

## Notes from the University of King's College Essay Writing Workshop - November 27, 2022



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### What is an analytic essay?

The goal of these notes is to help you learn how to write a university-level analytic essay. This document will focus on papers that would be submitted to humanities disciplines, like English, history, philosophy etc. This kind of essay is meant to persuade the reader of an interpretive claim by presenting organized evidence.

This is not a book report, which is a summary of a text without interpretive analysis and argumentation.

This is not an opinion piece or reflection, which presents an opinion or review of a text without interpreting.

There is nothing vague about a thesis. A strong thesis will always be well-developed, defined and precise.

The goal of the analytic essay, at the university-level, is to offer a compelling interpretation of the text, using it as the single/main source of your essay. This means that it goes beneath the immediate surface level, does not summarize the content or offer an opinion on the text.

### The Thesis

The first piece of any analytic essay is a thesis. It is the central interpretive claim that is advanced and defended in the essay. It is the controlling idea around which the essay is structured.

It should be a debatable claim about the material. It focuses on themes or ideas, rather than just the plot. It is specific. It goes beyond the 'what' in a text, expanding into the

'how' and 'why' of the material. It should be introduced, concisely, in the introductory paragraph. It tells the reader what they should expect from the essay.

There is no one true, correct interpretation of a text. Well-made texts can support a variety of readings and interpretations and can answer different questions. The goal is to offer a strong and compelling reading, which means that it is a reading directly supported by the text.

To better understand this, we are going to look at some examples below. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* will be used.

Examples:

- 1) Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is interesting and entertaining.

This thesis is weak. It does make a debatable claim, but this debate is entirely on the level of subjective experience. It tells us about the tastes of the writer rather than telling us about the text. There is no mention of the themes, meaning or significance of the text. It fails to offer a compelling interpretation or present an argument about the text.

- 2) This essay is about love in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

This is better. It tells the reader what this essay will be about, and it says something about the text. It names a central theme.

HOWEVER, this thesis is still too vague and general. It doesn't tell the reader what kind of love will be discussed? What specific vantage point does the play offer on the theme of love? This thesis needs more development to become a thoughtful thesis about the material.

- 3) Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* warns against passionate love.

This is an improvement. The writer tells us what kind of love will be discussed, and how the play treats it. There is an arguable interpretive claim which can be disputed and offers a substantial interpretation of the source material.

However, there is still room for improvement. The reader will have other questions, such as the 'how' and 'why' the writer came to this thesis. There needs to be development so that the thesis becomes more specific and concrete.

- 4) By portraying the relationship between the two main characters as impulsive and destructive, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* condemns rather than celebrates the pursuit of strong passions.

This is a fully-developed thesis statement. It has an arguable, interpretive claim and offers a substantial interpretation of the source material. The claim is specific and defined and can be substantiated with evidence from the play and addresses its

specifics. The writer takes an objective posture. They're not measuring the play's view of passionate love against their own personal view but presenting in more or less impartial terms of what they find in the text.

5) Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* is just a bad idea.

This thesis tells us what the writer thinks but does not present any evidence or contextualize their claim with the text. This is a value judgement rather than an analytic claim.

6) Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto* is against capital.

Here, there is a central theme presented. However, it is general, vague and poorly defined. There is no 'how' or 'why' present.

7) Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto* offers a challenge to the capitalist mode of production, but not because of its harms.

This is a substantial improvement. There is evidence of insight into the text. There is a basic analysis of the basis for challenging capitalism and is behind that challenge. However, this thesis needs more definition and development. The reader is still wondering why Marx and Engels are challenging the capitalist mode of production, if not on the basis of its harms.

8) Marx and Engels' challenge to the capitalist mode of production in the *Communist Manifesto* does not hinge on its benefits or harms. Rather, they seek to expose certain self-defeating contradictions inherent in the capitalist system itself.

This is a robust, well-developed interpretive claim that offers insight into the text and can act as a substantial controlling idea for an extended argument.

## Basic Essay Structure

To defend your thesis, you will need to organize and present evidence from the text. This should be structured, so that the reader can follow the logic of your argument.

An essay is made of different paragraphs, and each one performs a specific function in the structure of your argument. They should all fit into the overall argument presented in your thesis, and each paragraph has a particular function within your argument.

Each paragraph should be structured around a single point that is relevant to the thesis. Each body paragraph develops an idea within the thesis. This requires the use of textual evidence. This is crucial, because it establishes the basis for your argument within the source material. All the claims in your body paragraphs need to be backed up by evidence. In the kind of essay we are talking about, this means quotations from the text. It is your job to connect the dots and lay out the evidence for your reader. You want to present the logic of your argument and the basis of your claim as clearly as possible,

which means that you must present, interpret and explain the evidence as clearly as possible. The following are examples of presenting textual evidence.

- 1) On page 13 they say: “Capital is a collective produce, and only by the united action of many members of society can it be set in motion” (Marx and Engels, 13).

There is no context to help the reader understand the passage, and no explanation of its meaning. Telling the reader that this quote is from page 13 is useless, because it is in the citation. The quote needs to be better introduced and more smoothly integrated into the argument.

- 2) “Capital is a collective product, and only by the united action of many members of society can it be set in motion” (Marx and Engels, 13). This quotation is about the contradiction at the heart of privately owned capital.

This is somewhat better. There is a quotation, and we have the writer explaining something about what the evidence means and how it works in their argument. It is, however, clumsy and awkward. The writer states the quote without giving context. There is no ‘how’ or ‘why’ that explains why the quotation supports their claim.

- 3) Marx and Engels describe the contradiction they see at work in capitalist private property, explaining that, “[c]apital is a collective product, and only by the united action of many members of society can it be set in motion” (Marx and Engels, 13). This underscores the social character of capitalist production, which for them conflicts with the capitalist’ private ownership of its means and products.

Here, the quotation is contextualized and integrated into the writer’s own sentence structure. There is an explanation following the quotation showing the reader what the evidence means. The quotation is sandwiched within the writer’s guidance and analysis, which is what we’re looking for in a well-argued essay.

## Common Problems

The following is a list of the five most common problems in university-level writing, with an explanation of each, followed by some general advice about fixing said problems. Most of these problems can be avoided by identifying them, and can be fixed in the writing and editing process i.e. there needs to be a draft in order for you to assess whether or not there are any problems with your writing.

The problems are the following:

- 1) Trying to sound smart v. being smart
- 2) Thesaurus-it is
- 3) Stream-of-consciousness
- 4) Unmotivated summary
- 5) Aimless editing

## Sounding smart v. being smart

This is a common issue seen in first year university students, although it is by no means exclusive to them.

This problem occurs when students use long or unusual words, complex sentence structures, unusual punctuation, italics, and a lot of unnecessary stylistic flourishes like excessive adjectives and adverbs. This includes puns.

The result of this kind of writing is often the opposite of the desired effect. The reader is often confused because they are trying to figure out what the words mean, rather than following the argument.

The best way to communicate your ideas is with clarity. Your words should translate your thoughts clearly, directly and accurately. This means limiting the complexity of your writing as much as possible. This means eliminating unnecessary words, clauses and sentences in order to achieve a simplicity of style that allows your ideas to be center stage. Your argumentation, rather than your style, is what is being judged.

## Thesaurus-itis

This is a related problem to the above. This is when students use words that don't quite fit. There are two main reasons students do this: to sound intelligent or to avoid repetition. This can be quite problematic when students don't fully understand the contextual nuances of different words.

While repeating the same term over and over again can be problematic in academic writing, repetition is generally preferable to using a word which just doesn't fit or which has a different meaning. Defining key terms is essential in many forms of academic writing. While using a different word may liven things up, it can cause problems if it has other, unrelated connotations.

## Stream-of-consciousness

This is a very common problem. It arises when students use writing as a way of working through their ideas. In other words, not separating the activity of thinking from writing. For academic writing, this is problematic. This is because our thoughts happen to us—and they very rarely happen in a logical order.

One of the most significant differences in the transition from high school to university-level writing has to do with the importance of structure. Most academic writing involves the presentation or evaluation of logically structured arguments. If you treat the writing process as a straightforward record of your thoughts, then the resulting work won't have a clear or coherent logical structure and won't be an effective way of relaying your ideas.

## Unmotivated Summary

The book report is a very common assignment in high schools. This form of writing is useful for teaching the skill of summarization and attention to narrative details. But, when it comes to crafting an argumentative essay, it is easy to run into problems if your model is the book report. This is because the goal of a book report is to give a clear summary of a book. In academic writing, summary is not the goal. The goal of almost all academic writing is to present an argument designed to convince your reader that a particular claim (i.e. your thesis) is true or reasonable to believe.

It is often useful to summarize portions of the text as a means to supporting your argument. The problem emerges when students summarize portions of the text with no specific purpose. This is distracting and cuts into the space you should use to work out your own ideas.

When summarizing, you must always explain why you have done so and how this summary fits into your overall argument.

## Aimless Editing

Editing is a crucial part of the writing process. Done properly, it can significantly improve almost any piece of writing. But there are better and worse ways to edit a piece of writing.

The most common way of editing a paper is to simply reread it and look for “mistakes”. This is also one of the least effective ways of editing and is only really useful for catching certain kinds of errors—things like typos, repeated words, punctuation and so on. This will not catch problems related to structure and argument, both of which are problems that are the most important to catch in academic writing.

The best way to counteract this is to have a targeted approach to editing. This begins with a diagnosis of the problems that you face in relation to writing. You can perform this diagnosis yourself, but one of the key ways of doing this in the university setting is to listen to the comments and criticism offered by your professors.

Your editing will become much more effective when you have a firm grasp on the specific problems within your writing.

## General Advice

- 1) Be deliberate. Think of how each paragraph fits into the overall essay.
- 2) Separate the activity of thinking from the activity of writing.
- 3) Give yourself time to edit your work.
- 4) A simplified writing style is the best vehicle for presenting complex thoughts.
- 5) Write about things that interest you (when you can)!