Tip Sheet: What Is This Thing Called Analysis?

The simple answer is this: When we write exposition, we are, by the very definition of the terms “expository essay” and “analysis,” writing analytically. Analysis, put simply, is “the breaking apart of a whole to examine its components,” meaning that when you examine your topic within any essay you write—whether your larger purpose is to explain or to persuade—you are being analytical.

In fact, virtually every question you consider when you write an essay requires a level of analysis: How and where does this example fit into my discussion? What do these data suggest about my topic? Where do I place my thesis, and why is it best placed here? How can I rewrite this sentence to create the emphasis I need? How and why does all of my support add up to my point? And so on.

It’s safe to say, therefore, that any essay built around a clear, compelling, focused thesis statement, consistent and compelling support of that thesis, an appropriate, effective arrangement of that support, and a legitimate purpose—e.g., to educate, to enlighten, to persuade, and so on—is analytical. There’s no mystery here.

However, some essays, by design, appear to be analytical in intent, especially some of the essays written for WRIT 121. These essays warrant a closer look, which follows.

Types of Analytical Essay: Causal Analysis

On occasion, you might be assigned, or decide on your own, to write a “causal analysis,” an essay focused on exploring and explaining the underlying, and sometimes obvious, causes of a condition or situation. For example, if the purpose of your essay is to attempt to answer the question, “Why is Sarah Palin such a force in American politics?” you are writing a causal analysis, as your mission is simply to identify and discuss the reasons she has become such a force.

Of course, if you’re writing this essay, you might decide that to explain the reasons is not your sole purpose. You might decide, instead, that your essay will criticize our popular culture for allowing someone with such weak credentials to become so significant. Or you might decide that Palin has become such a player for some very good, powerfully American reasons—that is, that there is something very good, very positive behind her success. It’s just a matter of where your evidence and your analysis take you.
In either case—whether your purpose is merely to examine causes or, instead, to pose an argument about the causes, you are, by definition, writing analytically.

**Types of Analytical Essay: Rhetorical Analysis**

Another form of analysis in expository writing is the rhetorical analysis, an analysis of some form of communication—an essay, a speech, a website, an advertisement, a photograph, and so on. In this form of analysis, your purpose is to reveal something useful or enlightening based on your examination of the “text” you’re analyzing.

Let’s use Sarah Palin, again, to illustrate. You might write a detailed analysis of one of her speeches, or her website, or even of her use of “momma bear” imagery. Why might you choose to do this? Perhaps to uncover and explain the strategies she uses, and to evaluate them—to heighten others’ understanding of her work, to argue that the strategies she uses are or are not effective, and so on.

Actually, as a student in a composition course, you are challenged to practice rhetorical analysis perhaps more than you know, whether you ever write a formal rhetorical analysis or not. If you’re assigned to read and assess an essay in your textbook, for example, you are participating in a form of rhetorical analysis. Whenever you write an essay of your own, you are participating in a form of rhetorical analysis as well—since the writing itself requires you to apply and evaluate the rhetorical choices you make as you write.

**Summary**

Other forms used in essay writing—process analysis, comparative analysis, classification, for example—can also be considered analytical, as each requires you to break a topic into smaller parts for the purpose of examination, explanation, and/or argument. It’s really just a matter of choice—what you choose to do with your topic, why you choose to do it, the impact you want your writing and your thinking have on those who read it. If you’re clear about these things and careful in the planning and drafting of your essay, and if you push your thinking beyond its normal limits, this thing we call “analysis” will take care of itself.

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