student will get a better job because of his education; many people, like Bill Gates, have done pretty well without a degree. And even if you can prove that students will make more money, that doesn't mean that they will remain in the community that invested in their education.

Against: True, but most probably will, and anyway, the university invests a lot of its money in these surrounding communities. As for your second point, for every Bill Gates, there are thousands of college dropouts who are flipping burgers or living on the streets.

For: But why should someone who doesn't have children or live near a university town have to support an institution that doesn't give anything back to them? Would you want to have to spend your hard earned money to support a senior center's golf course?

Against: Studies have shown that when governments do not spend money on education, they have to spend more on prisons so it's not as though cutting funding for education will benefit those taxpayers you describe. However, I agree that certain families should pay more for their children's education, as long as they can afford it.

For: And I will concede that governments should continue to provide access to education for those who can't afford it, but I think even children of poor families have an obligation to give back to the community that supported them when they finish their degrees.

Though this could continue for several more pages, you can see that both sides are starting to move toward more reasonable characterizations of each other. Again, when writing an issue dialogue, it is tempting to ridicule those on the other side

with stock phrases to make it easier to dismiss their views (especially when looking at perspectives from different cultures and eras). But the more we can reasonably state the opposing view's arguments, the more we can reasonably state our own, and we should apply the same amount of scrutiny to our own beliefs that we do to those who disagree with us.

Part of this scrutiny may involve raising questions about the author's period, culture, and biases (see the previous chapter, regarding analysis of sources). In addition, you should consider the strength of the arguments, evaluating how well the author supports the main assertions with sound evidence and reasoning while paying particular attention to whether they rely on any **fallacies**⁴—errors in reasoning. For instance, does the author make any hasty generalizations? Consider someone who attempts to argue that global warming doesn't exist on the basis that the weather has been quite cold for the last few days. Obviously the person would make a stronger case for her argument by presenting more encompassing evidence. Another common fallacy is the faulty syllogism (i.e. all cats die; Socrates is dead; therefore Socrates was a cat). Just because two items under considerations have a certain quality in common, does not mean that these items are the same. Perhaps the most common fallacy that I see students make is "guilt by association." This may be due to the fact that politicians use it all the time. For instance, in the 2008 presidential election, many tried to associate Barack Obama with terrorists simply because his middle name (Hussein) was the same as the deposed leader of Iraq. John McCain's significant personal wealth was seen as evidence that he would be insensitive to the needs of the poor, even though liberals like Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy were also very well off. Also, be aware of the opposite fallacy—success by association. Go to any tennis shoe commercial on YouTube and you will see famous athletes performing incredible acts, as though the shoes, and not years of practice, are responsible for their success.

Metaphorical Language

Not all the details you analyze will suggest a literal action or point of view; many will be of a metaphorical, or symbolic, nature. Though there are many different types of **tropes**⁵ (words or phrases that point toward a figurative meaning)—such as metaphor, simile, and synecdoche. The basic function of each is to allow someone to literally "see what you mean" by comparing an abstract concept to something concrete. One reason the metaphor "love is a rose" is so well known is that the object and the concept match extremely well. A rose, like love, may manifest in many different forms and have several complex layers when examined closely. Roses show the cheerful side of love because they look nice, smell sweet, and inspire warm fuzzy feelings. However, they also show the dangers of love by having thorns, and being difficult to care for. Like the different people you love, a rose requires just the right amount of attention and care—neither too much nor too little.

4. Errors in reasoning, such as hasty generalizations (the weather's cold outside; thus, global warming doesn't exist) or faulty syllogisms (all cats die; Socrates is dead; therefore Socrates is a cat)

5. Words and phrases that point toward figurative meanings, such as the metaphor "love is a rose."

The need to extend metaphorical implications is especially apparent when analyzing a poem or a song. For instance, in her song “China,” Tori Amos explores the different metaphorical significance the central term has on a crumbling relationship: a far away location that represents the distance couples often feel between each other, a place with a Great Wall that can refer to the figurative barriers we build to protect ourselves emotionally, and fancy plates that, on closer examination, have cracks (just like those who seem to have the perfect relationship and then suddenly announce that they are breaking up). Tori Amos, “China,” *Little Earthquakes* (Atlantic Records, 1992). In this case, understanding the metaphorical significance can give us an even greater appreciation of the song. When we say that a song (or any piece of art) “strikes a chord,” we mean that it resonates with our thoughts, feelings, and memories, and an understanding of its central metaphors allows us to relate to it in even more ways.

Metaphorical language does not come up only in the arts, but also in other disciplines, especially theology and philosophy. Nearly all religious texts are filled with parables and analogies because they provide us with concrete images to explain spiritual concepts. Perhaps the most famous analogy from antiquity is Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” in which Socrates compares human understanding to people locked in chairs and forced to look at the shadows of themselves, cast by the light of candles against a cave wall. In time, they confuse that reality for the true reality that lies above them. When one brave soul (read Socrates) escapes these confines and leaves the cave to discover the true reality, he returns to the people left behind to tell them of their limited existence. Instead of being grateful, they choose not to believe him and have him put to death because they prefer to accept the reality to which they’ve become accustomed.

While this analogy continues to be told in various forms, it still needs to be examined critically. For instance, you might ask who put them in the cave and why? Is our reality set up as a training ground to move on to more satisfying forms of existence, as proposed in the film *The Matrix*? Or is it a cruel joke in which we’re allowed only a glimpse of the way things should be while wallowing in our own inability to effect change? In addition, many have argued that the analogy relies on a transcendent notion of Truth that cannot be communicated or realized—that Socrates believes that there is a greater place outside of our natural existence only because he has a vivid imagination or a need to prove his own importance. If this is true, then we might do better to improve the existence we actually experience than to stagnate while hoping for a better one.

But while poets, philosophers, and songwriters use metaphorical language to entertain and enlighten, many others use it primarily to manipulate—drawing off of the symbolic value of certain terms. Again, advertisers are masters of this, helping companies to embed their products with metaphorical significance, beginning with

what they choose to call them. Car companies often use the names of swift predatory animals to associate their products with speed, control, and power. And advertisers love to use analogies because they don't have to be proven. For example when stating that a product works "like magic," they get all the associations with a mystical process that offers quick, painless solutions without having to demonstrate its actual effectiveness. Be particularly on guard for inappropriate analogies when analyzing arguments. For instance, people may attempt to justify violent acts to advance their version of the public good by using the analogy that "you have to break a few eggs to make a cake." A person is far more valuable than an egg, and the analogy is simply inappropriate. The analogy would be far more appropriate and effective if used to justify how you might need to give up smoking or sleeping late in order to get back into shape.

Images, Sounds, Tastes, and Smells

Images, like words, are often imbued with metaphorical significance and thus can be manipulated in a similar manner. For instance, the politician who stands in front of a flag while giving a speech is attempting to feed off of the patriotic implications associated with it. Likewise, fast food companies often use images of clowns and cartoon figures to associate their products with the carefree days of childhood when we didn't have to worry about gaining weight or having high cholesterol. But images we see in painting, sculpture, photography, and the other arts offer more subtle and variant interpretations and deserve more careful examination.

In fact, we can look at certain paintings more than a hundred times and continue to discern new patterns of meaning. For me, this is especially true of Van Gogh's "The Starry Night." In his song "Vincent," singer-songwriter Don Mclean describes the painting as "swirling clouds in violet haze" that reflect the eyes of an artist who suffered for his sanity because the people around him could not understand or appreciate his vision. Don McLean, "Vincent," *American Pie* (United Artists Records, 1971). Sometimes I see the painting this way, and other times I see it as a joyous dance of the stars moving in constant circles unencumbered by human misery (if you want to consider what the painting might mean to you, go to <http://www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/starryindex.html>).

Music can also create feelings of triumph, joy, or despair without the need for any words to convey a direct message. Again, sometimes this can happen in a way that seems apparent and universal, (such as how the theme song from the film *Star Wars* evokes feelings of heroism, excitement, and adventure) or in ways that are more subtle and complex. Jerry Farber, Professor of Comparative Literature, explains that the aesthetic appeal of Mozart's *Violin Concerto in A Major* emerges through the contrast among the various musical themes within it:

Now there are moments when many listeners, I think, are likely to get isolated in the music immediately at hand, losing much of their awareness of the whole structure. Particularly during one section, a so-called ‘Turkish’ episode in a different time signature and a minor key, the listener is likely, once having adjusted to this new and exotic atmosphere, to be swept far away from the courtly minuet. Still, the overall structure is the context in which we hear this episode and is likely, if only by effect of contrast, to help shape our resonant response. Jerry Farber, *A Field Guide to the Aesthetic Experience* (New York: Forwards, 1982), 106.

Which of these details you analyze depends on the unique features of the subject’s particular genre. For instance in analyzing both a poem and a song, you can consider the major metaphors, key terms, and actions. But with a song, you should also consider how it’s sung, which instruments are used, and how the music underscores or contrasts with the lyrics. Likewise, an analysis of both a painting and a film requires attention to the color, composition, and perspective of the scene. But with a film, you should also consider the dialogue, background music, and how each scene relates to the ones that come before and after it. Keep in mind that although different kinds of texts tend to stimulate particular types of responses, sometimes it is fruitful to think about pieces in light of seemingly incongruous perspectives. For instance, you could look at a love song as reflecting cultural attitudes about gender roles or a political speech as encouraging psychological disorders such as paranoia.

When your analysis focuses on personal experiences, decisions, and encounters, you can discuss those details that correspond with the other senses as well. In fact, taste and smell can play a crucial role in our experiences, as they have the strongest connection to memory. In *Swann’s Way*, the first part of his prolific novel *In Search of Lost Time*, French author Marcel Proust describes how dipping a pastry in tea helped him to recall a period of his life that he might have otherwise permanently forgotten. Though at first he couldn’t recall why the taste had such a powerful effect on him, he eventually remembered that it was something his grandmother gave him as a child when the family visited her in the summer. The taste helped him to recall not only his moments with his grandmother but the details of the house and town itself. As he puts it:

But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Killmartin (New York: Random House, 1981), 50–51.

Though the personal experiences you write about do not have to be as significant to you as this was for Proust's narrator, you still need to recall the details as best you can. When doing so, take a step back and try to look at yourself as you might a character in a novel. Detaching yourself like this can be very hard to do, especially when you have a vested interest in seeing yourself in a certain light. However, you often get your best insights when you try, to paraphrase the poet Robert Burns, to see yourself as others see you. To illustrate, I will show how I can both present and analyze a recent visit to my gym.

As I swiped my card at the entrance, the gentleman at the front desk greeted me with a friendly, "Hi Randy." I felt the usual twang of guilt because I can never remember his name and have to respond with a generic and slightly overenthusiastic, "Hey, how's it going?" Inside, the YMCA has its usual mix of old and young, most of whom are trying to get back into shape as opposed to other gyms where the main motivation for coming is to show off the body you already have.

I take a bitter sip from the rusty drinking fountain and head to the weight room where I see a young man completing his set on the first machine. He is definitely impressed with himself, periodically looking in the mirror with an expression that would make Narcissus ashamed. When he gets off, I wait until he turns around so he can see me move the key down to include more weight than he was just using. The satisfaction I get from this action comes partly from deflating some of his ego and partly from inflating my own. However, my own smugness is short-lived, because as soon as I get up, a much older man with a noticeable beer belly and smelling of Ben Gay sits at the machine and lowers the key much further than where I had it.

I go through my weight routine with a bit more humility and then wander over to the elliptical for the aerobic portion of my workout. I pull out my iPod and click to Credence Clearwater Revival, the only group with a happy enough sound to take my mind off my aching feet. After enough time, I leave the same way via the guy at the front desk (only now I return his, "Bye Randy," with a generic and slightly over enthusiastic, "See you later; have a good day").

Though there was no text to consult this time, I can still interpret the experience by recalling and focusing on the key details that make it up. I could discuss why I find it embarrassing to admit any personal weakness, whether it stems from my bad memory for trying to recall names or from my inability to lift as much weight as others. I could discuss the key in the weight machine metaphorically, and how I warped it in my mind from a simple tool to a larger symbol of competition. I could

also discuss the effect of music and how it takes a lot of sting out of exercise by allowing me to focus on something other than the painful routine that stretches out before me. Finally, I could discuss how the rusty taste of the drinking fountain water or the smell of Ben Gay and sweat will always remind me of this particular gym.

When looking at a relationship or a decision, the analytical process is essentially the same as when you examine a specific event; you still need to consider, recall, and imagine various moments—just more of them. Whereas a relationship with another person is the sum total of all the time you’ve already spent with that person, making a decision involves imagining what might come about as a result of our choices. Oftentimes our analysis inspires thoughts that leap around in time as we reconsider past patterns to predict likely future events. For instance, if I were to analyze whether I should get a kitten, my mind may race through a string of potentially good and bad memories of having had cats in the past: images of soft, cuddly, purring little creatures that also like to destroy drapes and meow in my ear at five in the morning. Of course no matter how long and hard we think about something, we can never be sure that the outcome will work out for us in the way we hope and expect. Still, to be satisfied that we at least tried to make an informed, intelligent, and aware decision, we must slow down and reconsider all the relevant moments that we’ve already experienced.

EXERCISE 1

Think of four concrete words, those which represent something we can see, touch, taste, or smell (for example, desk, willow, seaweed, or sidewalk), and four abstract words, those that represent concepts, feelings, or attitudes (for example, jealousy, freedom, fear, or arrogance), and then think of how each of your concrete words illustrate an aspect of your abstract ones. For instance, you might consider how fear is like a willow. Both may spread a lot of shade over our lives. At times fear may keep us in the dark, “rooted” like a willow from moving forward to places we need to go. However, at other times our fears may protect us from those dangers we are not yet ready to face.

EXERCISE 2

Write an issue dialogue on a policy that is important to you. First freewrite on your own position, considering all of the places where you got your information from in the first place; then freewrite on the opposite point of view, again, considering all the places where you have heard these perspectives articulated. Write a dialogue in which you take both sides seriously by fully considering the merits of each argument. How did your own position change as you considered other points of view? What possible compromises did you come to?

EXERCISE 3

Select something in your own life that is important to you at the moment. It could be the desire to recall a past experience, to reflect on an important relationship, or to analyze a decision that you must make. Now, take a moment to freewrite on all the significant details and factors that are involved. Reflect further on what you just wrote. To what extent do/did you have choices regarding the outcome? To what extent does/did it seem predetermined and by which people and what circumstances? What can you still learn or do about the situation to maximize its benefits? How can you better accept those aspects of it that are not likely to change?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. A close reading of a subject involves understanding the implications of the actions, terms, phrases, arguments, and images that make it up.
2. Metaphorical language can help us to understand a concept further as we extend how something concrete compares to something abstract.
3. An analysis of personal experiences, decisions, and relationships necessitates a certain level of detachment and a close reading of the relevant details.

3.2 From Interpretations to Assertions

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Reveal the kinds of assertions that block a successful analysis.
2. Discuss how to produce meaningful assertions.
3. Explain how to unite meaningful assertions into a working thesis.
4. Show how to evaluate and modify a working thesis.

A close reading of the key details of a subject should help you to discover several intriguing interpretations about an array of different subjects: the consequences of an event, the motivations of a character, the effectiveness of an argument, or the nature of an image.

Interpretations

An assertion differs from an interpretation by providing *perspective* on an underlying pattern, a perspective that implies what it means to you and why you think it's significant. Without such a perspective, an interpretation merely becomes a statement with no potential for development. Just as one might utter a statement that kills the mood of a particular situation ("What a romantic dinner you cooked for me! Too bad I'm allergic to lobster and chocolate..."), so one can make types of statements that block any possibility for further analysis. What follows are some of the most common:

1. Statements of Fact

Factual statements might help support an analysis but should not be the main force that drives it. I might notice that Vincent Van Gogh used twenty-five thousand brush strokes to create *Starry Night*, that global warming has increased more rapidly in the polar regions, or that Alfred Hitchcock used erratic background music throughout his film *Psycho*. But what else can I say about any of these statements? They simply are true or false. To transform these factual statements into assertions that can be explored further, you need to add your own perspectives to them. For instance, you could argue that the erratic music in *Psycho* underscores the insanity of the plot and results in a cinematic equivalent to Edgar Allen Poe's frantic short sentences, or that global warming in the polar regions will result in higher sea levels that will cause enormous damage if we don't do anything to keep it in check.

2. Statements of Classification

It is not enough to simply assert that the focus of your analysis fits into a pre-established category like “modernism,” “impressionism,” “neo-conservativism,” or “first wave feminism.” Of course it can be useful to understand the nature of these broader categories, but you still need to explore why it is important to see your subject in this light. For instance, rather than simply point out that *Family Guy* can be seen as a satire of the American family, you should also consider what this perspective reveals about the show’s development and reception. It might also be worthwhile to consider how a work transcends the standard notions of its period or genre. You might point out that while most of the time the *Family Guy* characters are show as broad and ridiculous, they can sometimes act in ways that are familiar and endearing. Similarly, when looking at a policy or argument, you should not simply categorize it as belonging to a particular social attitude or political party, but consider it on its own merits. Though political pundits often use terms associated with their opposition as curse words and summarily dismiss anything they advocate, you want to appear much more reasonable in an academic analysis.

3. Statements of Taste

Similarly, an analysis is not just a review in which you simply state how you feel about a piece or dismiss an argument or policy as being “distasteful.” A good assertion will not only reveal how you feel about the focus of your analysis but will also inspire you to explore why it makes you feel that way. In her article, “*Babe, Braveheart and the Contemporary Body*,” Susan Bordo, Professor of Media Studies, explains that the reason she liked the film *Babe* much better is that it shows the need for self-acceptance and connection to others in a society that overly values conformity and competition. Susan Bordo, *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 1999. This assertion allows her to explore different aspects of contemporary American culture that may have inspired each of these films. Had she simply stated her opinion without stating why her subject, the films, made her feel this way, her article would not have been as compelling or convincing.

4. Statements of Intention

When looking at creative works, we often want to assert that our point of view is the one the author intended, yet when we equate our perspective with the author’s, we (rather arrogantly) assume that we have solved the mystery of the piece, leaving us with nothing more to say about it. And even if we can quote the author as saying “I intended this,” we should not stop exploring our own interpretations of what the piece means to us. John Lennon tells us that his song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” was written in response to a drawing given to him by his son, Julian.

Others suspect that his real intention was to describe a drug trip brought about by LSD, the initial letters in the words of the title of the song. John Lennon and Paul McCartney, “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds,” *Sergent Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Apple Records, 1967). I have never seen his son’s drawing, and I don’t use psychedelic drugs, so neither interpretation means much to me. I love the song because it guides me through a kind of *Alice in Wonderland* fantasy of “looking glass ties” and “tangerine trees.” To be able to show why a given interpretation matters to us, we should not phrase our assertions as being about what we think the author intended but what it causes us to consider.

Likewise you should be careful to avoid simply stating that you know the “real intentions” behind a work of non-fiction, a social policy, or a particular action or decision. For example, consider if a business decides to move its operations overseas to save money. This may inspire some to say that the company’s real intention is to destroy the American economy or to exploit workers overseas, but it would sound far more persuasive and reasonable to actually show how these concerns could come about, even if they were never the stated intentions.

Worthwhile Assertions

In short, **worthwhile assertions**⁶ should reveal a perspective on your subject that provides possibilities for further exploration. Statements based on facts, classifications, opinions, and author intentions provide only inklings of perspectives and should be revised to inspire more prolific and meaningful analysis. Once you come up with some initial interpretations of your subject, reconsider it in light of what it means to you, perhaps by asking some or all of the following questions:

- What memories does it spark?
- How does it cause you to react emotionally and intellectually?
- What personal decisions/relationships does it cause you to ponder?
- What social, political, or intellectual concerns does it make you consider?
- How does it confirm or contradict your morals and beliefs?

Questions like these will help you to reflect on the subject further, enabling you to transform the aforementioned problematic statements into meaningful assertions. For instance, consider how the interpretation, “The CEO is moving his company’s operations overseas because he hates America and wants to exploit the workers of the third world” can be revised: “Though the CEO’s stated intention for moving the company’s operations overseas is to save money, the end result could be disastrous for both the local economy and the new country’s employees who will have to work

6. Statements that have potential for further development because they express points of view that move beyond fact, individual taste, classification, or intention.

under unsafe conditions.” Similarly, the statement “John Lennon’s real intention in writing ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ is to promote the use of LSD” can be revised: “Whatever John Lennon’s real intention, I see ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ as being about the power of the imagination to transcend the deadening routine of daily life.”

Once you have made several assertions like these, you can combine your favorite ones into a **working thesis**⁷, your initial argument or center of focus for your essay. It’s called a “working” thesis because your point of view is likely to evolve the more you consider each aspect of your subject. Contrary to what you may have heard, the thesis does not have to be set in stone before you begin to write, guiding all the ideas that follow. When you revisit your responses, your point of view will evolve to become more precise, more thoughtful, and more sophisticated. For example, sometimes your thesis may start off as a brief and somewhat vague notion: “This ad manipulates through patriotic images of our country’s nature,” and later becomes more developed and clear: “Though this ad appeals to the patriotic spirit by showing images of our cherished countryside, it attempts to sell a product that will cause harm to the very environment it uses in the background for inspiration.” Each time you return to your thesis, you will think about it in a more nuanced manner, moving from the initial simplicity of a gut reaction to the complexity of a thoughtful and sophisticated response.

For this reason, you do not always need to state your thesis as a definitive argument that shows how you feel in no uncertain terms. Instead, it is often desirable to show your ambivalence about your position as long as you are clear about why you feel this way. For example, you might feel uncertain as to whether your school should build a new football stadium. Although you might think the money could be spent on more pressing educational needs, you might also want to have a more safe and comfortable place to watch the games. You can discuss the advantages and disadvantages of such a proposal, making it clear that you haven’t yet decided which side to support. Some of the most intriguing essays are exploratory, highlighting the mysteries of a subject, rather than persuasive, trying to convince us of a particular point of view.

While a thesis does not need to be limited in terms of argument, it should be limited in terms of scope. Perhaps the most common mistake I see students make is to choose a thesis that encompasses too many aspects of the subject. Remember that it is almost always better to write “a lot about a little” than “a little about a lot.”

When you discuss too many aspects of your subject, it becomes difficult to provide any new perspectives. Challenge yourself to write about an aspect of your subject that may appear too small to inspire even a page response. Then think about the nature of your perspective a bit further, putting it to the following tests before you put too much more time into it.

7. The initial (subject to change) argument or center of focus of an essay that may express a definitive point of view or an exploration of ambivalence.

1. The Evidence Test

Before engaging in further analysis, look again at your subject and ask yourself, “Is there really enough evidence here to support my point of view?” If I were to write about the film *Office Space* as showing just how much employees love to go to work in the Tech Industry, I might have a very difficult time finding enough scenes to match my perspective. You should also research the details surrounding your subject to see if your assertion needs to be modified, for instance by considering the historical circumstances that were in place at the time the event happened or the piece was created. One student, when writing about the speech from *The Tempest*, (quoted in Chapter 1), wrote that when Prospero’s actors disappear into “thin air,” they must have been projected on film with the camera suddenly switching off. Of course, Shakespeare could not have had that in mind given that he wrote three hundred years before we had the technology to carry this out. Still, one could argue that the scene might best be performed this way now. If a statement cannot be justified or at least modified to match the evidence, then you may have even more problems with the next category.

2. The Explanation Test

Oftentimes when there isn’t enough evidence to support a thesis, writers will be accused of stretching their explanations. I once heard a talk on how technicians assigned terms associated with women to parts of the computer to give themselves an illusion of control. Some of the assertions made sense—for instance that “mother” in motherboard shows how men may want to recall/dominate the nurturing figure of their childhoods. However, when the speaker pointed out that the “apple” in Apple Computers recalls the forbidden fruit that Eve handed to Adam, I started to squirm. The speaker even tried to argue that the name Macintosh was chosen because it’s a “tart” apple, and “tart” is a derogatory term that men use to refer to women of ill repute. Nonetheless, I would rather see a stretch than an analysis in which the explanation isn’t even necessary because the thesis is so obvious: “Othello reveals the destructive consequences of jealousy,” or “Beavis and Butthead’s stupidity often gets them into trouble.” Ideally, the assertion should require some explanation of the relevant details within or directly implied by the thesis. Remember that the goal is not to come up with an answer to the question “what’s THE meaning of the piece?” But rather to explore dimensions of the subject that do not have definitive answers, allowing us to consider our own subjectivities.

3. The Significance Test

You should also try to avoid wasting time on a thesis that does not have any significance by applying what many teachers call the “so what?” test. If your assertions do not lead to a deeper consideration of any of the questions for further

thought raised earlier, then it probably will be boring for both you to write and for your audience to read. Oftentimes to make an assertion more interesting, we simply need to add more to it. For instance, I could argue that Peter feels beaten down by the soulless routine of his workplace throughout the film *Office Space*. But I need to remember that Peter is just a character in a film and cannot benefit from any of my conclusions. To make this more significant, I also need to consider how Peter represents the attitude of many contemporary workers and reveal the broader consequences of this attitude.

All of these considerations will help your thesis to become clearer, nuanced, and unique. In addition, it will allow your research questions (discussed in the previous chapter) to become more precise and fruitful as you compare and contrast your points of view with those of others. If there is one thing that I hope that I made clear throughout this chapter it is that the goal of a careful examination should not be to arrive at the same conclusions and have the same thoughts as everyone else. If we all came to the same conclusions when looking at a subject, then there would be no reason to write a new essay on it. I always tell my students that I know what I think and sometimes what most experts think when I look at a subject; I want you to tell me what you think instead of presenting opinions that have already been stated by someone else. Developing a perspective that is both unique and worthwhile takes time, and although carefully examining a piece may help you to form an initial understanding and lay the cornerstone for your analysis, you still need to build the rest of the essay. In the next chapter, we'll look at ways to do this, first by helping you to explain more thoroughly how you arrived at your perspective and second by helping you to explore the significance of your perspective in a manner that moves beyond the most obvious lessons.

EXERCISE

Look over the exercises you have completed so far in this chapter. Choose one and list the main assertions that you came up with on your subject. Cross out those that reveal only statements of fact, classification, taste, or intention and then consider what the remaining ones have in common. Try to construct a working thesis that presents a point of view that implies all of these perspectives. Put this working thesis to the evidence, explanation, and significance tests, and modify it accordingly. Remember the thesis does not have to be stated as a definitive argument but can reveal your ambivalence about your subject.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Certain statements do not lead to productive essays, especially if they reveal only a fact, an individual taste, or a particular classification.
2. The remaining worthwhile assertions should connect to each other through a working thesis or center of focus.
3. This thesis may reveal a definitive perspective or an exploration of ambivalence, as long as it is justifiable, clear, and worthwhile (passes the evidence, explanation, and significance tests).