

Writing Analytically



FIFTH EDITION

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Reading Analytically

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT ANALYZING TWO KINDS OF SUBJECTS, one of which we might call the world (anything and everything you want to better understand), and the other we could call the world of reading—other people’s ideas as these are developed in writing. This unit, Writing the Researched Paper, focuses specifically on writing about reading, using print sources to contextualize, ground, and stimulate your thinking.

One of the biggest differences between high school and college reading practices is that college students are expected to understand fairly sophisticated theoretical frameworks and apply these to other materials. The goal is to learn how to do things with readings rather than just passively registering the information contained in them.

Because analysis relies so heavily on reading, we address ways of negotiating what you read, directly or implicitly, throughout this book. In this chapter, though, we are focusing exclusively on how you can see more in what you read and do more with it. This chapter’s strategies include:

- Becoming conversant instead of reading for the gist.
- Reading for the pitch, the complaint, and the moment.
- Uncovering the assumptions in a reading—where the piece is coming from.
- Reading with and against the grain.
- Using a reading as a model for writing.
- Applying a reading as a lens for examining something else.

The idea of using a reading as a lens takes us to the next chapter of this unit—Using Sources Analytically—where you will find a set of strategies that comprise what we call the *conversation model*, the goal of which is to put your sources into conversation with one another and to open ways for you, the writer, to enter the conversation.

The greatest enemies of reading analytically are reading for the gist and the transparent theory of language. Reading for the gist causes readers to leap to global (and usually unsubstantiated) impressions. Like the Fortune Cookie School of Analysis (see Chapter 4) wherein readers extract a single message and throw away the rest, reading for the gist inclines readers to attend only superficially to what they are reading. The transparent theory of language, which we discuss in Chapter 3, has a similar effect. It causes readers to treat words as clear windows rather than as the

lenses they are. Failure to arrest attention on the words themselves (the window that focuses and frames what we see) causes readers to miss all but the vaguest impression of the ideas that the words embody.

HOW TO READ: WORDS MATTER

In a sense, the world is a text. As any child psychology textbook will tell you, as we acquire language, we acquire knowledge of the world. We can ask for things, say what's on our minds. This is not to say that everything is words, that words are the only reality. But to an enormous extent, we understand the world and our relation to it by working through language. Words matter: they are how we process the world.

As you have probably noticed, this book uses the word *reading* to mean *interpreting*. This usage goes back to the idea of the world as a text. This is not a new idea. The Puritans envisioned the world as a text in which God read their lives, and so, predictably, they started reading their lives too, reflecting on events that befell them, querying whether these were signs of salvation or damnation. (The stakes for being a good reader couldn't have been higher!) In short, reading for the Puritans meant gathering evidence and analyzing it to arrive at conclusions.

This more generalized notion of reading as interpretation remains with us today. For most of us a significant amount of that interpretation actually consists of the more literal act of reading—that is, moving our eyes along a line of printed words and processing what the words signify (reading comprehension, as the standardized tests call it). And so reading suggests two related activities: (1) reading in the literal sense of tackling words on the page, and (2) reading in the sense of gathering data that can be analyzed as primary evidence to produce ideas.

Considering how central both kinds of reading are in our lives, it's amazing how little we think about words themselves. We use words all the time, but often unthinkingly. We don't plan out our sentences before we utter them, for example, and the same goes for many of the ones that we write. Most of us live, however, as if there were a consensus about what words mean. We tend to assume that things mean simply or singly. Often—much more than you suspect—there isn't a consensus.

In previous chapters we put forth the notion that things have multiple meanings—that there are almost always multiple plausible interpretations. Similarly, all words have multiple meanings, and words mean differently depending on context. Consider the following examples of memorably silly headlines posted on the Internet: “Teacher Strikes Idle Kids,” “Panda Mating Fails: Veterinarian Takes Over,” “New Vaccines May Contain Rabies,” “Local High School Drop-outs Cut in Half,” and “Include Your Children When Baking Cookies” (or if you prefer, “Kids Make Nutritious Snacks”). Another posting included sentences such as “The bandage was wound around the wound” and “After a number of injections my jaw got number.” English is often a nutty language, and we need to remember this fact whenever we start getting too complacent about the meanings of words being stable and obvious.

BECOMING CONVERSANT INSTEAD OF READING FOR THE GIST

Many readers operate under the mistaken impression that they are to read for the gist—for the main point, to be gleaned through a glancing speed-reading. Instead, the vast majority of writing tasks that you encounter in school and in the workplace require your *conversancy* with material that you have read. To become conversant means that:

1. After a significant amount of work with the material, you should be able to talk about it conversationally with other people, and answer questions about it without having to look everything up.
2. You should be able to converse with the material—to be in some kind of dialogue with it, to see the questions the material asks, and to pose your own questions about it.

Few people are able to really understand things they read or see without making the language of that material in some way their own—a goal most easily achieved by working closely with the language itself. We become conversant, in other words, by finding ways to actively engage material rather than moving passively through it.

Why bother to master information in this way when you can just Google it on your iPhone? It's all about what is actually in your head to think with and not just what's at your fingertips. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato speculated that the written word would damage civilization as he knew it. Writing, he argued, would eliminate people's need to remember things, and thus their capacity for assimilating information would decline. By analogy, the ready access we enjoy to information on the Internet has arguably further reduced our motivation to make the necessary effort to retain things in memory.

Why is this a problem? Why isn't it okay just to go look things up whenever you need them because information is now so easy to access? An insufficiently furnished mind—one crowded with whatever the loudest and most insistent voices in the culture are saying—doesn't allow for the same quality of thinking that a better furnished one would. Neuroscience is now telling us that what we put in our brains affects the way they work. The things we do and think actually change our brains, so it matters what we put in there.

And as learning theorists tell us, you can't learn passively; it requires an act of will and a set of activities that stir you into acquisition and assimilation mode. This is why skills such as note taking, paraphrasing, and outlining—all forms of summary—are not just empty mechanical tasks. They are the mind's means of acquiring material to think with.

THREE TOOLS TO IMPROVE YOUR READING: A REVIEW

The following three strategies combined can become the basis of your preparation for class discussion as well as writing about reading. The first move is to choose the single passage in the reading (and this can be as little as a sentence) to write about.

Paraphrase the key terms repeatedly. And then write a paragraph on what this process caused you to better understand. It's this last act of reflection that launches you into laying out the implications of the reading, allowing you to think with and about the material rather than just registering it passively.

- *Freewriting and passage-based focused freewriting*: Ask yourself: What is the single sentence that I think it is most important for us to discuss and why? The underlying assumption here is that readers gain a better appreciation of how the whole works when they've come to better understand a piece of it. A freewrite should target key phrases and paraphrase them, ask So what? about the details, and address how the passage is representative of broader issues in the reading.
- *Paraphrase × 3*: Paraphrasing inevitably discloses that what is being paraphrased is more complicated than it first appeared. Paraphrase is not summary; it's a mode of inquiry and the first step toward interpretation. (See Chapter 3.)
- *Ranking versus coverage*: Another means of combating passive registering of information is the strategy we call ranking. Once a reader has to decide which pieces of evidence are most interesting or most revealing or most significant, etc., he or she is propelled into thinking analytically rather than just recording information. This principle (ranking vs. neutral coverage) holds true for all of the standard modes of exposition, such as comparison/contrast, summary, and definition.

THE PITCH, THE COMPLAINT, AND THE MOMENT

In reading analytically, a useful premise to start from is that information is almost never neutral. There is no such thing as “just information.” Every reading can be thought of in terms of the following three components:

- The *pitch*: what the piece wishes you to believe.
- The *complaint*: what the piece is reacting to or worried about.
- The *moment*: the historical and cultural context within which the piece is operating.

Here's a bit more on each.

The pitch: A reading is an argument, a presentation of information that makes a case of some sort, even if the argument is not explicitly stated. Look for language that reveals the position or positions the piece seems interested in having you adopt.

The complaint: A reading is a reaction to some situation, some set of circumstances, that the piece has set out to address, even though the writer may not come out and explicitly say so. An indispensable means of understanding someone else's writing is to figure out what seems to have caused the person to write the piece in the first place. Writers write, presumably, because they think something needs to be addressed. What? Look for language in the piece that reveals the writer's starting point. If you can find the position or situation he or she is worried about and possibly trying to

correct, you will find it much easier to locate the argument, the position the piece asks you to accept.

The moment: A reading is a response to the world conditioned by the writer's particular moment in time. In your attempt to figure out not only what a piece says but where it is coming from (the causes of its having been written in the first place and the positions it works to establish), history is significant. When was the piece written? Where? What else was going on at the time that might have shaped the writer's ideas and attitudes?

■ Try this 13.1: *Locating the Pitch and the Complaint*

Take a passage of something you are reading, and look for language that reveals the position or positions the piece seems interested in having you adopt. It is easier to find the pitch if you first look for language that reveals the position or situation the writer is trying to correct. Type out the sentences that most fully articulate the pitch and the complaint. Then paraphrase them to enrich your sense of where the writer is coming from and where the piece is trying to take you.

UNCOVERING THE ASSUMPTIONS IN A READING

Uncovering assumptions is a primary and powerful move in reading analytically. We devoted an extended analysis to it at the end of Chapter 5. Because this move—also known as reasoning back to premises—is such an important tool in a reader's arsenal, we briefly revisit the topic here.

An assumption is the basic ground of belief from which a position springs, its starting points or givens. All arguments or articulations of point of view have underlying assumptions. All readings are built on assumptions. Often, assumptions are not visible; they are implicit, which is why you need to stop and take the time to infer them.

Sometimes a text deliberately hides its premises—a pro-Nazi website, for example, that is ostensibly concerned with the increasing disorder of society. Sometimes a source just neglects to divulge its premises and perhaps may not know them. In any case, when you locate assumptions in a text, you understand the text better—where it's coming from, what else it believes that is more fundamental than what it is overtly declaring.

Chapter 5 offers a step-by-step procedure for uncovering assumptions. The essential move is to ask, *Given its overt claim, what must this reading also already believe?* To answer this question you need to make inferences from the primary claims to the ideas that underlie them. In effect, you are working backwards, reinventing the chain of thinking that led the writer to the position you are now analyzing.

■ Try this 13.2: *What Must the Writer Also Already Believe?*

Here's a prime example of a statement that conceals a wealth of assumptions. In the reference application sent to professors at our college for students who are seeking to enter a student-teaching program, the professor is asked to rank the student from one to four (unacceptable to acceptable) on the following criterion: *The student uses his/her sense of humor appropriately.*

What must the writers of the recommendation form also already believe? Compile a list of their assumptions. Here are two hints that can help you do this:

- Do Paraphrase \times 3 on the quotation (the explicit claim) to help you see the range of implicit ideas attached to it.
- Articulate what the claim is *not* saying because understanding that often brings into relief the underlying positions that it is “saying.”

Want more practice? Locate a statement from anything you are reading that you find interesting or challenging. Paraphrase it. Then uncover assumptions, asking what must the text also already believe, given that it believes this. List at least three assumptions.

READING WITH AND AGAINST THE GRAIN

It is useful to think of both written and visual works as independent entities, independent, that is, of their authors, produced by authors but not ultimately controlled by them. The poet Emily Dickinson expresses this idea in a poem about words and about an author sending his or her words into the world. Dickinson writes (in poem #1212): “A word is dead/When it is said,/Some say./I say it just/Begins to live/That day.”

If we allow ourselves to think in this way—that writing, once committed to the page and released into the world by its author, comes to have a life of its own—then we are at liberty to see what is going on in that life that may or may not have been part of the author’s original intention. If we take this writing-as-a-living-creature analogy a step further, we might reasonably grant that a piece of writing (say, a book), like a person, has an unconscious. In other words, we can ask not only what the book knows, what it seems fully aware of, but also what the book is saying that it seems not to know it is saying.

You might now be saying to yourself, “Doesn’t this strategy for thinking about writing take us back to the hidden meaning theory that you debunked in Chapter 4?” Well, not really. Surely you have had the experience of looking back on something you have written—something good, even if only a sentence or two—and wondering where it came from. You didn’t plan to say it that way ahead of time; it just “came out.” This suggests that writers and artists can never be fully in control of what they communicate, that words and images always, inescapably, communicate more than we intend. And so it does not follow that the writers and artists who have made such works have therefore deliberately hidden anything from us.

Instead, their work has revealed meanings that the writers and artists may not have intended to reveal and that they probably didn’t know that they were revealing. Any of us who has had what we thought to be a perfectly clear and well-intentioned letter misinterpreted (or so we thought) by its recipient can understand this idea. When we look at the letter again we usually see what it said that we hadn’t realized (at least not consciously) we were saying.

When we ask ourselves what a work (and, by implication, an author) might not be aware of communicating, we are doing what is called *reading against the grain*. When we ask ourselves what a work seems aware of, what its (and, by implication, its author’s) conscious intentions are, we are *reading with the grain*.

Most good reading starts by reading with the grain, with trying to determine what the work and its author intend. This doesn't mean, as we discussed in Chapter 4, that an author's stated intentions get the last word on what his or her work can be taken to mean. But if we appreciate what authors and artists have to offer us, and if we respect them and the creative process, then we owe it to them and to ourselves to try to determine what they wished to say to us. This is known as a *sympathetic reading*, and generally speaking, you should always start this way, by trying to understand the piece on its own terms.

Both reading with the grain and reading against the grain require us to attend to implication. Communication of all kinds takes place both directly and indirectly. Some of what we mean is explicitly asserted and some—the indirect—must be inferred by readers. So, for example, in the classic novel *Jane Eyre*, the narrator Jane repeatedly remarks on her own plain appearance, with the implication that physical beauty is transient and relatively insignificant. The text is in fact obsessed with her plainness; almost every new character entering the novel reflects at some point on Jane's unattractiveness. Not that they don't like Jane—on the contrary, they esteem her greatly even as they acknowledge her lack of physical charms. Are we then to conclude that Jane and the novel believe that physical appearance does not matter? Probably not. Reading against the grain, we'd see the novel's very obsession with plainness as a symptom of how worried it is about the subject, how much it actually believes (but won't admit) looks matter.

Is reading against the grain—looking for what a work is saying that it might not know it is saying, that it might not mean to say—a hostile and potentially destructive activity? Some authors certainly think so because it is part of writing to wish to communicate to others what you want to communicate and thus to discourage readers from thinking something else instead. Many authors, however, also freely admit that writing is a somewhat scary as well as exhilarating process over which they have only tenuous control. Inquiring into intention often makes such writers nervous. They tend to think that the fewer questions asked about their creative process the less likely it will be for them to become paralyzed through self-consciousness. Writers in this second camp are more likely to agree that there are things in their writing—probably things worth finding—that they were not aware of. They just might prefer not to know what these are!

We can end this necessarily rather philosophical discussion of reading with and against the grain by returning to Dickinson's observation that the meaning of words is not fixed when they are put on paper. Her saying that a word "just begins to live that day" is an author's generous acknowledgement that a writer's works belong not just to the writer but to his or her readers. We cannot make of them what we will (as we argued in opposing the Anything Goes School of Interpretation in Chapter 4), but it is part of reading well to uncover ideas and assumptions that are not clearly and obviously evident as part of a writer's stated aims.

■ **Try this 13.3:** *Appears to Be about X but Is Really about Y*

For obvious reasons, this strategy, introduced earlier, deserves another try here in the context of reading with and against the grain. Take a passage in anything you are reading and apply this formula to unearth attitudes and ideas in the reading that weren't

immediately evident to you and that may not have been evident to the writer either. What, in other words, are some of the passage's implications that go somewhat against the grain of its apparent intention?

USING A READING AS A MODEL

Most of the critical activities that people do with readings involve assimilating and thinking about the information that is being conveyed to them. But to use a reading as a model is to focus instead on presentation. This represents a change in orientation for most readers, and it takes a little practice to learn how to do it. A useful guideline to remember is *look beyond content* (or subject matter). To focus on presentation is to focus on what a piece of writing *does* rather than just on what it says.

There are two primary reasons for using a reading as a model:

1. Most obviously, it can provide a way of approaching and organizing material that you might imitate.
2. Additionally, it can lead you to see features of a reading that you might otherwise overlook. We are, for the most part, seduced by the content of what we read, and so we do not see how the piece is behaving—how it sets us up, how it repeats certain phrases, how it is patterned. This is the analytical function of focusing on presentation rather than just on content.

If, for example, you were to do an analysis of programs designed to help smokers quit by using an analysis of programs designed to help drinkers quit, the latter might be used as a model for the former. And if the drinking cessation piece began with a long anecdote to phrase some central problem in program design, and you then began your piece with an analogous problem serving the same aim for your piece, that would represent still a closer use of a reading as a model.

To use a reading as a model, detach your attention from the pure information-assimilation mode to observe *how* the reading says *what* it says. Where does it make claims? What kind of evidence does it provide? Does the writer overtly reveal his or her premises? (See the section on uncovering assumptions earlier in this chapter.) How and when does he or she use metaphors or analogies?

And what about the overall organization of the piece you are reading? Not all reading proceeds in a straight narrative line from A to B to C. Some pieces are organized like quilts, a series of patches or vignettes operating as variations on a theme. Others favor a radial organization—locating some central issue or example in the center, and then spiraling out to connect it to other matters, then returning to it again and spiraling out again. A 10-on-1 analysis often takes this form, with the writer returning to the 1 for more details to explore.

Inexperienced writers sometimes resist using readings as models because they fear that imitation will suppress their ability to think for themselves. In practice this fear usually proves unfounded. Learning to see how other writers organize their thinking expands rather than closes down your range as both a reader and a writer.

APPLYING A READING AS A LENS

This final section of the chapter shows how to apply a reading to other material you are studying. Using a reading as a lens means literally looking at things as the reading does, trying to think in its terms.

When you put on a pair of glasses and look at something you know, you see it differently. In Chapter 2, we refer to this phenomenon as defamiliarizing. Defamiliarization is one function of using a reading as a lens. It allows us to see things anew.

Of course, the match between lens and new material is never perfect. Thus, you need to remember that whenever you apply the lens (A) to a new subject (B), you are taking A from its original context and using its ideas in different circumstances for different purposes.

As with using a reading as a model, when you use a reading as a lens you first need to separate its analytical method from the particular argument to which it leads. Not that the argument should be ignored, but your emphasis rests on *extracting the methodology* to apply it to your own analytical ends. For example, you can learn a lot about looking at spaces as described in an urban studies article on the relocation of the homeless in Los Angeles without necessarily focusing on either L.A. or the homeless. Most college campuses, for example, offer significant opportunities to observe the manipulation of public space either to encourage or deter use by certain populations.

The movement between lens and subject bears similarities with using a thesis to focus evidence. In Chapter 9, *Making a Thesis Evolve*, we explain that the relationship between thesis and evidence is reciprocal. The thesis causes you to see your evidence in a particular way, and your evidence in turn causes you to re-see parts of your thesis.

Your first goal when working with a reading as a lens, though, is to fully explore its usefulness for explaining features of your subject. We are not saying that you need to adopt a position of unquestioning reverence for all of the readings you'll be introduced to in college courses. But neither are we saying that your goal is to critique and dismiss other people's thinking solely on the grounds that it doesn't fit tidily with some subject you are considering. In the long run, the advance of knowledge is a product of patiently applying "old" ideas to new materials and of using the new materials to revise "old" ideas. In any event, what you typically do in college writing is not discover what's wrong with your lens, but discover which features in your evidence your lens doesn't seem to account for.

There are circumstances, however, in which evidence left fuzzy or unaccounted for by your reading-as-lens might appropriately be used to refocus the lens. Let's say, for example, that you have read a smart review essay on the representation of Black/White race relations in contemporary films in the 1970s, and you decide to use the review as a lens for exploring the spate of Black/White buddy films that emerged in the 1990s.

"Yes, but . . ." you find yourself responding: there are places where the films appear to fit within the pattern that the article claims, but there are also exceptions to the pattern. What do you do? What *not* to do is either choose different films that "fit better" or decide that the article is wrong-headed. Instead, start with the "yes"—talk about how the film accords with the general pattern. Then focus on the "but"—the

claims in the reading (the lens) that seem not to fit, or material in your subject not adequately accounted for by the lens.

Because cultural climates and trends are constantly shifting and reconfiguring themselves, particularly in popular culture, you will learn from examining the films how the original review might be usefully extended to account for phenomena that were not present when it was originally written. This move is a subject in our Chapter 14, *Using Sources Analytically*.

ASSIGNMENTS: Writing Analytically about Reading

1. Write a summary of a piece of writing using the following methods:
 - a. Paraphrase \times 3
 - b. Ranking and reducing scope
 - c. Attending to the pitch, the complaint, and the moment
2. Take a paragraph from an analytical essay you are reading in one of your courses or from a feature article from a newspaper or website such as Slate or *aldaily.com*—and do the following:
 - First, uncover assumptions by reasoning back to premises. Ask yourself, If the piece believes this, what must it also already believe? Answer that question and be sure to share your reasoning (why you think so).
 - Try reading against the grain. What, if anything, is the piece saying that it might not know it is saying?
3. Use a reading as a lens for examining a subject. For example, look at a piece of music or a film through the lens of a review that does not discuss the particular piece or film you are writing about. Or you might read about a particular theory of humor and use that as a lens for examining a comic play, film, story, television show, or stand-up routine.
4. Use a quotation as a lens: apply the following generalization about talk shows to a talk show of your choice: “These shows obviously offer a distorted vision of America, thrive on feeling rather than thought, and worship the sound-byte rather than the art of conversation.” Alternatively, take any general claim you find in your reading and apply it to some other text or subject.