

## English 621 - Analyzing Essays

As we read and write essays, it is important to know how to pick out the important elements which make up the essay. This is essay analysis. Here's what we look for:

### I - Purpose

- what the essay tries to accomplish; the author wouldn't have written it without some sort of purpose in mind
- common purposes are to narrate, to describe, to express, to argue, to persuade, to instruct, to report (expressed as a verb)
- figuring out the purpose behind the essay is essential in order to recognize the type of essay

### II - Subject Matter

- Subject - the topic
- Thesis Statement - sentence(s) summarizing the main point of the essay; all subordinate points should support thesis
- Subordinate Points - individual thoughts or arguments that develop the thesis (topic sentences for each paragraph)
- Supporting Details - examples, illustrations, quotes, reasons used to support the subordinate points (which support thesis)

### III - Audience

- to whom the essay is directed
- why would the author choose to direct this essay at this particular audience? (this is tied to the purpose)

### IV - Vehicle

- the form of writing the author has selected
- letter, article, review, column, editorial, speech, etc.

### V - Context

- the personal, historical or social circumstances of the writer that influence the content and form of the essay
- for example, what would prompt June Callwood to write her essay in which she offers advice regarding relationships and perfect mates?

### VI - Style

- in simple terms, style refers to the author's writing style, his/her structure, diction, use of figurative language and rhetoric
- also refers to the overall selection and arrangement of sounds, words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Style is affected by regional and cultural variations, by changing uses of words, by the development of new words and new meanings in the language, and by the fertility of the author's imagination. A good writer chooses and arranges words to convey his/her particular meaning and to produce a particular effect.

Structure	The pattern of development and arrangement of details (more on reverse)
Diction	Choice of words used (connotation, specific/general, colloquial/form, abstract/concrete)
Figurative Language	In writing, this includes figures of speech. What impact do these devices have on the passage? The reader?
Sentences	Is the passage written in short, long, fragments? Does the passage include rhetorical devices - deliberate use of words for effect.

#### Rhetorical Devices

Rhetoric is the study of effective speaking and writing; the art of persuasion; and many other things. Rhetorical devices include techniques that help persuade the reader to agree with the view presented. Knowledge of those devices is critical to effective writing. Use rhetorical devices appropriately and carefully, since overuse can result in unnatural and even unintentionally humorous effect.

#### Common Types of Rhetorical Devices:

- Parallelism - arrangement of phrases, sentences and paragraphs so that elements of equal importance are equally developed and similarly phrased
- Alliteration - repetition of initial letter or sound
- Rhetorical Question - a question not intended to induce or require a reply; answer is obvious

A FULL LIST OF RHETORICAL DEVICES CAN BE FOUND ON PAGE 130 OF THE STUDENT GUIDE TO LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND MEDIA

### VII - Tone

- the feelings toward the subject matter of the audience
- Voice - writer's own words and attitude
- Persona - an adopted voice by the author

The tone is created through a number of features, such as rhetorical devices, diction (word choice or vocabulary), and type of evidence presented. Tone is a major factor in establishing the overall impression of the piece of writing. Tones vary as much as there are emotions and attitudes. The tone of an essay may be ironic, frustrated, sincere, angry, self-mocking, encouraging, or nostalgic, etc.

In reading and analyzing essays, it is important to identify the writer's voice and examine its impact on what is being said. There are times when a writer may adopt a persona - a character other than him/herself - in order to add another dimension to his/her writing. In other words, there is a split between the surface meaning of the text and the deeper meaning - the writer's real message. This method is particularly useful in writing satirical pieces.

## Structure of an Essay (A Large Part of an Essay's Style)

Beginnings and Endings are most important parts of an essay.

Significance of Beginnings and Endings:

- ❖ The reader remembers these best.
- ❖ They contain the ideas you most want to emphasize.
- ❖ The beginning is what draws the reader in.
- ❖ The ending leaves the reader with a strong final image, thought, or insight.

Beginning/Ending	Example
Illustrative Anecdote: a brief recounting of an incident that illustrates or introduces the point you made or are about to make	In his essay, 'How to Live to be 200', Stephen Leacock uses the anecdote of Jiggins, the health nut, to introduce his criticism of the overly health conscious.
Shocking Statistic	'...powerful industries - the \$33 billion a year diet industry, the \$20 billion cosmetics industry, the \$300 cosmetic surgery industry, and the \$7 billion pornography industry - have arisen from the capital made out of unconscious anxieties, and are in turn able, through their influence on mass culture, to use, stimulate, and reinforce the hallucination in a rising, economic spiral'. (Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth)
Bold, Direct, Statement	'A student often leaves high school today without any sense of how to survive in a digital world and knowledge economy'. (Northrop Frye)

## Developing an Argument

The development of arguments is the main component of the structure of the essay. Using different methods indicates a sophisticated thought process.

Development Method	Definition	Example
Analogy	compares something that is less familiar with something more familiar in order to help the reader understand the less familiar topic	Niels Bohr's model of the atom made an analogy between the atom and the solar system.
Cause-Effect	explains why something happened by showing the direct causal relationships between two or more things	Factory jobs draw people to cities which, in turn, have become overpopulated.
Definition	explores in greater depth the significance associated with the term or concept in order to give as full a picture as possible of its characteristics	Susan Sontag defines 'beauty' by examining the ancient Greek and Christian views of beauty, the language used to describe men's versus women's beauty, internal and external beauty, and the significance of the absence of beauty in the world.
Example	illustrates a point with reference to a personal or shared experience, an allusion, statistics, analogy, or quote from an authority	In his essay 'Were Dinosaurs Dumb?' Stephen Gould cites Jack chopping down the beanstock and David smiting Goliath with a slingshot as examples of metaphors and fairy tales that show how 'slow wit is the tragic flaw of the giant.'
Comparison	points out similarities and differences between two or more ideas, things, people, etc; point-by-point comparison is a more effective organization in that similarities and differences are clearly pointed out	Comparing Brutus to Hamlet as tragic heroes reinforces the characteristics of the Shakespearean tragic hero while pointing out specific differences in their tragic flaws.
Contrast	points out differences between two characters or ideas; because this method can sharpen and clarify an argument, it is frequently more powerful than comparison	By contrasting the openly discriminatory laws against women with any other visible minority, Doris Anderson argues that 51% of women suffer routine discrimination
Categorize/Classify	places together under a single heading concepts or things that share sufficient key characteristics as to be considered similar	Kildare Dobbs in his essay 'Canada's Regions' classifies the people of each region of Canada by their character.