Analyzing a text

Summary vs. Analysis

**Summarizing** is similar to writing a book report. Simply condense the plot points of a story or the main arguments of a text. Talk about all of the most important parts briefly without adding any opinion about them or trying to interpret meaning.

**Analyzing** is like giving a doctor’s diagnosis. The symptoms of an illness are the story, facts without meaning attached to them. It’s up to the doctor, or in this case, the writer, to explain what the symptoms mean. Analysis is all about evaluation and interpretation.

With nearly all kinds of writing, **analysis** is the goal. Anyone could re-cap the main points; interpretation of those points is what is interesting, meaningful, and unique. Whether examining relationships between characters in *The Odyssey* or creating a case study on an international corporation, the writer should aim for the “so what?”. So what that Odysseus didn’t come home to Penelope for over a decade? So what that Nabisco reported record sales last year? It is the writer’s responsibility to explain why the reader should care about these things.

**Questions that lead to analysis**

How does one read with an analytical eye? When reading a text, ask these questions to get past plot summary and into interpretation.

- What assumptions do you bring to the text? Why do you have those assumptions, and how does the author address these potential assumptions?
- What statement is the author making via the text?
- What motivates the author to write his/her text?
- How does the author’s time period affect the piece?
- How is the text structured? How does it affect your understanding of the text?
- What are the key passages of the text and why are they important?
- Are there recurring themes, symbols, etc.? When do they appear?
- How does the author support his or her assertions of the text or support the meaning of the story?
- Are there contradictions in the text? How do they affect your understanding of the text?
- How does your analysis of the text differ from others’ understandings of the text? How are they similar?
Reading Actively:

Analysis begins during the act of reading. Keep track of the ideas that seem important or confusing by asking the following questions as you go. Be sure to take note of your first impressions, questions, and ideas with sticky notes, pencil in the margins, or another strategy that works for you. You’ll want to be able to find them when you begin formulating an essay topic or discussion question later on.

What is/are the overall theme(s)?
Track the quotes that follow your theme. For example, if you’re looking for “Lust,” write an “L” next to quotes that match that theme.

Why did this character do (X) when he/she could have done (Y)?
Make a note of each time a character makes a choice or decision that either moves the plot forward or has an impact on other characters.

Why did the author include this dialogue/sentence/passage/chapter?
If you find yourself having a positive or negative response to something, take note of it, and consider what the author’s purpose might be.

What could the author’s political/social commentary be?
If the text is a narrative, consider whether a passage seems to represent more of the author’s or the character’s voice. If the text is a speech or theoretical proposition, decide if the author is challenging or agreeing with the status quo.

What does this character/action/scene symbolize?
Be on the lookout for repeating images or symbols, and make a note of where and when they occur.