

Analysis Brainstorm Questions

Prompts such as “Evaluate her argument” or “Say if you find her views convincing” are asking you for *analysis*. For analysis, you take apart the author’s reasoning, follow the lines of her logic, try to identify her assumptions and prejudices, and see if she left out anything important. You are writing as much about the author—how the author did her job—as about the subject matter of the piece.

Consider logic or logoi

Logical arguments are a mainstay of persuasion. To consider the writer’s logic (logoi), brainstorm questions like these:

Is she consistent with her claims? Does she appear to *contradict* herself?

What are her *conclusions*? Do they follow logically from her arguments?

What are the *possible* or *likely consequences* of her position? Does she take consequences into consideration?

What might be the *unintended consequences* of her position? Does she consider the unintended consequences?

Here is an example of what you might come up with after an examination of a writer’s logic: *He seems to equate one’s approval for the bond measure with a worthy desire to cure childhood illnesses, and disapproval of the bond measure with a callous willingness to see children sicken and die. This is oversimplified.*

Consider completeness of the evidence

Sometimes authors cherry-pick their facts. Ask yourself questions about how complete or fair the author’s evidence is. Evidence could include things like examples or illustrations from current or historical events, statistics, research findings, and personal experience.

What do I know that she seems not to know?

What evidence has she *left out*? What has she failed to consider?

Here is an example of noticing missing information: *She fails to mention that the legislation is destined to lapse in July and is unlikely to be renewed by Congress.*

Consider assumptions, worldview, and prejudices

Every author approaches a problem by looking at it through the lens of his own assumptions and sometimes his own prejudices. You have to read between the lines to uncover hidden assumptions and prejudices the writer himself may not know he has—or that he does not wish to be forthcoming about. Try considering questions like these:

What are *her assumptions* or *premises*? Where in the text do you see them?

Do her assumptions or premises seem valid?

Are there other possible, but opposing, assumptions? Does she fairly consider opposing viewpoints?

Does she seem to believe in a particular *worldview*? Describe it. Where in the text do you see that?

Does she seem to reveal any *prejudices*? What are they? Where in the text do you see that?

Here is an example of a claim that might result from examining an author's assumptions, worldview, or prejudices: *The author seems to believe that class warfare is the defining struggle of middle class Americans; he attributes universally negative motives to big business, pointing to a possible prejudice on his part against a capitalist system.*

Consider sense of proportion

Even if all the pertinent facts are there, the weight of facts can be changed. Look for clues that an author is exaggerating or minimizing a problem by asking yourself questions like these:

Has she *exaggerated* a problem, making it seem larger than it is? Where in the text do you see that?

Has she *minimized* a problem, making it seem smaller than it is? Where in the text do you see that?

Are her comparisons (analogies or metaphors) *appropriate*?

Here is an example of one writer's judgment about an author's sense of proportion: *However, his comparison of terror attacks to traffic accidents is ridiculous.*

Consider feelings or pathos

Authors usually use a judicious dose of pathos to help them persuade readers, trying to awaken feelings, for example, of love, fear, indignation, anger, hope, or patriotism. Ask questions such as these to discover how and how much an author is relying on pathos:

Does she use any *language likely to incite strong feelings* (like patriotism, love, fear, indignation, anger)? What words or phrases make you say that?

Is there more *neutral language* that she could use but does not use? What, for example?

Can you tell by the way she expresses herself *how she feels* about the subject? Which words or phrases make you think so?

Here is an example of a claim based on analysis of an author's use of pathos: *He chooses to describe this as a cowardly "surrender" of liberty, rather than as a reasoned concession to realistic security concerns.*

Consider authority or ethos

We believe or disbelieve authors based on many factors, for example their skill at writing, their expertise in a certain area, their perceived fairness, and their choice of evidence. If they don't have their own strong expertise in an area, we judge them based on the credibility of the experts they cite. Ask questions like these:

What about the author suggests she is *qualified* to discuss this subject?

If she appeals to an outside authority, is it an *appropriate authority* for this subject?

Are outside authorities cited likely to have particular *worldviews or prejudices* that might compromise their fairness and authority?

Here is comment on the ethos of an author: *However, the author herself admits she has no direct experience working with the homeless.*

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



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