

Analytical Essay Writing

American Government

What is an analytical essay?

In most political science courses, the two primary essay forms used are the persuasive essay and the analytical essay. A persuasive essay is just that; the writer expresses a point of view and uses the essay to persuade the reader to adopt that perspective. If you've read editorials in the newspaper or listened to any type of political commentary on the radio, those are versions of persuasive essays. The success of the persuasive essay is determined by whether or not it makes the reader believe the writer's central thesis or at least makes the reader acknowledge the validity of the viewpoint.

The analytical essay is often written in response to another piece of writing, like an essay or an editorial, and basically answers the question of "Are you persuaded?" For the essay assignments in this class, you will generally be asked to read articles or court opinions (or summaries of them) and respond. In the Critical Thinking Essays, your goal is to address the central theme of the court opinion or article by analyzing the specific arguments made by the writer. There are a number of ways to perform such an analysis, such as to compare and contrast the author's perspective with another viewpoint or to examine the factual components of the evidence presented to see if there are other interpretations. Writing a good Critical Thinking Essay requires you to form an opinion based on the readings and express and support that opinion. I really don't care whether you end up agreeing with the writer or not, provided you do a good job of explaining your decision.

Note that an analytical essay generally relies solely on the source material, which will be identified and/or provided in the assignment document, and addresses the issues raised in that source material. The assumption in the analytical essay is that the reader is familiar with the source material and is interested in a response to it. The Critical Thinking Essay assignment does not ask for narrative essay that describes a person, place, event or thing or a research paper that uses outside sources to explore the same person, place, event or thing that was discussed in the source material. Your essay should be a response to the readings that shows your understanding of the concepts and your ability to evaluate the arguments made.

Parts of the Essay

There should be three parts to your analytical essay – the introduction, the body and the conclusion.

A. The introduction should contain

1. A reference to the source material by title of the article and name of the author or, for court opinions, the name of the case plus whether it is the majority opinion, the concurrence or the dissent you will be analyzing.
2. A brief summary of the content of the source material in order to provide a bit of background. Generally, this can be a sentence or two but in no event should it take up more than a paragraph. Your goal in this essay is to respond to the source material, not re-state it.

3. Your thesis statement – do you agree? Are you persuaded?

B. The body of the essay should examine the arguments made in the opinions or articles and provide an explanation as to why you found them persuasive or not. In this section:

1. You can group the arguments together in common themes or address each one individually but you should provide a response to each unless one is so overwhelmingly right or wrong that it makes the others irrelevant.
2. You can use outside sources to support your analysis but remember, this isn't a research paper; don't let outside sources take you away from your goal of evaluating the source material. Generally, you can support your argument through reference to well-known facts or logical conclusions. Each of the Critical Thinking assignments will involve at least two court opinions or articles and be related to the material you've read for class so you can use the information provided in one piece of assigned reading to support your analysis of the others.

C. You should conclude your essay with a reaffirmation of your evaluation of the source material and a brief summary of the reasons. Conclusions are hard but are necessary to give your reader a sense of closure.

Mistakes to avoid:

1. Run-on sentences – Read each sentence aloud; if you have to take a breath before you've reached the period, the sentence is too long.
2. Sentence fragments – Read each sentence aloud, preferably starting at the end of your essay and working your way back to the beginning so that you are reading each sentence separately out of context. If the sentence doesn't make sense on its own, you have an incomplete sentence.
3. "Running jump" writing – Your summary of the event or thing that is the subject of the source material should be brief. Providing more than a few sentences of background before you start actually writing your analysis of the source material is like running through the parking lot before you jump in the pool. Just jump.
4. Missing punctuation, missing words – Read the essay aloud; many times you can hear mistakes that your eyes skimmed over.
5. Misspelled words – use a spellchecking program.

I strongly encourage you to make an outline before you write. It doesn't have to be overly-structured or complex but it will help you clarify what you want to write and how you want to write it which will result in a clearer, more cohesive essay.