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## 6

# Analyzing Argument

**A**nalysis is the act of investigating how something works. It involves seeing how individual parts add up to the whole, how specific aspects figure into the overall operation. If we were to analyze a car engine, we would try to figure out how individual components—the pistons, carburetor, battery, air filter—contribute to the working machine. If we were to analyze a novel, we would ask how characters, plot, setting, and narrative style figure into the whole aesthetic experience. The same goes with analyzing argument. We can ask how specific rhetorical moves work in the overall piece, how the line of reasoning proceeds, how examples support the main claim, how opposition is countered, how underlying values give way to appeals, or how the writer engages the intended audience.

## THE ANALYTICAL POSTURE

**A**nalyzing an argument requires reading with a specific goal: to understand how the argument works. Reading analytically calls for a particular posture, one that is different from some of our most basic intellectual reflexes. When we are reading an argument, we may feel the reflex to respond—to seek out points of agreement or disagreement. We might ask ourselves, *Do I agree or disagree? Do I like the point being made or not? Do I like this author or not?* But in analysis, such questions must be put aside. Even if we find ourselves outraged by or in total agreement with the argument, we have to think in analytical terms. After all, an analysis seeks to make claims of fact rather than claims of value.

Sometimes, it's difficult to put aside the basic reflex to agree or disagree, especially if the argument itself is heated. For example, consider the following argumentative passage from Cameron Johnson:

Facebook is fun. It connects people to old friends and, many would say, it even generates new friendships. But here's a question that's not often asked: so what? Even if we accept the idea that friends confirmed on FB are anything close to real friendship (and only the most giddy among us would), we might ask ourselves if another corporate controlled friend-making device should be so celebrated. While America is well known as a civilization absolutely turned in on itself, unaware of its own history, ignorant of the grisly business just outside its borders, millions of otherwise savvy thinkers are spending countless hours learning what their e-friends are drinking or feeling after drinking whatever they drank. Certainly, FB fans would say that many users trade important views about war, poverty, history, religion, and so on. But there's nothing about FB itself that urges hard reflection on such matters. In fact, the medium works, primarily, to thrust quick blurby opinions back and forth. From what I've seen in my admittedly limited experience, FB is yet another bourgeois tool for celebrating *me*, my personal thoughts, and my closed bubble of acquaintances. Like an electronic junior high clique, it reinforces a pre-adolescent take on the world. Like *Fox News*, like most morning news programs, like most talk radio, like mainstream sports, FB bolsters the everything-I-like-about-my-life mentality that civilizations, at some point, must evolve beyond.

We might have a range of responses to the passage: *Hell, yes! It's totally true! No way! I love Facebook! What if Facebook has made my life bigger, not smaller? I hate Cameron Johnson!* But such responses veer toward claims of value rather than claims of fact. They fall into the argument about Facebook rather than remaining outside of the argument on analytical ground. To be an analytical reader, we have to ask how the passage works. We have to ask what premises the passage puts forward, how it seeks to convince us of each premise, how it appeals to shared values, how it relies on examples to create a convincing reality.

Analyzing an argument is commonly called *rhetorical analysis* because we are trying to discover the basic rhetorical strategies—those discussed in the previous chapters: Claims, Appeals, Examples, Evidence, Counterarguments, Concessions, Qualifiers, and Assumptions. If we can point to these argumentative moves and understand the intended audience, we are well on the way to analysis. It can be tricky business because these moves are not evident. (Writers do not go out of their way to tell us what they're up to!) But if we can, for example, identify an appeal to value amid a range of other moves, we begin to understand how the argument functions. Here's how we might begin to identify the moves in Johnson's passage about Facebook:

ALLUSIONS:	To <i>Fox News</i> , talk radio, mainstream sports
APPEALS TO VALUE:	To the value of world knowledge, history, maturity
APPEAL TO LOGIC:	“Even if we accept the idea that friends confirmed on FB are anything close to real friendship (and only the most giddy among us would), we might ask ourselves if another corporate mediated friend-making device should be so celebrated.”
CONCESSION:	“Facebook is fun.”
COUNTERARGUMENT:	“But there’s nothing about FB itself that urges hard reflection on such matters. In fact, the medium works, primarily, to thrust quick blurby opinions back and forth.”
QUALIFIER:	“From what I’ve seen in my admittedly limited experience, . . .”

Once we’ve identified these basic rhetorical ingredients, we are on an analytical path. But analysis goes far beyond labeling the parts. Good analysis involves explaining *how* something works, how each part functions in the whole. It is not enough to simply call something an appeal to value and then move on. The following example not only identifies an appeal but also explains *how the appeal works* in Johnson’s passage:

Johnson’s argument against Facebook relies on several appeals to value—especially to the concept of world knowledge. Johnson calls on readers to condemn Facebook primarily because it fixes users’ concentration on personal, even petty, rather than global issues. The worst parts of American culture, he argues, are those that turn people’s attention inward away from a world of difference. The passage suggests that global consciousness is inherently good while self-involvement is a form of arrested development, a reflex that keeps people and entire civilizations from maturing. The appeal is most apparent in the description of FB users as junior high children who disregard the bigger world beyond their own small social network.

Staying on the analytical path is difficult. But the path does lead to new insights. In fact, the goal of analysis is just that: to discover something about a text—to see some complexity, some underlying connections, some underlying principle. Analysis should lead us to some better, richer understanding of the thing itself. All three sample analyses in this chapter achieve that richer understanding. They each identify rhetorical moves, explain how the moves work, and then articulate some insight about the text being analyzed.

In his analysis of Chief Seattle's speech (pp. 113–116), Andrew Buchner discovers an important layer—something that a quick glance might not reveal. After carefully walking through specific rhetorical strategies in the speech, Buchner finds an interesting and subtle tension within Seattle's concession:

So, while Seattle's speech can be broadly viewed as a concession, it is a concession *on his own terms*. He hasn't assented to the superiority of the white way of living. He hasn't conceded that he has been beaten by the better opponent. He only concedes to the fact that his wave has crested and spilled onto the shore, whereas the white man's wave may simply be further out at sea.

In her analysis of a Benetton clothing ad, Megan Ward discovers something about the interplay between the ad and its broader context. The ad itself (p. 124) says very little. But through careful analysis, Ward shows that its complexity is bound to the cultural arguments it quietly engages:

Benetton engages its audience on an "immediate, emotional level" with the bare images of meat so starkly presented. But when we acknowledge the ad's context—all the cultural debates about race, difference and equality—we can see how it argues on a "much broader stage."

And in his analysis of *Avatar* (pp. 128–130), Benjamin Wetherbee discovers a powerful tension in the movie's implied values:

Here, however, enters *Avatar's* logical contradiction. The movie's explosively violent final act implies what most action films do (e.g., the *Rambo* and *Lethal Weapon* franchises): real results, ultimately, come only from manning up and settling matters through armed conflict. This macho, right-wing truism, popular among American film audiences, appears most transparently in the climactic final battle, wherein Sully expresses unequivocal joy at the chance to fight and kill the merciless colonel who had been his superior officer. The movie glorifies this moment, even as it gainsays the Na'vi wisdom that killing should be only an affair of sad necessity. In its finale, *Avatar* does not bemoan the violence it presents. The violence is meant to be fun. As audiences uncritically tag along on this final explosive ride, they accept its logic; they accept the "git-'er-done" attitude that values decisive, violent action, and rebukes diplomacy and dialogue.

All of these discoveries are the result of powerful analysis—close inspection of the argumentative parts. Each writer (Buchner, Ward, Wetherbee) comes to a new understanding about the original argument.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

To understand how an argument works (analysis), we must understand what it is arguing (summary). The *how* depends upon the *what*. Usually, rhetorical analysis relies on an initial, brief summary. For instance, if we were conducting an analysis of Holly Wren Spaulding's essay, "In Defense of Darkness" (from Chapter 5), we first would need to understand it to accurately portray its claims:

In her argument, Holly Wren Spaulding celebrates the power of darkness, genuine darkness that is not injured by artificial light. She explains how nighttime gives birth to vital dimensions of life: connectivity to others, an ability to wonder, the reflex to extend outward and feel something other than fear. Part of this celebration involves condemning the increasing drive to illuminate the world. She denounces the uncritical and deeply engrained habit of keeping on the lights.

After we get a good sense of the argument, we can begin to understand how it works, how Spaulding urges readers to believe in something that is different from, even contrary to, mainstream assumptions. Without that initial basic understanding, analysis is nearly impossible.

And even after we summarize, when we enter analytical territory, we still need summary. For instance, notice how the following passage begins with a brief summary statement and then moves to analysis. In this case, summary and analysis work together. The power of the analysis depends upon a close and accurate summary:

Spaulding begins her fifth paragraph with a general point about modern industrial society. She says that we, in this current age, favor electrical light—that it defines our lives. This characterization puts her argument, and her readers, in time—in the long epic narrative of the human species. She describes herself and readers as "We modern, industrial, technological Homo sapiens," which puts us in proportion within the bigger human story. And this desire for proportion—for understanding ourselves in proper relation with the rest of the world—is a major component of Spaulding's argument.

## SUMMARY VERSUS ANALYSIS

While summary is important to good analysis, it can also become a problem. It can overshadow the analytical moves. If we are doing analysis (if analysis is the goal), then we must be careful to keep summary from taking over—from eclipsing our explanation of how the argument works. This can be a difficult path. In the following passages, a writer examines Ryan Brown's essay (from Chapter 2). In the first, the writer strictly summarizes. In the second, the writer identifies Brown's appeal to value but then

shifts into summary, merely restating the argument rather than analyzing the appeal. And in the third, the writer genuinely analyzes Brown's argumentative move:

**Summary:** In his third paragraph, Brown says that we have lost the intimate dialogue that comes from walking in our everyday lives. He goes on to blame cars for pulling us away from downtown communities and to suburban shopping centers.

**Almost-Analysis:** In Brown's sixth paragraph, he appeals to value. He argues that our communities are our homes. But, he says, we don't treat them as such. Instead, we drive quickly through them for the sake of convenience.

**Analysis:** In Brown's sixth paragraph, he appeals to value by connecting the over-reliance on cars and the breakdown of community. Brown draws our attention to the inherent good in familiarity, location, and social connectedness. He then shows how car culture undermines those principles—those ideals that people seem to cherish but also ignore on their way to the shopping plaza on the other side of town.

In the following examples, we see the writer summarizing, almost-analyzing, and finally analyzing Holly Wren Spaulding's argument. Notice the critical difference between almost-analysis and analysis:

**Summary:** In her third paragraph, Spaulding tells about her city friends' awe at the dark skies above her home. She explains that they can hardly believe the beauty of all the stars.

**Almost-Analysis:** Spaulding appeals to our yearning for calm. She says that our cultural reflex is to brighten up the landscape, to turn away from darkness and watch only what is easily visible. This, she explains, is a result of consumer capitalism.

**Analysis:** Spaulding appeals to our yearning for calm. In her testimony about the silent canoe ride across the lake, she describes, in lush detail, moments of reflection and discovery. These moments are contrasted by descriptions of fast-paced mainstream life that is lit up, overly bright, and "insomnia-producing." In her personal testimony, the darkness is characterized as inspiring and even curative while everyday mainstream life is characterized by isolation and petty consumer fulfillment.

To accomplish genuine analysis, the writer has to both identify the argumentative move (such as an appeal to value) and then *explain how it works*. If we discover an appeal to value, we have to describe what value, what cherished ideal, the writer appeals to and how that drives the argument forward or how it supports the main claim.

## FOUR COMMON PITFALLS

Rhetorical analysis comes with a few unique dangers—four traps to avoid. First, some writers get lured inside the points of the argument they are analyzing, and rather than remain outside of that argument, on solid analytical ground, they begin **making a case** for the argument. In the first passage below, the writer further develops—makes a case for—Brown's idea. It's as if the writer has suddenly been possessed by Brown. In the second passage, the writer analyzes Brown's argument:

**Making a Case for Brown:** Brown shows why communities in our modern civilization are breaking down. We elect the car over our own feet. And when we get into cars, roll up the windows, turn on the tunes, and drive away, we have little interaction with the people around us. We learn to see the world around us as a blurry landscape on the road to our singular destination.

**Analyzing Brown:** Brown shows why communities in our modern civilization are breaking down. Through a series of connected premises, he describes a cause/effect relationship between consumer habits, driving patterns, and urban planning. The cause/effect relationship is developed over several paragraphs that detail everyday life for mainstream Americans in typical towns like Brown's.

The second pitfall involves **describing the effect** of the original argument. In this situation, the writer describes how the argument (or a part of it) might affect an audience. This is not inherently wrong. After all, rhetorical analysis does involve an understanding of the argument's impact. But, as you will see, dealing with effect can be tricky. In the following passage, the writer examines Lynda Smith's essay (from Chapter 3) and *appropriately* considers the effect on readers:

Lynda Smith likens technological dependence to drug dependence. She walks through the harmful effects of chemical addiction and compares them to the quieter, but equally ruinous, effects of technological craving. This comparison appeals to readers' knowledge of drug addiction—its peril, its obvious harm to individuals and communities. It taps into the emotional baggage associated with drugs.

But imagining the effect quickly gets dangerous. After all, we don't know exactly how an audience will respond. We cannot assume that readers or viewers will automatically laugh, think, cry, or get angry. But we can examine how a specific argumentative move corresponds to an audience's characteristics. This is a fine line. The danger is that the original argument (the text being analyzed) gets left behind while the focus shifts to imagined audience responses. The following passage crosses into dangerous territory

because it begins to move away from Smith's argument and emphasizes particular audience responses:

Lynda Smith's argument strikes at the core for many readers who are already leery about the latest cell phone technology. Her claims make us realize that *we are surrounded by a growing and alarmingly powerful wave of technological progress. Because we cannot, alone, stave off the power of corporate America, we feel her argument at an emotional level. We become afraid for our own ability to live an independent life.*

While the previous pitfall focuses too much on an imagined audience, the third pitfall involves **describing the author's intent**. This strategy is fraught with problems. Because we cannot genuinely know a writer, advertising agency, or movie director's thoughts, we must be careful not to conjure them based on one argument. In the following example, a writer examining Carl Rogers' essay in Chapter 4 strays from rhetorical analysis into imagining the interior life of the author, suggesting, for example, that he is "deeply troubled":

Rogers hopes people truly understand the arguments to which they are responding. Because he is a psychologist, he is deeply troubled when someone puts forth an argument without first listening and then accurately restating the original argument. He thinks this shows a lack of personal courage, and he values courage above all else. Rogers wants people to be more courageous which he thinks will lead to everyone getting along better.

**Evaluation** is the fourth pitfall. In evaluation, we make and defend judgments about the worth of an argument. We condemn it, celebrate it, or explain that it's okay but not great. Analysis does none of that. It avoids judging the success, the worth, the soundness, the acceptability of any of its claims. Analysis avoids taking a side for or against the argument. In the first of the following lists, the statements judge the worth of Brown's, Smith's, or Johnson's argument. They are claims of value. The second list makes analytical points (or claims of fact).

#### **Evaluation (Claims of Value)**

Brown does a good job of supporting his main idea.

Smith's ideas are right on target.

Brown effectively convinces me that we are reliant on automobile culture.

I don't accept Smith's claims.

I am suspicious of Johnson's ideas because they seem ungrounded.



## Analysis (Claims of Fact)

Brown relies on personal testimony to set up his main idea.

Smith develops an appeal to need with several paragraphs.

Brown directly addresses opposing assumptions about transportation.

Johnson immediately appeals to emotion by connecting the topic, telemarketers, to a predatory economic climate—to the fear and quiet anger associated with corporate power.

Now, let's look at the difference between evaluation and analysis in a full paragraph. In the first passage, the writer openly condemns Johnson's passage about Facebook (p. 104). This passage is clearly evaluative because it judges the soundness of Johnson's points. The second passage is clearly analytical. It avoids judging Johnson's argument and, instead, explains its rhetorical strategies.

**Evaluative:** Johnson's argument mischaracterizes Facebook users. He suggests that users think primarily about themselves and their own small social circles. But users have lives beyond the website. They heal, govern, administrate, build, preach, sell, and even teach in their everyday lives. While Johnson's claims against the broader popular culture might hold some water, his insistence that all Facebook users think like adolescents ignores their real non-Facebook lives and caricaturizes the reality.

**Analytical:** Johnson's argument against Facebook relies on several appeals to value—especially to the concept of world knowledge. Johnson calls on readers to condemn Facebook primarily because it fixes users' concentration on personal, even petty, rather than global issues. The worst parts of American culture, he argues, are those that turn people's attention inward, away from a world of difference. The passage suggests that global consciousness is inherently good while self-involvement is a form of arrested development, a reflex that keeps people and entire civilizations from maturing. The appeal is most apparent in the description of FB users as junior high children who disregard the bigger world beyond their own small social network.