

Writing an Analytical Essay

This handout is available in an alternative format on request

The analytical essay goes beyond simple summary and description. Rather than telling the reader the facts of the situation, the analytical essay demands that you examine information and evaluate it. Put another way, the analytical essay does not simply ask what, where and when; it asks why and how.

High School Essays	University-level Essays
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Topic often broad or general<input type="checkbox"/> Thesis must be stated in one sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Five-paragraph essay with three main points <input type="checkbox"/> Introduction (with thesis statement), body, and conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> In-depth analysis of focused topic<input type="checkbox"/> Thesis indicates that the essay will explain and give evidence for its claims, but no specific length<input type="checkbox"/> No fixed format; the number of paragraphs depends on the argument<input type="checkbox"/> Introduction (with thesis statement), body, and conclusion

Getting Started

The first step in writing an analytical essay is ensuring that you have read through the material critically and carefully. It is important to know exactly what the author is saying and why. The second step is ensuring that you understand the assignment and what you need to complete it.

1. Read the assignment prompt very carefully. Be aware of the differences between “consider,” “explain,” and “evaluate.”
2. Select a topic and brainstorm around it. Try to come up with as many ideas as possible that relate to the assignment.
3. Highlight the best ideas from opposing perspectives.
4. Decide which perspective you want to defend.
5. Develop a working thesis.
6. Identify the areas you will discuss in order to defend or explain your thesis, and what your point will be with regard to each area.

Developing the Analysis

Once you have developed a working thesis and a list of points that need to be discussed, it is important to assess whether your thesis is defensible and which points support it and which detract from it.

1. Focus on quality, not quantity. There may be dozens of reasons that support your view. Pick only the best.
2. Consider opposing viewpoints and possible reasons for defending them. Are any of these reasons compelling? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. Revise and rethink your thesis as various arguments or interpretations emerge. You may have to try different—even opposite—conclusions before you can be sure that your position is the best one.

Structuring the Essay

There are many different ways to structure an analytical essay. Which structure is best depends on the type of essay, the main goals of the essay and the discipline for which it is written. Here are some examples of alternative structures:

Introduction (Including thesis statement)	Introduction (Including thesis statement)	Introduction (Including thesis statement)
Main Position	Alternative Perspectives A B C	Issue A Main Position Alternatives Why Main Position is correct
Alternative Perspectives A B C	Reasons why Alternative Perspectives are Wrong A B C	Issue B Main Position Alternatives Why Main Position is correct
Defense of Main Position A B C	Summary & Defense of Main Position A B C	Issue C Main Position Alternatives Why Main Position is correct
Conclusion	Conclusion	Conclusion

Composing the Essay

Depending how complex it is, there are several different ways to present your argument. Often the best first step is to develop an outline and examine it to ensure that the ideas are structured in a clear and consistent way.

1. Develop a clear, focused thesis statement and keep this focus in each paragraph.
2. Each paragraph should contribute to the development of your argument. Avoid tangents!
3. Present your ideas in a natural order. Although there is no one way to present information, the ideas should be clear, coherent and flow in a logical order.
4. Use evidence or examples from the text in each paragraph.
5. Ensure that your analysis is thorough. Did you consider all opposing arguments? Are you making assumptions that are questionable?