

HOW TO WRITE AN ANALYTICAL ESSAY

What is an analytical essay?

An analytical essay is a form of prose writing that examines a particular object and/or subject, such as a literary text, visual medium, institutional structures, or social groups, in order to provide an explanation for, and understanding of, the logics of production and/or operation that underpin the object and/or subject being examined.

Writing an Analytical Essay - Sample:

For demonstrative purposes, we will see how an analytical essay can be written for Andrea Gibson's (2013) poem, "Etiquette Leash"¹ by mapping it out onto the classic five-paragraph essay structure. However, before we come to the essay, we need to develop a thesis statement.

Writing a thesis statement:

Keep in mind when writing a thesis statement that you are making a particular claim. This is to say that you are taking up a stance that you will justify throughout your essay. As such, the thesis statement is setting up the stage to answer the "so what?" question. The "so what?" question, means that after reading the thesis statement, the reader should have a clear idea of what your paper is about, and how it can matter to them. Hence, the thesis statement must not be the central idea or a one-line summary of the text under scrutiny. Nor should the thesis statement be overly generalized or unclear about what is at stake in your essay. Consider the following examples:

Example 1:

In the poem, "Etiquette Leash" the title itself suggests to us that the poem is going to be about how societal norms (etiquettes) are actually a means of controlling certain people (by putting them on a leash) as if they were rabid animals.

In the above example, we see that the writer has merely stated the central idea of the poem. Writing the central idea does not constitute a thesis statement for an analytical paper. Furthermore, phrases such as, "suggests to us that the poem is going to be about", should be avoided when writing a thesis statement as a thesis statement should be concise. Moreover, using words such as "suggests" implies that the writer is not confident about the argument being made. Be direct.

¹ You can listen to Gibson's recitation of their poem here: <https://bit.ly/1OSb8VI>

Example 2:

Andrea Gibson's poem, "Etiquette Leash", unequivocally argues for the need for self-reflexivity.

At first glance, this seems to be a good thesis statement. The argument (that Gibson's poem is arguing for the need of self-reflexivity) is stated directly and immediately. However, upon closer examination, notice how this statement is about what the poem argues and not what *you* will argue about the poem in your paper. Remember, your thesis statement should tell us what *your* argument is concerning the text under study. As the statement is currently written, it could qualify as the central idea of the poem, which does not qualify as a thesis statement.

Admittedly, your argument can be that the poem argues for self-reflexivity, however we need to know your justification for how the poem is arguing for self-reflexivity. That is, why do you think that the poem argues this? What are you going to investigate in your paper? What evidence can you provide for this?

Example 3:

This essay argues that "Etiquette Leash" (2013) articulates an ethics of responding to pain by contrasting various iconic instances and forms of protest with festive and commonplace events. This articulation is predicated on our being able to recognize our complicity in the generation of pain as both productive and destructive.

This qualifies as a thesis statement for an analytical essay because we are breaking down certain elements in the poem (the compare and contrast of various iconic instances and forms of protest with festive and commonplace events) to evaluate the larger point of the poem, which is to articulate the ethics of pain. Also, notice how the thesis statement can be broken into two clauses: a main clause and a qualifying clause. While uncommon, it is okay to break a thesis statement into two parts for purposes of clarity because a thesis statement must be, above all, short and clear.

Furthermore, recognize that we have provided an argument that can be contested, rather than a summary or a central idea. Thus, our essay will go on to a) discuss how using compare and contrast as a rhetorical device helps Gibson's argument, b) explicate what an ethics of pain is, and c) be self-reflexive about, and accountable to, the cause of others' pain.

Tip:

When writing and revising a thesis statement, keep the following points in mind:

1. What are the key terms in my thesis statement? Have I used any? If not, why?
2. What are the words and/or phrases that I can omit from my thesis statement?
3. A thesis statement is usually one sentence. But in certain cases, it can be two sentences as demonstrated above.
4. All the keywords used in the thesis statement need to be defined later. For example, “pain” would be the keyword in the above example that needs to be defined.
5. Situate the primary text you are looking at in its historical context. This does not necessarily have to be done in the thesis statement itself.

Pro Tip:

- ❖ If you want to evaluate how pithy your thesis statement is, then see if it is Tweetable. If it is not within 280 characters, then consider revising it. Though, of course, not all thesis statements need to be within the character limit of 280. But, you would be surprised to learn what can be done with just 280 characters. As for the quality of the argument being made, share your thesis statement with “#AcademicTwitter”, and see what kind of response you get.

Writing the Introduction:

Always write your introduction after you have finished writing your essay. This is not to say that you do not write an introduction at all when starting out, you do. However, you will benefit from heavily revising your introduction because your introduction should be appropriate to your body paragraph. Since you do not yet know what exactly you will be writing in your body paragraphs, you will not be able to write an effective introduction. This is predicated on the idea of multiple drafts and revisions.

Also note that your introduction should not begin with overly generalized and oft-repeated phrases such as, “In contemporary times humanity has ...” or “Through the ages past we have seen the rise ...”, because this way, your writing will lack specificity. By using such phrases, you are taking up unnecessary space in your introduction as these phrases do not communicate much, if anything, to the reader. Consider the phrase, “Through the ages past we have seen the rise and fall of humankind”; how does this help us make our argument? Even if we are writing an historic paper that traces the formation and disintegration of various empires, how does this help us make our argument? Recall that a thesis statement makes an argument — it does not state figures and facts. Though, to make an argument based on figures and facts is a separate activity altogether. As such, directly state your thesis statement in the introduction and provide a succinct overview of your paper and its relevance.

Providing Evidence in the Body Section:

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, in a classic five paragraph model essay you will have three paragraphs for the body (though this varies depending on your assignment), where each paragraph provides evidence in support of your thesis statement. It is crucial that each separate point that you make in your body paragraph links to your thesis statement.

Pro Tip:

- ❖ During the initial drafting stage of your writing, you could temporarily write the thesis statement on top of each page so that you have a constant reminder of your end goal.

For example, based on the thesis statement below, we can mention a few potential points for the body paragraph.

This essay argues that “Etiquette Leash” (2013) articulates an ethics of responding to pain through contrasting various iconic instances and forms of protest with festive and commonplace events. This articulation is predicated on our being able to recognize our complicity in the generation of pain as both productive and destructive.

Note: Please ensure that you have read the poem before proceeding. Otherwise, the following points, which are bits of evidence taken from the poem, will seem vague and disconnected.

1. Andrea Gibson’s poem resonates with Michel Foucault’s (1979) ideas in “For an Ethics of Discomfort”, where the task is to differentiate between discomfort for improvement (of ourselves) and discomfort for materialistic profit. In particular, Gibson’s verses, “Hallelujah to making everyone / uncomfortable / To the terrible manners of truth”², is a powerful reminder of how an ethics of discomfort is not necessarily something to be eschewed.
2. Gibson’s seamless, and relentless, comparison and contrast of one imagery of protest/disruption, “... holding a ten foot / photograph of a baby elephant in chains”³, with images of festivity and joy, “when it’s probably some little kid’s / birthday”⁴, works to constantly remind us how an ethics of responding to pain can involve the willingness to be the cause of pain, but of a markedly different kind. The willingness to be the cause of pain, as a way of responding to pain, must be rooted in love and the will to change for the better. Consequently, we must come to recognize how we are complicit in sustaining and perpetuating the structures of violence because, as Gibson states, “millions of people die in wars in the Congo / fighting for the minerals that make

² Andrea Gibson, “Etiquette Leash”, *ohandreagibson*, para 4, 11-13 <<http://ohandreagibson.tumblr.com/post/64919374540/etiquette-leash-i-want-a-good-heart-i-want-it>> [23 March 2019]

³ Gibson, “Etiquette Leash”, para 4, 6-7

⁴ Gibson, “Etiquette Leash”, para 4, 8-9

our / cellphones”⁵. This recognition may also mean recognizing that, at times, there is nothing you can do besides being a witness to the pain and suffering of others. And sometimes not even that.

3. Protest and the persistence of hope, however, is key to Gibson’s poem. Much like Ada Limón’s ([1976]2017) poem “Instructions on Not Giving Up”, Gibson in talking of the various forms of protest provides us with counter narratives and the injunction that hope must persist. That is why, Gibson writes, “Might our grace riot the walls down ... [so that] our good hearts forever be too loud to / let the neighbors sleep”⁶.

While these three points have not been fully developed, notice how each of them still links back to the thesis statement. Both the first and second point address our concern with self-reflexivity regarding our positionality within systems of oppression, and what it might mean to develop an ethics of responding to pain. While the first point takes a more theoretical bend by using Foucault to provide a greater depth and a sense of ‘authority’ to the argument within academia, the second point concerns itself more with the text itself in order to thoroughly substantiate one’s claims. The third point then addresses the poem as a whole and circles back to developing an ethics of responding to pain by elaborating on how hoping and insisting on hope is one way of doing so.

Writing a Conclusion:

When writing a conclusion, it is best to stick to the two golden rules:

1. Synthesize your research and then link it to the broader significance of your study.
2. Your conclusion should indicate future research avenues that can be explored. That is, what is the broader significance of your essay?

You should refrain from making a new argument because your entire paper is centered around providing evidence (as this is an analytical paper) for your central argument (thesis statement). That is why, to introduce another argument at the very end leaves the reader hanging. Therefore, it is best to reiterate the research that you have done and then link it to the broader significance of your study. What is important to note here is that you must not summarize your paper. Rather, provide a synthesis. One way to do this is to think, “If there is one thing that I want the reader to take away from this work, it is ...” and fill in the blank. Furthermore, a conclusion can also be a place for you to reflect on what you have written so far. For example, in writing a conclusion to my essay on Gibson’s poem, I could reflect on dangers of relativism associated with the ethics of responding to pain that Gibson espouses. In this manner, I shall be going back to my main argument (ethics of responding to pain) and also indicating an avenue of further research (the dangers of relativism).

⁵ Gibson, “Etiquette Leash”, para 5, 6-8

⁶ Gibson, “Etiquette Leash”, para 5, 31-36

Pro Tip:

- ❖ Do not end your conclusion with a quotation unless the quotation requires no explanation and serves to emphasize the point you have already made. Remember, when you quote, you need to explain the quote and the significance of it at that juncture in your essay.
- ❖ Reiterate the significance of your analysis along with your thesis statement in the conclusion.

A small point concerning stylistics:

Please consult the citation guide you are following (APA, Chicago, MLA, etc.) to ensure that the formatting of your document is correct. Usually, if the primary text is a novel, periodical, film, TV show, etc. then the title is italicized and written without any quotation marks. For titles of poems, short stories, Greek letters, etc. the title is not italicized and placed in double quotation marks (as done with “Etiquette Leash”).

Furthermore, if it is a work that was not originally written in the language in which you are writing your paper, which would be English in this case, you should also provide the original title of the work in the beginning of your paper. For example, Kimitake Hiraoka’s (1949) book will be written as such: Confessions of a Mask (仮面の告白).

Note also, that you while you can write the name of the author as is the naming convention in their home country, for example surname first and then their given name, it is not necessary to do so. Just ensure that you are consistent in how you write the author’s name.

Bibliography:

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