

How can I create stronger analysis?

Overview

Choosing the right evidence can be crucial to proving your argument, but your analysis of that evidence is equally important. Even when it seems like evidence may speak for itself, a reader needs to understand how the evidence connects to your argument. In addition, because analysis requires you to think critically and deeply about your evidence, it can improve your main argument by making it more specific and complex.

General Considerations

What Analysis Does: Breaks a work down to examine its various parts in close detail in order to see the work in a new light.

What an Analysis Essay Does: Chooses *selective pieces of evidence and analysis* in order to arrive at one single, complex argument that makes a claim about the deeper meaning behind the piece being analyzed. In the essay, each piece of evidence selected is paired with deep analysis that builds or elaborates on the last until the thesis idea is reached.

Analysis should be present in all essays. Wherever evidence is incorporated, analysis should be used to connect ideas back to your main argument.

In Practice

Answer Questions that Explain and Expand on the Evidence

Asking the kinds of questions that will lead to critical thought can access good analysis more easily. Such questions often anticipate what a reader might want to know as well. Questions can take the form of explaining the evidence or expanding on evidence; in other words, questions can give context or add meaning. Asking both kinds of questions is crucial to creating strong analysis.

When using evidence, ask yourself questions about context:

- What do I need to tell my audience about where this evidence came from?
- Is there a story behind this evidence?
- What is the historical situation in which this evidence was created?

Also ask yourself what the evidence implies about your argument:

- What aspects of this evidence would I like my audience to notice?
- Why did I choose this particular piece of evidence?
- Why does this evidence matter to my argument?
- Why is this evidence important in some ways, but not in others?
- How does this evidence contradict or confirm my argument? Does it do both?
- How does this evidence evolve or change my argument?

Example: “There’s nothing wrong with being a terrorist, as long as you win,” stated Paul Watson at an Animal Rights Convention.

Argument: Violent action is justified in order to protect animal rights.

Questions that explain the evidence: *What did Watson mean by this statement? What else did he say in this speech that might give more context to this quote? What should the reader pay attention to here (for example, why is the word “terrorist” here especially important)?*

Questions that expand on evidence: *Why is this quote useful or not useful to the argument? How does Watson’s perspective help prove or disapprove the argument? How do you think the reader should interpret the word “terrorist”? Why should the reader take this quote seriously? How does this evidence evolve or complicate the argument—does what Watson said make the argument seem too biased or simple if activism can be related to terrorism?*

Be Explicit

Because there may be multiple ways to interpret a piece of evidence, all evidence needs to be connected explicitly to your argument, even if the meaning of the evidence seems obvious to you. Plan on following any piece of evidence with, at the very least, one or two sentences of your honest interpretation of how the evidence connects to your argument—more if the evidence is significant.

Example: Paul Watson, a controversial animal rights activist, started his speech at the Animal Rights Convention with a provocative statement: “There’s nothing wrong with being a terrorist, as long as you win.” His use of the word ‘terrorist’ refers to aggressive actions taken by animal rights groups, including Sea Shepard, under the guise of protecting animals. While his quote might simply be intended to shock his audience, by comparing animal activism to terrorism, he mocks the fight against international terrorism.

Allow Analysis to Question the Argument

Sometimes frustrations with analysis can come from working with an argument that is too broad or too simple. The purpose of analysis is not only to show how evidence proves your argument, but also to discover the complexity of the argument. While answering questions that lead to analysis, if you come across something that contradicts the argument, allow your critical thinking to refine the argument.

Example: If one examined some more evidence about animal activism and it became clear that violence is sometimes the most effective measure, the argument could be modified. The more complex argument might be: “Violent action by animal activists might be akin to “terrorism” and deemed unacceptable, but it does make more of an immediate impact and gets more press. Without such aggressive actions, animal rights might be seen in a better light.”

Avoid Patterns of Weak or Empty Analysis

Sometimes sentences fill the space of analysis, but don't actually answer questions about why and how the evidence connects to or evolves the argument. These moments of weak analysis negatively affect a writer's credibility. The following are some patterns often found in passages of weak or empty analysis.

1. Offers a new fact or piece of evidence in place of analysis. Though it is possible to offer two pieces of evidence together and analyze them in relation to each other, simply offering another piece of evidence as a stand in for analysis weakens the argument. Telling the reader what happens next or another new fact is not analysis.

Example: "There's nothing wrong with being a terrorist, as long as you win," stated Paul Watson at an Animal Rights Convention. According to PETA, hunting is no longer needed for sustenance as it once was and it now constitutes violent aggression.

2. Uses an overly biased tone or restates claim rather than analyzing. Phrases such as "this is ridiculous" or "everyone can agree that this proves (fill in thesis here)" prevent the reader from seeing the subtle significance of the evidence you have chosen and often make a reader feel the writing is too biased.

Example: According to PETA, The Jane Goodall Institute estimates that 5,000 chimpanzees are killed by poachers annually. This ridiculous number proves that violence against animals justifies violent activist behavior.

3. Dismisses the relevance of the evidence. Bringing up a strong point and then shifting away from it rather than analyzing it can make evidence seem irrelevant. Statements such as "regardless of this evidence" or "nevertheless, we can still argue" before analyzing evidence can diminish the evidence all together.

Example: Paul Watson was expelled from the leadership of Greenpeace. Nevertheless, his vision of activism should be commended.

4. Strains logic or creates a generalization to arrive at the desired argument. Making evidence suit your needs rather than engaging in honest critical thinking can create fallacies in the argument and lower your credibility. It might also make the argument confusing.

Example: Some companies are taking part in the use of alternatives to animal testing. But some companies does not mean all and the ones who aren't taking part are what gives animal activists the right to take drastic action.

5. Offers advice or a solution without first providing analysis. Telling a reader what should be done can be fine, but first explain how the evidence allows you to arrive at that conclusion.

Example: Greenpeace states that they attempt to save whales by putting themselves between the whaling ship and the whale, and they have been successful at gaining media support, but anyone who is a true activist needs to go further and put whalers at risk.

Exercise

For the following pairings of evidence and analysis, identify what evasive moves are being made and come up with a precise question that would lead to better analysis. Imagine your working thesis is as follows: *Message communications came to life in order to bring people closer together, to make it easier to stay connected and in some instances they have. More often however, these forms of communication seem to be pushing people apart because they are less personal.*

1. An article In *USA Today* last year had the headline, “Can Love Blossom in a Text Message?” I’m sure most people’s gut reaction would be a resounding, “Of course not!” The article discusses a young woman whose boyfriend told her he loved her for the first time in a text message. Messaging is clearly pushing people apart.
2. In fact in the United States today, there are an estimated 250,146,921 wireless subscribers. Evidence shows that a person is more likely to first establish communication with someone you are interested in via text message or a form of online messaging via Facebook, Myspace, email, or instant messenger. People find these means of communication less stressful. This is because they are less personal.
3. This way of communicating is very new, with text message popularity skyrocketing within only the last five years, the invention of instant messaging gaining popular use through AOL beginning in 1998, and websites such as Myspace and Facebook invading our computers within only the last 5 years. Regardless of this change in communication technology, these forms of communication do not bring people together.
4. The way some people wish others “Happy Birthday” is another example. On birthdays, if you are on Facebook, your wall becomes flooded with happy birthday wishes, which is nice. However, if one of your close friends or perhaps a sibling simply wishes you a happy birthday on Facebook, you probably will feel a little cheated. It is important to know where you stand in your relationships, and if the person is actually important to you, you should take the time to call them in this kind of situation.
5. Studies suggest that over 90% of the meaning we derive from communication, we derive from the non-verbal cues. These nonverbal cues include body language, facial expression, eye movement and contact, posture, gestures, use of touch (such as hug or handshake), vocal intonation, rate of speech, and the information we gather from appearance (Applebaum, 108). It’s terrible to think that such important things are said with only a mere 10% of their meaning being properly conveyed. Phone calls can eliminate some of these problems.
6. Many people now have “Top Friends” on their Facebook profile where they rank their friends in order of importance. Sure most of us have a couple people who we refer to as our “best friends,” but never before this online ranking phenomenon has the order in which you rank your friends been public knowledge. This shows that friendship has lost all meaning.

Answer Key

1. argues with tone and uses a generalization
2. introduces new evidence and uses generalizations
3. dismisses evidence
4. offers advice or a solution and dismisses evidence
5. argues with tone and offers advice
6. uses a generalization

Resources:

<http://www.peta.org/mc/facts.asp>

<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/about/history/paul-watson/>

Last updated June 2011