

# ANALYZING ESSAYS

An essay is a **position** that has been developed and organized into a piece of writing. It contains a series of arguments designed to prove its thesis statement.

Authors use various **techniques and devices** to make their essays more persuasive. A technique or device can refer to the strategy the author employs to organize and present her ideas clearly (ex: cause and effect, definition, classification and division); it can also mean the use of logical and objective proofs to persuade readers that the arguments and thesis are valid (appeal to authority, empirical evidence). Finally, some writing techniques are more subtle and are designed to put the reader in a certain frame of mind so as to be more receptive to the essay (anecdote, tone, description). Analyzing an essay, therefore, goes beyond evaluating its main ideas; it also involves recognizing which techniques and devices the author has used and determining how effective you think they are.

*Note that this list is not comprehensive and that not all instructors use the same terms when discussing techniques and devices.*

**Allusion** in an essay involves a direct or indirect reference to some usually well-known person, place or event that is assumed to be known to the reader. This technique is used as a kind of shortcut to recall existing knowledge in order to reinforce the author's point. Example: *In Joseph Boyden's essay, "The Hurting", he describes rampant suicide rates on Indian reservations in northern Canada as a phenomenon "deadlier than any epidemic since the smallpox and tuberculosis eras." This is an allusion to the two centuries following first contact when roughly 90% of the indigenous peoples of the Americas were decimated by viruses brought by Europeans. The seriousness evoked through the use of this allusion tells us right away that the topic is also very serious.*

**Analogy** is the illustration of a new idea using one that is more familiar, where both share certain features. The result is that the reader can grasp the new idea more easily. Example: *Nerenberg suggests that global warming can be explained by imagining the Earth experiencing a fever.*

**Anecdote** is a short, simple and true story told by the author that is meant to illustrate a larger idea. This story could be an account of the author's personal experience or an historical account. An anecdote is often used at the beginning of an essay to subtly demonstrate the claim's validity before the actual thesis statement has been introduced. The use of anecdotes engages the reader and adds a personal dimension to the essay. Example: *Ted Gup uses the anecdote of watching his son do his homework to support his claim that the use of the internet for research has narrowed society's field of learning.*

**Appeal to authority** is when an author uses the research or opinions of an expert (or experts) in the field related to his/her claim. This device is used to strengthen the credibility of the author's claim. Example: *The author refers to noted urban planner, J.H. Crawford's belief that "Medieval urban forms are superior to everything that came before or has come since" to support his claim that we should develop car free cities.*

**Cause and Effect** is when an author suggests new logical connections between different elements. An essay may focus more on either origins (causes) or outcomes (effects) or look at both simultaneously. An author uses this technique to build causal relationships or links between things to argue a position. Example: *The widespread adoption of the automobile in modern urban centers has brought older people, infirm people, poor people and children into a worse situation than they were a hundred years ago.*

**Classification / Division** is a way of organizing information by creating categories. Classification means grouping things together into more general categories, and division means breaking things down into more specific categories. This technique can make a complex subject easier to understand by breaking it down, or give perspective and reveal the big picture by grouping elements together. Example: *Cross divides time into different categories based on how she sees people making use of their leisure hours: Busy Time, Leisure Time, and Travel Time.*

**Comparison / Contrast** Comparison is when the author relates two things to show how they are similar, while contrast is when the author relates two things to highlight their differences. This essay style provides context for its arguments and emphasizes its position in relation to that context. Example: *Canada, like other post-industrial societies, enjoys high literacy rates and a high average life expectancy. However, unlike France, Germany, and Japan, Canada's average real income is expected to drop by ten percent over the next five years. (\*See the TLC tipsheet on Comparison/Contrast Essays.)*

**Definition** Definition essays define a word, term, or concept in depth by providing a personal commentary on what the specific subject means. Authors may use this essay style to change the way the reader considers a particular word or idea. Example: *When we think of "the ghetto", we imagine scenes of urban misery, poverty and despair. Yet these so-called ghettos are often rich cultural hubs that inspire their residents with a sense of identity, pride and belonging.*

**Description** Unlike narration, which is used to order a sequence of events, the use of description suspends a moment in time through the detailed portrayal of physical characteristics. The effect is to give the reader a better understanding of an experience by involving the senses, thus allowing a more personal reaction to the essay. Example:

Compare “*I went swimming on a nice day*” with “*I could hear parrots calling and the sea foam whispering on the sand. The sun was warm on my face and arms as I waded into the cool turquoise water.*”

**Diction** (also referred to as **level of language**) refers to the author’s distinctive vocabulary choices to achieve a particular effect. Through the use of very formal or very informal language, the author adopts a different posture in the reader’s mind, affecting the essay’s overall impression. Compare “I utilize a complex and varied lexicon in all verbal communication” with “I speak street talk”. Example: Whereas both can be synonyms for “child”, the word “progeny” is an example of formal diction, and “kid” is an example of informal diction.

**Empirical evidence (or fact)** verifiable information used to support the author’s claim. The effect is to make the argument or claim seem valid. Example: *The author refers to the demolition of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 to support her claim.*

**Enumeration** is when an author provides a list of items to support his/her argument, applying numbers to the list. The effect is to give the essay a logical outline or structure. Example: *The author enumerates different ways to improve your vocabulary by providing a list of five different techniques.*

**Example** refers to the particular single item, fact, incident, or aspect that illustrates an idea or a general statement. Example: *The author uses the example of the Industrial Revolution to support her idea that machines have been replacing the need for manual work for a long time.*

**Irony** in essays is apparent when an author creates a deliberate contrast or reversal between appearance (what seems to be true) and truth (what the author really thinks). This is used to sharpen or highlight certain discords of reality in order to emphasise the assertion of a truth, making the assertion more persuasive. Example: *Christine, who had 546 “friends”, felt she had no one to talk to about her problems.*

**Metaphor / Simile** A metaphor is a non-literal comparison of two things that suggests common characteristics. Example: *Lawyers are vultures.* It is non-literal because we are not suggesting that lawyers have physically transformed into carrion-eating birds. Unlike metaphors, similes are comparisons using “like” or “as”. Example: *Lawyers are like vultures.* In both cases, the comparison creates an image causing the reader to see lawyers differently.

**Narration** is the act of telling a story by arranging its sequence of events. It is usually encountered in more personal essays. To create a certain effect, (suspense, empathy, outrage), authors use narration to skip over or change the order of events (called *flashback* and *flash-forward*), or to emphasize some details while disregarding others.

**Overstatement (hyperbole)** is an exaggerated remark or comment made by the author. Its effect is usually to make the tone more informal and/or humorous. It is not meant to be taken literally. Example: *I'm so hungry I could eat a horse. I have told you a million times. It was so cold even polar bears were wearing jackets.*

**Refutation (of opposing views)** is when an author presents one or more opposing views and explains why they are not as convincing as his/her own. Acknowledging and considering the essay's anti-thesis usually makes an author appear more credible and objective, hence more persuasive.

**Repetition** involves the author deliberately stating the same words, phrases, or ideas several times throughout a text, usually to emphasize a main idea or the main theme. This can make the author's ideas seem more cohesive.

**Rhetorical question** is a question posed by the author where the author implies that the answer is too obvious to require a reply. Therefore, the question is posed in order to persuade the reader to agree with the author. Example: *King poses a rhetorical question to persuade readers to understand his desire for a strategy of nonviolence in a conflict between nations. When he asks: "How much longer must we play at deadly war games before we heed the plaintive pleas of the unnumbered dead and maimed of past wars?" the reader is led to think about how throughout history there has been a great number of lives lost as the result of warring nations.*

**Satire** may occur when someone or something is ridiculed or made fun of. Satire usually exposes a vice or folly. This can be a difficult technique to spot or to explain, so do not use this unless you are sure you understand what you are supposed to do. Example: *When Birdboot first arrives to the theatre and tells Moon that he and the other theatre reviewers have decided that they will give the play good reviews if it is not too long, Stoppard is satirizing the inflated egos of theatre reviewers by exposing these critics as selfish people who care more about the play's infringement on their time than on the quality of the art.*

**Tone** is the effect of the author's choice of words on the overall mood of the essay. It refers not to *what* is said but *how* it is said. Tone can also refer to the author's attitude toward the subject. The tone of an essay may be, for example, indignant, humorous, personal, casual, nostalgic, melodramatic, or objective. The author's use of an objective

tone may help make her arguments appear more convincing, whereas a humorous tone helps make readers more sympathetic to the author. More than one tone may be present in an essay.

**Understatement** is when an author presents something as having less importance than it does in reality. This is often done in a humorous way. Example 1: *There are worse things than being loved by everyone around you.* Example 2: *Upon seeing a friend completely covered with poison ivy, you might say "That looks slightly uncomfortable" as an understatement.*