Writing to Analyze

Analysis is a critical thinking skill you use quite often, in academic as well as professional and everyday reading and writing. You may analyze the argument in a text or article, the benefits of a business proposal, and/or the ideasBrea offered in a news editorial or television news commentary. Analysis helps determine the quality of the information you read by extracting and examining different aspects of that information.
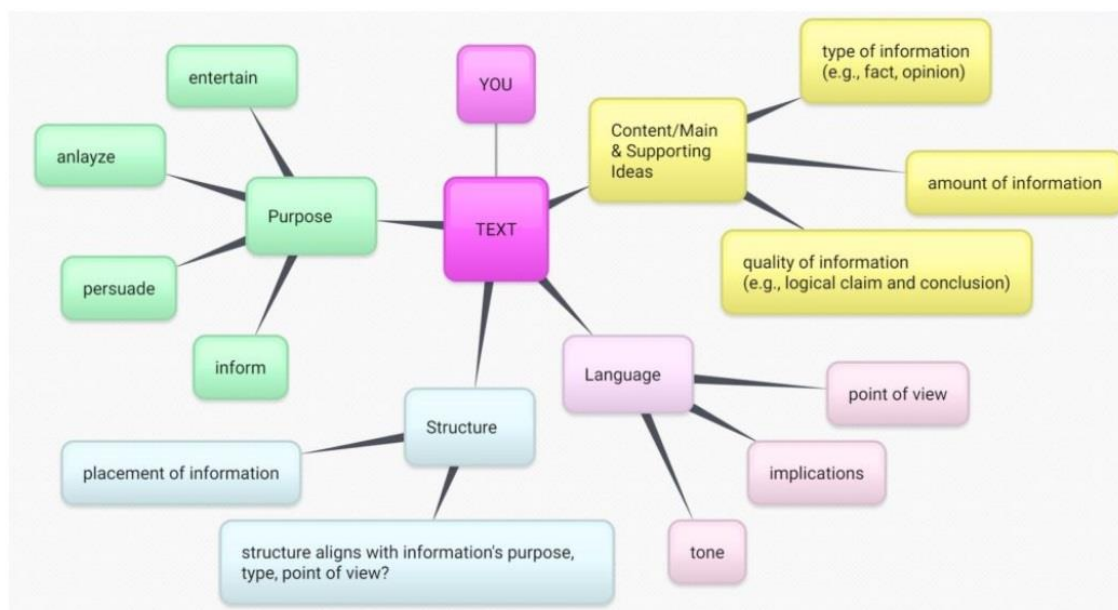
Reading to Analyze

Analytical reading starts with finding and understanding a main idea, and then considers the validity of that main idea by studying its parts, to see how logically those parts fit together. As the *American Heritage Dictionary* states, analysis is "the separation of an intellectual…whole into constituents for individual study." Analysis essentially takes apart the whole text and examines how the parts relate to one another to make up the text's ideas and content, in order to determine the quality of the ideas and content.

There are four main parts to a text that you may analyze, and multiple sections within each part.

1. Content
2. Language
3. Purpose
4. Structure

Breaking a Text into Parts to Analyze

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Analytical Reading Process

Reading a text for the purpose of analysis usually requires you to read that text more than once. Upon a first reading, take note of characteristics to investigate further. Do you agree or disagree with certain ideas? Did you react to certain phrases? How do the ideas in the text relate to your own experience? Application of reading skills such as previewing, annotating, note-taking, and summarizing all help you note characteristics that you may want to investigate further as they promote your ability to understand the text. Understanding is the basis for analysis.

Fuller analysis happens after a first reading, when you delve into the text more completely, asking and answering specific questions about its parts.

Ask and answer three basic questions as a starting point for analyzing a text:

- What is the main idea?
- What is the author's purpose?
- What additional pieces of the text should I question more fully (content, language, structure), based on the author's purpose?

Main Idea

Always start by identifying the main idea of the text that you have read. What is the one thing that the author wants you to understand after reading the text? The main idea may be stated directly in the text, or it may be implied, in which case you need consider the text carefully in order to identify its main idea.

Purpose

Once you identify the main idea, identify the purpose in order to determine how/whether to analyze the text.

- **If the purpose is to persuade or logically argue, you always need to analyze the text** to see if the main idea is justified, and to see how the supporting ideas, language, and structure relate to the main idea. Persuasion and argument need to present logically valid information to make the reader agree intellectually (not emotionally) with the main idea.
- **If the purpose is to inform or explain, you usually need to analyze the text,** since the text needs to present valid information in objective language to meet its purpose of informing (as opposed to persuading) the reader. You may analyze the text in terms of its structure as well, since information placement can influence its importance and how that information is perceived.
- **If the purpose is to entertain, then you may or may not need to analyze the text** for its content. Writing that entertains does not necessarily have to be either logical or complete in order to accomplish its purpose. You may want to analyze the text for language, though, to see how an author uses language to accomplish her purpose.

Additional Questions for Analysis

When you decide to analyze a text, and when you determine the pieces (content, language, structure) on which to focus the analysis, ask and answer additional analytical questions.

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Questions to analyze content:

- Is the information mostly fact, opinion, or a combination of both? Is the type of information appropriate to the purpose and main idea?
- Is the support relevant to the main idea – does it relate to and enhance the main idea?
- Is the support logical?
- Does supporting evidence come from trusted, valid sources?
- Is there enough support to verify the main idea and supporting ideas?
- Does the support consider and deal with an opposing viewpoint if there is a significant opposing viewpoint?

Questions to analyze language:

- What do the words imply/connote and how do the words influence the reader's understanding of the main idea?
- Are the author's tone and general point of view intended to sway the reader to a certain way of thinking about the main idea?

Questions to analyze structure:

- Why is certain information placed as it is within the text? How does that placement emphasize or de-emphasize the information?
- How does the order of information align with the text's main idea and purpose?

These questions are a starting place for text analysis. Note that more questions may occur to you based on the specifics of the text.

Writing to Analyze
If you were writing an analysis based on the article "Why Aren't Governments as Transparent as They Could Be?," your next steps might be to review the answers to the analytical questions above and develop a unique insight or argument based on those answers. You would not have to deal with all of the items noted; based on your answers, you might create your own insight or assertion about the language used, the quality of information, the idea about having a stronger argument if it were focused on either local or federal government, or one of many other possibilities. Or you might want to analyze the article as a whole piece and touch on content, language, and structure in his analysis.

In more general terms, analytical writing uses the same whole-parts concept as analytical reading. You offer your overall judgment of/argument about the whole, or a portion of, the article's quality as your main idea or thesis. You then group and organize the parts that you are analyzing. You may want to focus on mapping or outlining as you prewrite for an analytical essay, since both mapping and outlining

help you picture and understand the relationship between your own main idea and its supporting parts. Note that you usually create groups dealing with content (type of information, amount of information, logical problems with information), language (inference, tone, point of view), and/or structure (placement of information, emphasis of information via placement) when you analyze the quality of a text.

Like analytical reading, analytical writing focuses on the relationship between the thesis, supporting ideas, and the language and order in which they are expressed. A reader should be able to analyze any piece of college writing that you do, apply the analytical reading questions and process, and (hopefully!) determine that your ideas and information are logically valid and of good quality.

You will be asked to analyze in many different ways in college. For example, you may be asked to analyze a company's marketing strategy. You may be asked to analyze the results of a sociological survey. You may be asked to analyze the causes of fire-related behavior. You may be asked to analyze the validity of a policy decision. You may be asked to analyze an author's use of symbol in a literary work. No matter what type of analysis is assigned, you will be expected to judge the whole text or a portion of the text based on your understanding and questioning of its parts and their relationship to the whole.