ANALYTICAL WRITING

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WHAT IS ANALYSIS?

The word *analyze* derives from a Greek term meaning "to unloose" or "to take apart." Today we use the word to mean something like, "to examine methodically." The reason for this evolution of the term is that when we examine something—when we try to better understand something complex—we break it down into its component parts. For example, we can all clearly see that birds can fly (most of them, anyway), but it is only when we look closely at the aerodynamics of the bird's shape and the unique composition of the bird's bones and feathers that we can really understand how birds achieve flight. In other words, we must methodically examine the component parts of the bird in order to accurately comprehend its capacity for flight.

This type of analysis has real-world consequences. After all, it was primarily through the close examination of the anatomy of flying animals that people first imagined and eventually invented flying machines. Prior to such examinations, the power of flight was generally attributed to supernatural forces, and mankind was necessarily content to remain grounded. The point here is that analysis helps us get beyond superstitions, ideologies, and false assumptions in order to develop better explanations, better solutions, better goals, and better practices. Individually and collectively, we enrich our lives through analytical processes.

For this reason, the most basic function of higher education is to instill within students the habits of analytical observation and thought; and the purpose of Freshman Composition as part of the core curriculum at PVAMU is to develop your ability to communicate clearly the fruits of such analysis through the written word. Regardless of the career path that you follow, such an ability will enhance your value and your opportunities within various work communities, social communities, political communities, etc.

To get a better sense of the crucial importance of analytical processes, let's consider the complex problems associated with illegal immigration.

Analysis, Problem-Solving, and the Issue of Illegal Immigration

Illegal immigration creates problems that must be addressed through national policy; but, unfortunately, US immigration policy is too often based on ideology and easy assumptions rather than sound analysis. Most people (including lawmakers) assume, for instance, that tighter border security decreases levels of illegal immigration. In 2002, however, the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) performed an in-depth analysis of the effects of tighter border security and produced findings that contradict this assumption. The PPIC report indicates that tighter border security does *not* significantly decrease levels of illegal immigration but *does* significantly increase the likelihood that undocumented immigrants will stay permanently in the US. Previous generations of undocumented immigrants were actually migrant workers who would cross back and forth over the US border following the patterns of seasonal labor. Now, with tighter border security, these migrant workers cross into the US and stay even when they have no work because they fear that they will not be able to get back into the US if they return to their native countries. This transformation of migrant workers into permanent residents has actually enhanced existing problems associated with illegal immigration and created new ones.

But if the PPIC report indicates that tighter border security is an inadequate response to illegal immigration, another report by the Texas State Office of the Comptroller (TSOC) indicates that we may not even have a clear understanding of how or why (or even whether) illegal immigration is a problem. As it turns out, false assumptions can even compromise our ability to accurately diagnose our problems. For example, one common assumption is that undocumented immigrants drain public funds because they receive services like education and healthcare without paying taxes. A study by the TSOC in 2006, however, revealed that undocumented immigrants actually generate a lot of tax revenue (mostly through payroll taxes and sales taxes) and receive far fewer benefits from public services than the average citizen. Additionally, the labor of undocumented workers contributes to massive profits in the private sector which are then taxed in various ways by federal, state, and local governments. Consequently, the TSOC study concluded that undocumented immigrants actually increase public revenue. Most people would be surprised to read the following synopsis of its findings:

> This is the first time any state has done a *comprehensive financial analysis* of the impact of undocumented immigrants on a state's budget and economy, looking at gross state product, revenues generated, taxes paid and the cost of state services.
>
> The absence of the estimated 1.4 million undocumented immigrants in Texas in fiscal 2005 would have been a loss to our gross state product of $17.7 billion. Undocumented immigrants produced $1.58 billion in state revenues, which exceeded the $1.16 billion in state services they received.

The TSOC report goes on to upset many common assumptions about undocumented workers. Like the PPIC report, then, it demonstrates that immigration issues are much more complex than "common wisdom" allows for, meaning that good public policies on immigration must be based on intense and unbiased analysis rather than easy assumptions. The same can be said about decision-making at all levels of human endeavor.

Analytical Writing: The Expository and Critical Modes

Analytical writing is the communication of the fruits of analysis through writing; its primary purpose is to inform. We might, therefore, understand analytical writing as distinct from literary writing (which attempts to induce various types of pleasure) and polemical writing (which attempts to persuade by any means available). That said, we must keep in mind that these categories (analytical, literary, and polemical) overlap considerably. On one hand, the best examples of literary and polemical writing are strengthened and enriched through analytical insight. On the other hand, analytical writing is always engaged in making arguments (persuading), and good analytical writing uses literary tools to enhance the pleasure we derive from achieving better understandings.

There are two different modes of analytical writing: **expository** and **critical**. The root word of expository is *expose*, meaning "to present to view" or "to exhibit openly." At the most basic level, then, expository writing is descriptive—it exposes to view the component parts of its subject matter. An entomologist (someone who studies bugs), for instance, might map out the anatomy of a newly discovered species of fly; a civil engineer might outline the process for building a certain type of drainage system; a historian might narrate the events leading up to the American Revolution; or a literary scholar might summarize the plot of a

recently discovered novel manuscript. All of these would be descriptive endeavors. They would be examples of **expository analysis**.

Critical analysis differs from expository analysis in that it approaches its subject matter as contestable, or disputable, rather than self-evident. For instance, the entomologist mentioned above regards it as self-evident that the fly he is describing actually represents a distinct species rather than just a variation of an already known species. But if he suspects that other entomologists might disagree, he would not just *describe* the anatomy of the fly but also *argue* that its anatomy is unique enough to warrant categorizing it as a new species. Likewise, the civil engineer might need to argue that her process for building the drainage system is superior to other processes, or the historian might need to argue that his narrative of the causes of the Revolution is more accurate than other narratives. In short, a critical analysis does not just give information but also makes an argument for a particular way of understanding that information.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS: EVALUATION AND INTERPRETATION

The two main functions of critical analysis are to **interpret** and **evaluate** complex material. Interpretive and evaluative arguments often overlap quite a bit, but it is helpful to recognize how they differ in their goals and in what they require of us as writers.

Interpretive Arguments

When we interpret material, we make arguments about its meaning or significance. In arguing that a newly discovered group of flies is a distinct species, for instance, our entomologist is interpreting anatomical data; he is making an argument about the significance of various anatomical differences between the new flies and other known flies. He is, in other words, telling us how those differences should affect our understanding of these and other flies. Similarly, when a literary scholar analyzes a novel or poem, he generally avoids making evaluative claims about the literature (like you might see in a book review) and instead focuses on illuminating the meaning or significance of the literature. The historian mentioned above might discuss events leading up to the American Revolution in order to change our understanding of the motivations of the revolutionaries, or he might discuss post-Revolution events in order to change our understanding of the significance of the Revolution in relation to world events. Either way, he would be making an argument that interprets the Revolution.

Notice that these examples have a lot to do with causes and effects. When we argue about meaning, we are often arguing about causes; and when we argue about significance, we are often arguing about effects. For instance, the historian who interprets the American Revolution is either explaining why it was fought (its meaning) or what it accomplished (its significance). In the one case, he may demonstrate that the revolt had more to do with financial interests than with lofty philosophical ideas about freedom and justice. In the other case, he might point out that one result of the Revolution was that slavery existed in the United States long after it was abolished throughout the British empire. In either case, the historian would be attempting to change our understanding of the Revolution by offering an unfamiliar interpretation of it.

Similarly, when a literary scholar interprets a piece of literature, he seeks to explain either why it was written as it was (its causes) or how it has influenced its readers, including other writers (its effects). For instance, a scholar writing about *My Bondage and My Freedom*, an autobiography that Frederick Douglass wrote in 1855, might seek to explain the political factors that caused him to thoroughly revise the account of slavery that he had given in his famous slave narrative ten years earlier. On the other hand, the scholar might seek to explain how Douglass's 1855 autobiography helped to shape the tradition of black autobiography as a means of opposing American racism. In the first instance, the scholar would be analyzing the text's meaning; in the second instance, he would be analyzing its significance. In both cases, he would be offering an interpretation of the text.

Read an Interpretive Argument

For an example of an interpretive argument, read Margaret Mead's essay, "War: An Invention—Not a Biological Necessity." Many people regard warfare as natural behavior, something that we know and do because of our very nature as human beings; but Mead reinterprets war as an invention, a tool that some human societies have manufactured and passed on to future generations by way of education and training. To support this interpretation, Mead, a world-renowned anthropologist, cites several examples of societies that have no concept of warfare.

Evaluative Arguments

When we evaluate material, we make an argument about its value. Let's think back to our civil engineer. Perhaps she is describing the process of building a particular type of drainage system because she wants to make sure that all the engineers in her firm are doing it the same way. But what if her coworkers do not all agree that hers is the best method for building the drainage system? In this case, she would need to put together a proposal that not only describes the method but also argues that it is superior because it is safe, quick, reliable, and/or cost-effective. These are value categories. In general, we assign greater value to procedures that are safer, quicker, more reliable, or more cost-effective than the alternatives. In composing her proposal, then, our civil engineer would be writing a critical analysis geared toward evaluating a particular process.

In order to make evaluative arguments in an analytical fashion, we must establish (through sound reasoning on relevant evidence) our criteria for judgment and demonstrate (again through sound reasoning on relevant evidence) that the object of our judgment meets or fails to meet those criteria. Imagine, for instance, if we were to argue that a particular workplace environment is not sufficiently democratic. We would first have to define "democratic" as it relates to workplace environments. In other words, we would need to set forth the criteria that a workplace would have to meet in order to be called democratic; and we would need to defend those criteria, probably with evidence that democratic workplaces accomplish the basic goals of business while also providing a more fair, fulfilling, or enriching experience for everyone involved. Finally, we would need to present evidence suggesting that the particular workplace in question does not meet our criteria for democratic workplace environments.

Read an Evaluative Argument

For an example of an evaluative argument, read Gerard Jones's "Violent Media is Good for Kids." Many people assume that violent stories act as a negative influence on kids, but Jones argues that, more often, they provide kids with positive psychological tools for coping with the problems that they face as they grow. As evidence for this positive evaluation of violent media, Jones cites several examples of children using violent fantasies as a way to develop positive self-esteem.

OPINION VS. POSITION

Thinking back to our drainage system example, the civil engineer, in order to convince the rest of her firm that her process for constructing a drainage systems is superior, would need to present *relevant evidence* and demonstrate *sound reasoning* in drawing conclusions from that evidence. Through this evidence and sound reasoning, the engineer would demonstrate that her **position** on constructing drainage systems rests on a firmer ground than mere **opinion**. An opinion is an interpretation or evaluation of some subject matter that one holds without having engaged in any systematic analysis of that subject matter. A position, by contrast, is an interpretation or evaluation that one has arrived at through the process of systematic analysis.

It is okay to have opinions, but it is not okay to hold those opinions sacred. We are all constantly forming opinions about the world that we experience; we cannot stop this process of opinion-formation, nor would we want to. Opinion-formation is a vital cognitive function; in order to navigate our complex daily lives, we need to be able to quickly formulate opinions based on our past and current experience. As demonstrated in the immigration example above, however, problems arise when we hold onto unexamined opinions in the face of contradicting evidence. Opinions help us in our daily lives, but they are inadequate grounds for higher-level decision-making. While we all have a right to hold opinions, then, we also have an obligation to subject those opinions to the processes of analysis that might complicate or discredit them.

When we write works of critical analysis, then, we should understand ourselves as contributing to a collective effort to question and examine our opinions. When we formulate positions based on relevant evidence and sound reasoning, we help ourselves and others move beyond opinion.

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