

WRITING WORKSHOP STUDENT GUIDE SERIES

How to think about writing an analytical essay in any discipline

The Basics

Writing in a new discipline is not as difficult as it seems, as long as you have the right formula. For most disciplines you will: 1) Establish your purpose and the questions you will ask; 2) Locate your material; 3) Analyze the material; 4) Synthesize your analyses; and 5) Define an argument from this synthesis. Your writing should make this process apparent.

1 Establish your purpose and the questions you will ask

What is the purpose of writing this essay? You should always first look to the assignment to see if the purpose is already defined for you or if you have to locate a narrower focus within the assignment. Is this a reading response paper? A literature review? A research paper?

What is/are my primary question(s)? For research papers and literature reviews, you will identify a “research question” that will help you identify the types of resources or data you need (see point #2). You can also check out our document [Questions to Ask Yourself While Writing a Research Paper](#) on the student resource page of the Shapiro Center website. Reading response papers usually require you to identify a question in relation to assigned readings. In this case, you know what your “data” is and you can proceed to #3.

2 Locate Your “Data” or “Evidence”

Data, evidences, or materials should become the driving forces behind your essay. Many student writers enter college thinking they need to come up with a strong argument first and then find sources to back their argument up. However, this process is called “cherry picking” and it is bad scientific practice. Cherry picking evidence also bypasses the critical thinking that goes into forming an argument.

So, instead, begin by identifying the type of “material” you are working with. In other words, the “data.” Here are some examples of “data” that we work with in different disciplines. Just remember that this is not a complete list and that many fields move between several categories:



	Literature and the Arts	Archival or Documentary Fields (e.g. history, law, politics, archaeology)	Qualitative Data Fields (e.g. social anthropology)	Qualitative and Quantitative Hybrid Fields (e.g. psychology, sociology, economics)	Hard Sciences and Other Quantitative Fields
Primary Sources	Novels, poems, and essays; music; artworks; performance	Archives; historical documents; legal documents	Fieldwork; participant observation; interviews	Qualitative and quantitative studies, including experimental studies and field studies	Lab and other experiments; field studies; case studies
Secondary Sources	Theoretical texts: books and journal articles	Theoretical texts or published studies: books and journal articles	Published studies: books and journal articles; ethnographies	Published studies: books and journal articles	Published studies: case studies, meta-analyses, consensus papers; conference proceedings
Original Research (conducted by student)	Archival research; creative processes	Archival research; document review; interviews; fieldwork; replication	Fieldwork; interviews; observation	Experimental study; interviews; fieldwork; observation	Lab or other experiments; fieldwork

3 Analyze the Material

Next, begin your thinking process by **analyzing the materials**. Ask yourself these key questions:

- What is the core argument that the authors are making and what do they conclude? Depending on the discipline, this may include considering the hypothesis, methodology, results, theoretical framework, or the authors' purpose.
- What kind of data back up the conclusion(s)? (Refer to the chart above.)
- What theoretical concepts are incorporated into the material?
- Are there any gaps or faults in the argument, methodology, or findings?
- What questions does the material bring up for you?

4 Synthesize your Analyses

After analyzing each of the materials you are working with, you can begin to **synthesize the materials as a whole**. See if you can see any common themes that emerge within the materials.

- Are the authors reaching similar conclusions?
- Where do the authors disagree?
- Are there any major gaps between the readings that require more research?
- Can you reach any conclusions about the topic at hand based on your analysis of these works?
- What further theoretical frameworks might you want to bring into the conversation?
- Try making a [concept map](#) to help you.



5 Define your Argument and Begin Writing!

This synthesize process should help you come up with your own argument. Arguments are not always unique or super-original; in fact, you should never stretch the available “data” in an attempt to make an impressive argument. Rather, an impressive argument stems from a good synthesis of the material at hand.

- Remember to state your argument upfront in the first paragraph (a.k.a. the thesis statement), and consider how you can build the argument throughout the essay, so that by the conclusion the reader understands and believes your argument (this is where outlines or concept maps can be helpful).
- Form your body paragraphs from your synthesis of the material, including creating topic sentences that relate specifically to themes that emerged from the materials. Use specific examples from the materials to illustrate these core themes. Assume your reader has not read the materials: remember to be clear and articulate so that the reader can follow your logic.
- By the time you reach your conclusion, you may be ready to re-write your introduction. Writing is a process, and it can take time to hone your argument. See our documents on writing effective [introductions and conclusions](#).

A Few Other Ways to Think About Writing Analytical Essays Across the Disciplines

“Don’t Put the Cart Before the Horse” (the horse has to pull the cart!)

This is a reminder phrase to remember that the argument should be formed from the “evidence” or “data.” Think of the horse as your evidence: this evidence pulls and carries your analysis and the overall argument you are going to make (the cart). You can’t come up with an argument out of thin air and then find materials to back it up just like you can’t expect the cart to pull the horse.

Abstract vs. concrete, or “Show Don’t Tell”

“Show don’t tell” is a common refrain used in creative writing to remind the writer of the reader experience. “Show” means to use action, description, senses, and emotion, rather than “tell” through personal opinion or summary. This is true in analytical essays as well. Writers should “show” through example, data, linear logic, “concrete observation,” and other techniques rather than summarize their personal theories or opinions, which can quickly become too “abstract.”

Your genius emerges from your good analytical thinking, not from your opinion

It is a common misconception that a strong essay has a strong opinion. While this may be true for op-eds, most college papers should show your skills at finding a good argument that synthesizes the material and perhaps presents something new that may be missing from that material.

