

Writing Analytically



FIFTH EDITION

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Analysis: What It Is and What It Does

FIRST PRINCIPLES

Writing takes place now in more forms than ever before. Words flash by on our computer and cell phone screens and speak to us from iPods. PowerPoint bulleted lists are replacing the classroom blackboard, and downloadable entries from Wikipedia and Google offer instant reading on almost any subject. Despite the often-heard claim that we now inhabit a visual age—that the age of print is passing—we are, in fact, surrounded by a virtual sea of electronically accessible print. What does all this mean for writers and writing?

If what is meant by writing is the form in which written text appears on page or screen, then presumably the study of writing would focus on the new forms of organization that characterize writing on the web. But what if we define writing as the act of *recording our thoughts in search of understanding*? In that case, the writing practices and mental habits that help us to think more clearly would be, as they have long been, at the center of what it means to learn to write.

This book is primarily about ways of using writing to discover and develop ideas. Its governing premise is that learning to write well means learning to use writing to think well. This does not mean that the book ignores such matters as sentence style, paragraphing, and organization, but that it treats these matters in the context of writing as a way of generating and shaping thinking.

Although it is true that authors of web pages and PowerPoint demonstrations display their finished products in forms unlike the traditional essay, people rarely arrive at their ideas in the form of PowerPoint lists and hypertext. Whatever form the thinking will finally take, first comes the stage of writing to understand—writing as a sustained act of reflection. Implicit throughout this book is an argument for the value of reflection in an age that seems increasingly to confuse sustained acts of thinking with information downloading and formatting.

ANALYSIS DEFINED

We have seized upon analysis as the book's focus because it is the skill most commonly called for in college courses and beyond. The faculty with whom we work encourage analytical writing because it offers alternatives both to oversimplified thinking of

the like/dislike, agree/disagree variety and to the cut-and-paste compilation of sheer information. It is the kind of writing that helps people not only to retain and assimilate information, but to use information in the service of their own thinking about the world.

More than just a set of skills, analysis is a frame of mind, an attitude toward experience. It is a form of detective work that typically pursues something puzzling, something you are seeking to understand rather than something you are already sure you have the answers to. Analysis finds questions where there seemed not to be any, and it makes connections that might not have been evident at first.

Analyzing, however, is often the subject of attack. It is sometimes thought of as destructive—breaking things down into their component parts, or, to paraphrase a famous poet, murdering to dissect. Other detractors attack it as the rarefied province of intellectuals and scholars, beyond the reach of normal people. In fact, we all analyze all the time, and we do so not simply to break things down but to *construct* our understandings of the world we inhabit.

If, for example, you find yourself being followed by a large dog, your first response, other than breaking into a cold sweat, will be to analyze the situation. What does being followed by a large dog mean for me, here, now? Does it mean the dog is vicious and about to attack? Does it mean the dog is curious and wants to play? Similarly, if you are losing a game of tennis, or you've just left a job interview, or you are looking at a painting of a woman with three noses, you will begin to analyze. How can I play differently to increase my chances of winning? Am I likely to get the job, and why (or why not)? Why did the artist give the woman three noses?

If we break things down as we analyze, we do so to search for meaningful patterns, or to uncover what we had not seen at first glance—or just to understand more closely how and why the separate parts work as they do.

As this book tries to show, analyzing is surprisingly formulaic. It consists of a fairly limited set of basic moves. People who think well have these moves at their disposal, whether they are aware of using them or not. Having good ideas is less a matter of luck than of practice, of learning how to make best use of the writing process. Sudden flashes of inspiration do, of course, occur; but those who write regularly know that inspirational moments can, in fact, be courted. The rest of this book offers you ways of courting and then realizing the full potential of your ideas.

Next we offer five basic “moves”—reliable ways of proceeding—for courting ideas analytically.

THE FIVE ANALYTICAL MOVES

Each of the five moves is developed in more detail in subsequent chapters; this is an overview. As we have suggested, most people already analyze all the time, but they often don't realize that this is what they're doing. A first step toward becoming a better analytical thinker and writer is to become more aware of your own thinking processes, building on skills that you already possess, and eliminating habits that get in the way. Each of the following moves serves the primary purpose of analysis: to figure out what something means, why it is as it is and does what it does.

Move 1: Suspend Judgment

Suspending judgment is a necessary precursor to thinking analytically because our tendency to judge everything shuts down our ability to see and to think. It takes considerable effort to break the habit of responding to everything with likes and dislikes, with agreeing and disagreeing. Just listen in on a few conversations to be reminded of how pervasive this phenomenon really is. Even when you try to suppress them, judgments tend to come.

Judgments usually say more about the person doing the judging than they do about the subject being judged. The determination that something is boring is especially revealing in this regard. Yet people typically roll their eyes and call things boring as if this assertion clearly said something about the thing they are reacting to but not about the mind of the beholder.

Consciously leading with the word *interesting* (as in, “What I find most interesting about this is. . .”) tends to deflect the judgment response into a more exploratory state of mind, one that is motivated by curiosity and thus better able to steer clear of approval and disapproval. As a general rule, you should seek to understand the subject you are analyzing before deciding how you feel about it. (See the Judgment Reflex in Chapter 2, Counterproductive Habits of Mind, for more.)

Move 2: Define Significant Parts and How They’re Related

Whether you are analyzing an awkward social situation, an economic problem, a painting, a substance in a chemistry lab, or your chances of succeeding in a job interview, the process of analysis is the same:

- Divide the subject into its defining parts, its main elements or ingredients.
- Consider how these parts are related, both to each other and to the subject as a whole.

In the case of analyzing the large dog encountered earlier, you might notice that he’s dragging a leash, has a ball in his mouth, and is wearing a bright red scarf. Having broken your larger subject into these defining parts, you would try to see the connections among them and determine what they mean, what they allow you to decide about the nature of the dog: apparently somebody’s lost pet, playful, probably not hostile, unlikely to bite me.

Analysis of the painting of the woman with three noses, a subject more like the kind you might be asked to write about in a college course, would proceed in the same way. Your result—ideas about the nature of the painting—would be determined, as with the dog, not only by your noticing its various parts, but also by your familiarity with the subject. If you knew little about art history, scrutiny of the painting’s parts would not tell you, for instance, that it is an example of the movement known as Cubism. Even without this context, however, you would still be able to draw some analytical conclusions—ideas about the meaning and nature of the subject. You might conclude, for example, that the artist is interested in perspective or in the way we see, as opposed to realistic depictions of the world.

One common denominator of all effective analytical writing is that it pays close attention to detail. We analyze because our global responses, to a play, for example, or to a speech or a social problem, are too general. If you comment on an entire football game, you'll find yourself saying things like "great game," which is a generic response, something you could say about almost anything. This "one-size-fits-all" kind of comment doesn't tell us very much except that you probably liked the game. To say more, you would necessarily become more analytical—shifting your attention to the significance of some important aspect of the game, such as "they won because the offensive line was giving the quarterback all day to find his receivers" or "they lost because they couldn't defend against the safety blitz."

This move from generalization to analysis, from the larger subject to its key components, is characteristic of good thinking. To understand a subject, we need to get past our first, generic, evaluative response to discover what the subject is "made of," the particulars that contribute most strongly to the character of the whole.

If all that analysis did, however, was to take subjects apart, leaving them broken and scattered, the activity would not be worth very much. The student who presents a draft of a paper to his or her professor with the words, "Go ahead, rip it apart," reveals a disabling misconception about analysis—that, like dissecting a frog in a biology lab, analysis takes the life out of its subjects. Clearly, analysis means more than breaking a subject into its parts. When you analyze a subject you ask not just "What is it made of?" but also "How do these parts help me to understand the meaning of the subject as a whole?"

Move 3: Make the Implicit Explicit

One definition of what analytical writing does is that it makes explicit (overtly stated) what is implicit (suggested but not overtly stated), converting suggestions into direct statements. Some people fear that, like the emperor's new clothes, implications aren't really there, but are instead the phantasms of an overactive imagination. "Reading between the lines" is the common and telling phrase that expresses this anxiety. We will have more to say in Chapter 4 against the charge that analysis makes something out of nothing—the spaces between the lines—rather than out of what is there in black and white. Another version of this anxiety is implied by the term *hidden meanings*.

Implications are not hidden, but neither are they completely spelled out so that they can be simply extracted. The word *implication* comes from the Latin *implicare*, which means "to fold in." The word *explicit* is in opposition to the idea of implication. It means "folded out." This etymology of the two words, *implicit* and *explicit*, suggests that meanings aren't actually hidden, but neither are they opened to full view. An act of mind is required to take what is folded in and fold it out for all to see.

The process of drawing out implications is also known as making inferences. *Inference* and *implication* are related but not synonymous terms, and the difference is essential to know. The term *implication* describes something suggested by the material itself; implications reside in the matter you are studying. The term *inference* describes your thinking process. In short, you infer what the subject implies.

Now, let's move on to an example that suggests not only how the process of making the implicit explicit works, but also how often we do it in our everyday lives. Imagine that you are driving down the highway and find yourself

analyzing a billboard advertisement for a brand of beer. Such an analysis might begin with your noticing what the billboard photo contains, its various parts—six young, athletic, and scantily clad men and women drinking beer while pushing kayaks into a fast-running river. At this point, you have produced not an analysis but a summary—a description of what the photo contains. If, however, you go on to consider what the particulars of the photo imply, your summary would become analytical.

You might infer, for example, that the photo implies that beer is the beverage of fashionable, healthy, active people. Thus, the advertisement's meaning goes beyond its explicit contents. Your analysis would lead you to convert to direct statement meanings that are suggested but not overtly stated, such as the advertisement's goal of attacking common stereotypes about its product (that only lazy, overweight men drink beer). By making the implicit explicit (inferring what the ad implies) you can better understand the nature of your subject. (See Chapter 4 for more on implications versus hidden meanings.)

■ Try this 1.1: *Making Inferences*

Locate any magazine ad that you find interesting. Ask yourself, "What is this a picture of?" Use our hypothetical beer ad as a model for rendering the implicit explicit. Don't settle for just one answer. Keep answering the question in different ways, letting your answers grow in length as they identify and begin to interpret the significance of telling details. If you find yourself getting stuck, add to the question: "and why did the advertiser choose this particular image or set of images?"

VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Science as a Process of Argument

I find it ironic that the discipline of science, which is so inherently analytical, is so difficult for students to think about analytically. Much of this comes from the prevailing view of society that science is somehow factual. Science students come to college to learn the facts. I think many find it comforting to think that everything they learn will be objective. None of the wishy-washy subjectivity that many perceive in other disciplines. There is no need to argue, synthesize, or even have a good idea. But this view is dead wrong.

Anyone who has ever done science knows that nothing could be further from the truth. Just like other academics, scientists spend endless hours patiently arguing over evidence that seems obscure or irrelevant to laypeople. There is rarely an absolute consensus. In reality, science is an endless process of argument, obtaining evidence, analyzing evidence, and reformulating arguments. To be sure, we all accept gravity as a "fact." To not do so would be intellectually bankrupt, because all reasonable people agree to the truth of gravity. But to Newton, gravity was an argument for which evidence needed to be produced, analyzed, and discussed. It's important to remember that a significant fraction of his intellectual contemporaries were not swayed by his argument. Equally important is that many good scientific ideas of today will eventually be significantly modified or shown to be wrong.

—Bruce Wightman, *Professor of Biology*

Move 4: Look for Patterns

We have been defining analysis as the understanding of parts in relation to each other and to a whole, as well as the understanding of the whole in terms of the relationships among its parts. But how do you know which parts to attend to? What makes some details in the material you are studying more worthy of your attention than others? Here are three principles for selecting significant parts of the whole:

1. *Look for a pattern of repetition or resemblance.* In virtually all subjects, repetition is a sign of emphasis. In a symphony, for example, certain patterns of notes repeat throughout, announcing themselves as major themes. In a legal document, such as a warranty, a reader quickly becomes aware of words that are part of a particular idea or pattern of thinking: for instance, disclaimers of accountability.
The repetition may not be exact. In Shakespeare's play *King Lear*, for example, references to seeing and eyes call attention to themselves through repetition. Let's say you notice that these references often occur along with another strand of language having to do with the concept of proof. How might noticing this pattern lead to an idea? You might make a start by inferring from the pattern that the play is concerned with ways of knowing (proving) things—with seeing as opposed to other ways of knowing, such as faith or intuition.
2. *Look for binary oppositions.* Sometimes patterns of repetition that you begin to notice in a particular subject matter are significant because they are part of a contrast—a basic opposition—around which the subject matter is structured. A binary opposition is a pair of elements in which the two members of the pair are opposites; the word *binary* means “consisting of two.” Some examples of binary oppositions that we encounter frequently are nature/civilization, city/country, public/private, organic/inorganic, voluntary/involuntary. One advantage of detecting repetition is that it will lead you to discover binaries, which are central to locating issues and concerns. (For more on working with binary oppositions, see Chapters 3 and 5.)
3. *Look for anomalies—things that seem unusual, seem not to fit.* An *anomaly* (*a* = *not*, *nom* = *name*) is literally something that cannot be named, what the dictionary defines as deviation from the normal order. Along with looking for pattern, it is also fruitful to attend to anomalous details—those that seem not to fit the pattern. Anomalies help us to revise our stereotypical assumptions. A TV commercial, for example, advertises a baseball team by featuring its star reading a novel by Dostoyevsky in the dugout during a game. In this case, the anomaly, a baseball player who reads serious literature, is being used to subvert (question, unsettle) the stereotypical assumption that sports and intellectualism don't belong together.

Just as people tend to leap to evaluative judgments, they also tend to avoid information that challenges (by not conforming to) opinions they already hold. Screening out anything that would ruffle the pattern they've begun to

see, they ignore the evidence that might lead them to a better theory. (For more on this process of using anomalous evidence to evolve an essay's main idea, see Chapter 9, *Making a Thesis Evolve*.) Anomalies are important because noticing them often leads to new and better ideas. Most advances in scientific thought, for example, have arisen when a scientist observes some phenomenon that does not fit with a prevailing theory.

Move 5: Keep Reformulating Questions and Explanations

Analysis, like all forms of writing, requires a lot of experimenting. Because the purpose of analytical writing is to figure something out, you shouldn't expect to know at the start of your writing process exactly where you are going, how all of your subject's parts fit together, and to what end. The key is to be patient and to know that there are procedures—in this case, questions—you can rely on to take you from uncertainty to understanding.

The following three groups of questions (organized according to the analytical moves they're derived from) are typical of what goes on in an analytical writer's head as he or she attempts to understand a subject. These questions work with almost anything that you want to think about. As you will see, the questions are geared toward helping you locate and try on explanations for the meaning of various patterns of details.

Which details seem significant? Why?

What does the detail mean?

What else might it mean?

(Moves: Define Significant Parts; Make the Implicit Explicit)

How do the details fit together? What do they have in common?

What does this pattern of details mean?

What else might this same pattern of details mean? How else could it be explained?

(Move: Look for Patterns)

What details don't seem to fit? How might they be connected with other details to form a different pattern?

What does this new pattern mean? How might it cause me to read the meaning of individual details differently?

(Moves: Look for Anomalies and Keep Asking Questions)

The process of posing and answering such questions—the analytical process—is one of trial and error. Learning to write well is largely a matter of learning how to frame questions. One of the main things you acquire in the study of an academic discipline is knowledge of the kinds of questions that the discipline typically asks. For example, an economics professor and a sociology professor might observe the same phenomenon, such as a sharp decline in health benefits for the elderly, and analyze its causes and significance in different ways. The economist might consider how such

benefits are financed and how changes in government policy and the country's population patterns might explain the declining supply of funds for the elderly. The sociologist might ask about attitudes toward the elderly and about the social structures that the elderly rely on for support.

ANALYSIS AT WORK: A SAMPLE PAPER

Examine the following excerpt from a draft of a paper about Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a collection of short mythological tales dating from ancient Rome. We have included annotations in blue to suggest how a writer's ideas evolve as he or she looks for pattern, contrast, and anomaly, constantly remaining open to reformulation.

The draft actually begins with two loosely connected observations: that males dominate females, and that many characters in the stories lose the ability to speak and thus become submissive and dominated. In the excerpt, the writer begins to connect these two observations and speculate about what this connection means.

There are many other examples in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that show the dominance of man over woman through speech control. In the Daphne and Apollo story, Daphne becomes a tree to escape Apollo, but her ability to speak is destroyed. Likewise, in the Syrinx and Pan story, Syrinx becomes a marsh reed, also a life form that cannot talk, although Pan can make it talk by playing it. *[The writer establishes a pattern of similar detail.]* Pygmalion and Galatea is a story in which the male creates his rendition of the perfect female. The female does not speak once; she is completely silent. Also, Galatea is referred to as "she" and never given a real name. This lack of a name renders her identity more silent. *[Here the writer begins to link the contrasts of speech/silence with the absence/presence of identity.]*

Ocyrhoe is a female character who could tell the future but who was transformed into a mare so that she could not speak. One may explain this transformation by saying it was an attempt by the gods to keep the future unknown. *[Notice how the writer's thinking expands as she sustains her investigation of the overall pattern of men silencing women: here she tests her theory by adding another variable—prophecy.]* However, there is a male character, Tiresias, who is also a seer of the future and is allowed to speak of his foreknowledge, thereby becoming a famous figure. (Interestingly, Tiresias during his lifetime has experienced being both a male and a female.) *[Notice how the Ocyrhoe example has spawned a contrast based on gender in the Tiresias example. The pairing of the two examples demonstrates that the ability to tell the future is not the sole cause of silencing because male characters who can do it are not silenced—though the writer pauses to note that Tiresias is not entirely male.]* Finally, in the story of Mercury and Herse, Herse's sister, Aglauros, tries to prevent Mercury from marrying Herse. Mercury turns her into a statue; the male directly silences the female's speech.

The woman silences the man in only two stories studied. *[Here the writer searches out an anomaly—women silencing men—that grows in the rest of the paragraph into an organizing contrast.]* In the first, "The Death of Orpheus," the women make use of "clamorous shouting, Phrygian flutes with curving horns, tambourines, the beating of breasts, and Bacchic howlings" (246) to drown out the male's songs, dominating his speech in terms of volume. In this way, the quality of power within speech is demonstrated: "for the first time, his words had no effect, and he failed to move them [the women] in any way by his voice" (247).

Next the women kill him, thereby rendering him silent. However, the male soon regains his temporarily destroyed power of expression: “the lyre uttered a plaintive melody and the lifeless tongue made a piteous murmur” (247). Even after death Orpheus is able to communicate. The women were not able to destroy his power completely, yet they were able to severely reduce his power of speech and expression. [*The writer learns, among other things, that men are harder to silence; Orpheus’s lyre continues to sing after his death.*]

The second story in which a woman silences a man is the story of Actaeon, in which the male sees Diana naked, and she transforms him into a stag so that he cannot speak of it: “he tried to say ‘Alas!’ but no words came” (79). This loss of speech leads to Actaeon’s inability to inform his own hunting team of his true identity; his loss of speech leads ultimately to his death. [*This example reinforces the pattern that the writer had begun to notice in the Orpheus example.*]

In some ways these four paragraphs of draft exemplify a writer in the process of discovering a workable idea. They begin with a list of similar examples, briefly noted. As the examples accumulate, the writer begins to make connections and formulate tentative explanations. We have not included enough of this excerpt to get to the tentative thesis the draft is working toward, although that thesis is already beginning to emerge. What we want to emphasize here is the writer’s willingness to accumulate data and to locate it in various patterns of similarity and contrast.

Try this 1.2: *Applying the Five Analytical Moves to a Speech*

Speeches provide rich examples for analysis, and they are easily accessible on the Internet. We especially recommend a site called American Rhetoric (You can Google it for the URL). Locate any speech and then locate its patterns of repetition and contrast. On the basis of your results, formulate a few conclusions about the speech’s point of view and its way of presenting it. Try to get beyond the obvious and the general—what does applying the moves cause you to notice that you might not have noticed before?

DISTINGUISHING ANALYSIS FROM ARGUMENT, SUMMARY, AND EXPRESSIVE WRITING

How does analysis differ from other kinds of thinking and writing? A common way of answering this question is to think of communication as having three possible centers of emphasis—the writer, the subject, and the audience. Communication, of course, involves all three of these components, but some kinds of writing concentrate more on one than on the others. Autobiographical writing, for example, such as diaries or memoirs or stories about personal experience, centers on the writer and his or her desire for self-expression. Argument, in which the writer takes a stand on an issue, advocating or arguing against a policy or attitude, is reader-centered; its goal is to bring about a change in its readers’ actions and beliefs. Analytical writing is more concerned with arriving at an understanding of a subject than it is with either self-expression or changing readers’ views. (See Figure 1.1.)

These three categories of writing are not mutually exclusive. So, for example, expressive (writer-centered) writing is also analytical in its attempts to define and explain a writer’s feelings, reactions, and experiences. And analysis is a form

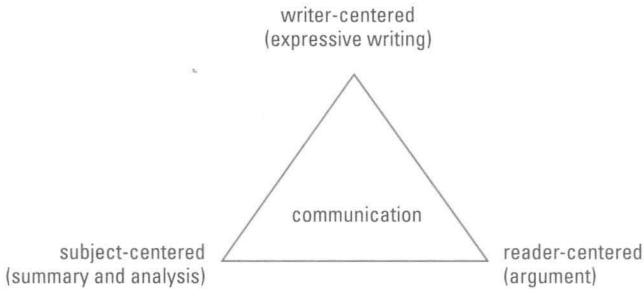


FIGURE 1.1
Diagram of Communication Triangle

of self-expression since it inevitably reflects the ways a writer's experiences have taught him or her to think about the world. But even though expressive writing and analysis necessarily overlap, they also differ significantly in both method and aim. In expressive writing, your primary subject is your self, with other subjects serving as a means of evoking greater self-understanding. In analytical writing, your reasoning may derive from your personal experience, but it is your reasoning and not you or your experiences that matter. Analysis asks not just "What do I think?" but "How good is my thinking? How well does it fit the subject I am trying to explain?"

In its emphasis on logic and the dispassionate scrutiny of ideas ("What do I think about what I think?"), analysis is a close cousin of argument. But analysis and argument are not the same. Analytical writers are frequently more concerned with persuading themselves, with discovering what they believe about a subject, than they are with persuading others. And, while the writer of an argument often goes into the writing process with some certainty about the position he or she wishes to support, the writer of an analysis is more likely to begin with the details of a subject he or she wishes to better understand.

Accordingly, argument and analysis often differ in the kind of thesis statements they formulate. The thesis of an argument is usually some kind of *should* statement: readers should or shouldn't vote for bans on smoking in public buildings, or they should or shouldn't believe that gays can function effectively in the military. The thesis of an analysis is usually a tentative answer to a what, how, or why question; it seeks to explain why people watch professional wrestling, or what a rising number of sexual harassment cases might mean, or how certain features of government health care policy are designed to allay the fears of the middle class. The writer of an analysis is less concerned with convincing readers to approve or disapprove of professional wrestling, or legal intervention into the sexual politics of the workplace, or government control of health care than with discovering how each of these complex subjects might be defined and explained. As should be obvious, though, the best arguments are built upon careful analysis: the better you understand a subject, the more likely you will be to find valid positions to argue about it.

Applying the Five Analytical Moves: The Example of *Whistler's Mother*

Summary differs from analysis because the aim of summary is to recount, in effect, to reproduce someone else's ideas. But summary and analysis are also clearly related and usually operate together. Summary is important to analysis because you can't analyze a subject without laying out its significant parts for your reader. Similarly, analysis is important to summary because summarizing is more than just copying someone else's words. To write an accurate summary you have to ask analytical questions, such as:

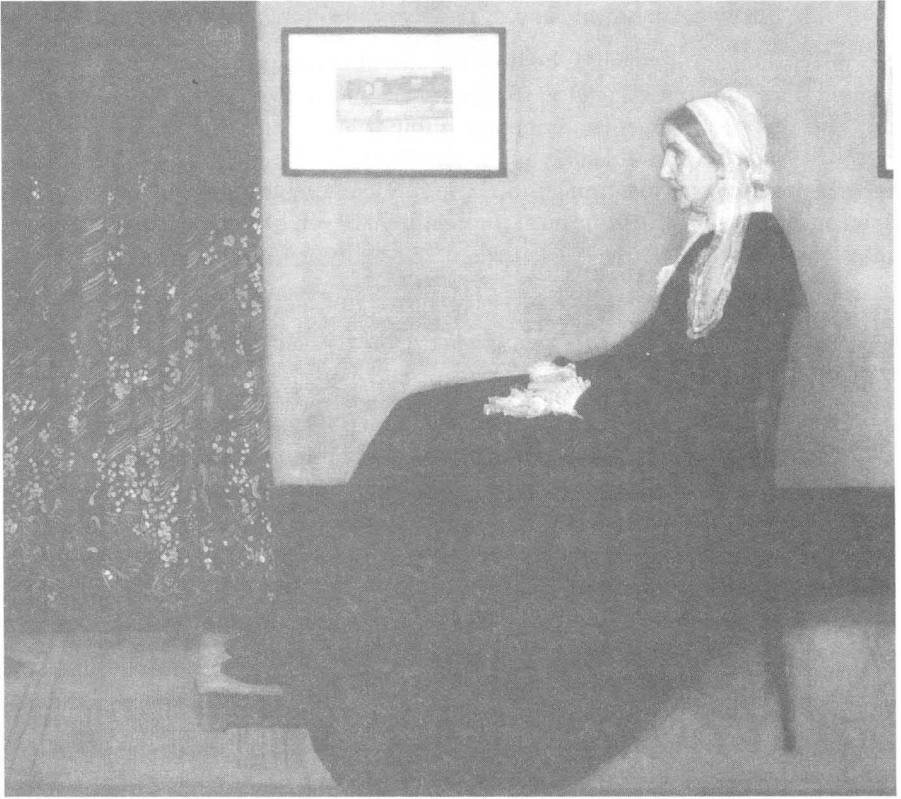
- Which of the ideas in the reading are most significant? Why?
- How do these ideas fit together? What do the key passages in the reading mean?

Like an analysis, an effective summary doesn't assume that the subject matter can speak for itself: the writer needs to play an active role. A good summary provides perspective on the subject as a whole by explaining, as an analysis does, the meaning and function of each of that subject's parts. Moreover, like an analysis, a good summary does not aim to approve or disapprove of its subject: the goal, in both kinds of writing, is to understand rather than to evaluate. (For more on summary, see Chapters 6 and 13.)

So summary, like analysis, is a tool of understanding and not just a mechanical task. But a summary stops short of analysis because summary typically makes much smaller interpretive leaps. A summary of the painting popularly known as *Whistler's Mother*, for example, would tell readers what the painting includes, which details are the most prominent, and even what the overall effect of the painting seems to be. A summary might say that the painting possesses a certain serenity and that it is somewhat spare, almost austere. This kind of language still falls into the category of *focused description*, which is what a summary is.

An analysis would include more of the writer's interpretive thinking. It might tell us, for instance, that the painter's choice to portray his subject in profile contributes to our sense of her separateness from us and of her nonconfrontational passivity. We look at her, but she does not look back at us. Her black dress and the fitted lace cap that obscures her hair are not only emblems of her self-effacement, shrouds disguising her identity like her expressionless face, but also the tools of her self-containment and thus of her power to remain aloof from prying eyes. What is the attraction of this painting (this being one of the questions that an analysis might ask)? What might draw a viewer to the sight of this austere, drably attired woman, sitting alone in the center of a mostly blank space? Perhaps it is the very starkness of the painting, and the mystery of self-sufficiency at its center, that attracts us. (See Figure 1.2.)

Observations of the sort just offered go beyond describing what the painting contains and enter into the writer's ideas about what its details imply, what the painting invites us to make of it and by what means. Notice in our analysis of the painting how intertwined the description (summary) is with the analysis. Laying out the data is key to any kind of analysis, not simply because it keeps the analysis accurate but also

**FIGURE 1.2**

Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist's Mother by James Abbott McNeill Whistler, 1871.

because, crucially, it is *in the act of carefully describing a subject that analytical writers often have their best ideas.*

You may not agree with the terms by which we have summarized the painting, and thus you may not agree with such conclusions as “the mystery of self-sufficiency.” Nor is it necessary that you agree because there is no single, right answer to what the painting means. The absence of a single right answer does not, however, mean that all possible interpretations are equal and equally convincing to readers. The writer who can offer a careful description of a subject’s key features is likely to arrive at conclusions about possible meanings that others would share.

Here are two general rules to be drawn from this discussion of analysis and summary:

1. Describe with care. The words you choose to summarize your data will contain the germs of your ideas about what the subject means.
2. In moving from summary to analysis, scrutinize the language you have chosen, asking, “Why did I choose this word?” and “What ideas are implicit in the language I have used?”

ANALYSIS AND PERSONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Although observations like those offered in the Interpretive Leaps column in Figure 1.3 go beyond simple description, they stay with the task of explaining the painting, rather than moving to private associations that the painting might prompt, such as effusions about old age, or rocking chairs, or the character and situation of the writer's own mother. Such associations could well be valuable unto themselves as a means of prompting a searching piece of expressive writing. They might also help a writer to interpret some feature of the painting that he or she was working to understand. But the writer would not be free to use pieces of his or her personal history as conclusions about what the painting communicates, unless these conclusions could also be reasonably inferred from the painting itself.

Analysis is a creative activity, a fairly open form of inquiry, but its imaginative scope is governed by logic. The hypothetical analysis we have offered is not the only reading of the painting that a viewer might make because the same pattern of details might lead to different conclusions. But a viewer would not be free to conclude anything he or she wished, such as that the woman is mourning the death of a son

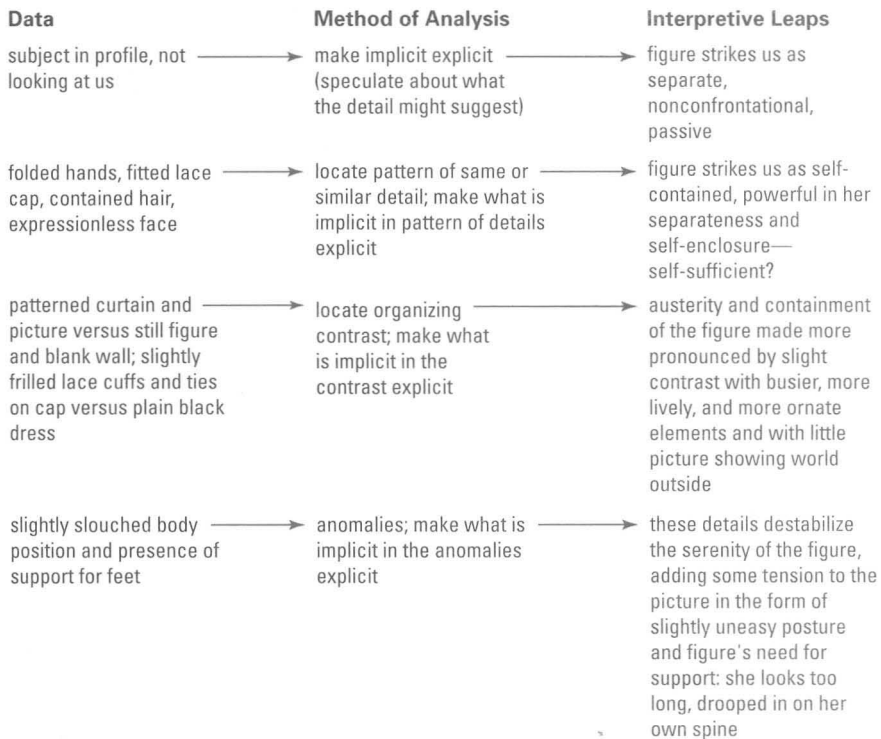


FIGURE 1.3

Summary and Analysis of *Whistler's Mother* Diagram

or is patiently waiting to die. Such conclusions would be unfounded speculations because the black dress is not sufficient to support them. Analysis often operates in areas in which there is no one right answer, but like summary and argument, it requires the writer to reason from evidence.

A few rules are worth highlighting here:

1. The range of associations for explaining a given detail or word must be governed by context.
2. It's fine to use your personal reactions as a way into exploring what a subject means, but take care not to make an interpretive leap stretch farther than the actual details will support.
3. Because the tendency to transfer meanings from your own life onto a subject can lead you to ignore the details of the subject itself, you need always to be asking yourself: "What other explanations might plausibly account for this same pattern of detail?"

As we began this chapter by saying, analysis is a form of detective work. It can surprise us with ideas that our experiences produce once we take the time to listen to ourselves thinking. But analysis is also a discipline; it has rules that govern how we proceed and that enable others to judge the validity of our ideas. A good analytical thinker needs to be the attentive Dr. Watson to his or her own Sherlock Holmes. That is what the remainder of this book teaches you to do.

ASSIGNMENT: Analyze a Portrait or Other Visual Image

Locate any portrait, preferably a good reproduction from an art book or magazine, one that shows detail clearly. Then do a version of what we've done with *Whistler's Mother* in the preceding columns.

Your goal is to produce an analysis of the portrait with the steps we included in analyzing *Whistler's Mother*. First, summarize the portrait, describing accurately its significant details. Do not go beyond a recounting of what the portrait includes; avoid interpreting what these details suggest.

Then use the various methods offered in this chapter to analyze the data. What repetitions (patterns of same or similar detail) do you see? What organizing contrasts suggest themselves? In light of these patterns of similarity and difference, what anomalies do you then begin to detect? Move from the data to interpretive conclusions.

This process will produce a set of interpretive leaps, which you may then try to assemble into a more coherent claim of some sort—about what the portrait "says."