

Writing Effective Informative Essays

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial examines the writing of informative essays by considering two of the most common forms of informative essay: analytical essays and definition essays. It addresses this topic in three parts:

1. Informative Essays
2. Analytical Essays
3. Definition Essays

1. Informative Essays

Informative essays are written to instruct, describe, explain, advise — to inform — readers. Even though informative essays sometimes require writers to interpret data or take a position on an issue, clear and objective communication of information is the primary goal.



HINT

When writing an informative essay it can be helpful to ask yourself, "What do I want readers to know after reading my essay?" This question must be answered in all writing that is meant to inform readers.

2. Analytical Essays

Analysis is the process of breaking something (e.g., an idea, concept, issue, etc.) down into smaller parts in order to understand it better. In composition, analysis is most often performed on a written work, a set of data, or a situation, but almost anything can be analyzed.



TERM TO KNOW

Analysis

Analysis is the intellectual process in which something (e.g., a written work, a set of data, a situation, etc.) is broken down into its component parts in order to understand it better.

An **analytical essay**, therefore, is a type of informative essay that analyzes the parts of something, and explains their meaning, purpose, or result in relation to the whole. It's the writing that is done when analysis is

performed, no matter what's being analyzed. You can analyze, and write an analytical essay about, the results of a survey, or the findings of a clinical study, or the characters in a novel or movie, among (many) other things.



TERM TO KNOW

Analytical Essay

An analytical essay is a type of informative essay that assesses and evaluates the component parts of a thing (e.g., a written work, a data set, a situation, etc.) and explains their meaning, purpose, or result as they relate to the whole.

The purpose of every analysis is to examine some or all of the component parts of a thing to draw conclusions about the whole. Similarly, the analytical essay's purpose is to report what the writer found as a result of this process.



HINT

Note that analytical essays use the components of the thing being analyzed as evidence to support the conclusions it makes about the whole. By doing so, they differ from, for example, research papers that rely on the conclusions provided in external sources.

While the findings (and interpretations of findings) of an analysis may be debatable, they must be factual, as far as the writer can determine. The information can be interpreted differently, but the writer must report results accurately. Analytical essays must provide descriptions and summaries of the thing being analyzed (e.g., a passage from a novel in which a character is introduced).

However, writers of analytical essays must do more than describe and summarize. The purpose of the analysis, and the essay's conclusion, must involve *meaning-making*: an effort to discover and reveal the purpose or value of the thing (or component of the thing).



EXAMPLE Students are assigned to write an analytical essay about the characters in a novel (e.g., Toni Morrison's *Beloved*). The analysis necessary to complete this assignment might include consideration of the ways in which one of the main characters is (or is not) a foil for another. Or it might focus on the settings in the novel, and the way that comparing and contrasting them deepens readers' understanding of communities.

This type of analysis requires students to break the novel into its component parts, so that they can better understand the entire work.



EXAMPLE A business class evaluates a marketing strategy by analyzing magazine ads promoting a new brand of energy drink. Their analysis involves breaking down the ads into the elements they include (e.g., the colors, the setting, graphic images, the physical appearance of models, the words used in "ad copy," etc.).

Other analytical essays report on analysis of data.



THINK ABOUT IT

Consider statistics related to the incoming freshman class at your school. Which questions might you ask, and what assumptions might you make, about a change in the number of out-of-state students? Does the change indicate a broader shift at your school? Does a drop in enrollment indicate that student life might improve (as a

result of less congestion in facilities and less competition for places in required courses?)

No matter what is being analyzed, the analytical essay written about it must inform readers of the basis for all assumptions and conclusions. In effective analytical essays, data is sorted, evaluated and interpreted objectively.

3. Definition Essays

Instead of focusing on the parts of a whole, a **definition essay** describes, examines and sometimes re-defines the whole. It is an informative essay that explains the meaning of a complicated word or concept, or alters — by expanding or otherwise changing — the standard definition of a word or concept.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Essays that redefine an abstract concept like love or freedom, and essays that broaden the definition of "social" to include the meaning acquired since the arrival of Facebook, etc., both qualify as definition essays.



TERM TO KNOW

Definition Essay

A definition essay is an informative essay that explains the meaning of a complicated word or concept or alters — by expanding or otherwise changing — the standard definition of a word or concept.

Whatever definition or redefinition you propose in a definition essay must be well-reasoned and supported by facts. By itself, your opinion is not sufficient. However, you don't need to discuss every alternative to your proposal, as long as you don't feel dishonest in leaving them out. Sometimes a commonly-accepted definition must be challenged so that your alternative can take its place in the reader's mind.

When writing a definition essay, it's often a good idea to set parameters to limit what you will and will not consider, and to clearly communicate those parameters to readers.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Suppose you're writing a definition essay to redefine bravery; to broaden the current definition to include the willingness to sacrifice something (e.g., comfort, leisure, etc.) to benefit others. It would be a good idea to state, early in the essay, that you don't want to diminish the sacrifices made by soldiers (for example), but that you want readers to understand that the current definition omits many important acts of bravery.

This isn't the only kind of definition essay. An essay written to define "home" that doesn't explicitly challenge readers' understanding of the word still qualifies as a definition essay. Although it does not redefine the word, the essay uses evidence and reasoning to explain the meaning of a complicated word or concept.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Suppose an academic scholar is writing an essay that argues for a new definition of illiteracy — one that takes social, online, and technologically-based communication into account. This essay also qualifies as a definition essay. The scholar would need to consider a number of examples, including some difficult ones (e.g., a person who is literate in social media terms, but illiterate in traditional terms). The impact of changes in the definitions of "illiteracy," "literacy" and other terms on academia (and society) are potentially enormous.



SUMMARY

This tutorial investigated the writing of informative essays by focusing on two of the most common types: analytical and definition essays. Analytical essays analyze the parts of a thing, explaining their meanings, purposes, or results as they relate to the whole. Definition essays explain the meaning of complicated words or concepts, or alter — by expanding or otherwise changing — the standard definition.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



TERMS TO KNOW

Analysis

Analysis is the intellectual process of breaking something (a text, data set, situation, etc.) down into smaller parts for the purpose of understanding it better.

Analytical Essay

An analytical essay is a type of informative essay that analyzes parts of an item (text, data set, situation, etc.) and explains their meaning, purpose, or result in relation to the whole.

Definition Essay

A definition essay is a type of informative essay that explains the meaning of a complicated word or concept or alters—by complicating, adding to, or otherwise changing—the standard definition of a word or concept.