



School of Liberal Arts

University Writing Center

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The Critical Analysis of an Argument in W132

An **analysis** assignment calls for a close reading of one piece of writing and the use of specific details from the piece to support an **assessment** you make of that particular piece of writing. Your **assessment** in a **critical analysis** states whether or not you think the author successfully supports the **argument**, or **claim** through the logical presentation of convincing **reasons** backed up by appropriate **evidence**. The **argument** referred to in such articles does not mean an angry, confrontational tirade or outburst. Instead, **argument** means a reasoned presentation of details which contribute to the support of a particular **argument** (point of view, or position) concerning a controversial topic. According to *The Aims of Argument* by Crusius and Channel, in the **critical analysis** assignment you examine how an argument is put together and determine "how well the argument achieves its aim and whether it advances a position that merits respect" (16).

You will need to read the article closely, examining its **assumptions**, assessing its **reasons** and **evidence**, and weighing its **conclusions**. Then, in your **critical analysis** paper you state your decision about whether the argument in the article is clear and about whether the author is convincing, based on the details the author includes, not on whether or not you agree with what the author says. **Critical analysis** papers are usually written in the third person, not using first person pronouns such as "I," "me," or "my," or second person pronouns such as "you."

REMEMBER TO FOLLOW YOUR INSTRUCTOR'S SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- Examine the situation prompting the author to write the article, often referred to as the **rhetorical context**. Try to determine why the article was written. Is there an ongoing debate in other articles about the topic which has prompted this author to write the article? Is the article directed toward a specifically identifiable audience? What characteristics, interests, and/or experiences would the people in this audience have in common? Would they be likely to have any biases concerning the topic? What does the author hope to achieve by writing this article?
- Identify the **author**. What is his or her occupation? Personal background? Political leanings? Sometimes you will need to consult other sources to find information about the author, such as the Internet or biographical dictionaries.
- Look at the **title**. What does it tell you about the **argument** the author will be developing in the article?
- Look over the **format** of the article. Are there subdivisions that might give you some idea of the structure of the argument?

- Determine whether the article is a **primary** or **secondary** source of information. **Primary** sources are original sources: documents, speeches, laboratory studies, field research reports, eyewitness accounts, observations based on personal experience. In **secondary sources** writers make comments about their observations of what others have said or done.
- Summarize the **main claim**, or thesis, of the article. What is the main point the author is seeking to make? The author may or may not state this directly, but you should always state your idea of his or her **main claim** in your analysis as a complete sentence. What are the **qualifiers** (exceptions) the author includes about the claim? (What words or phrases does the author include to indicate the claim might not hold true in every situation or circumstance? What are the circumstances under which the claim is true? Look for phrases such as “on the whole,” “typically,” “usually,” or “most of the time.”)
- Determine what underlying **assumptions** the author might have. What ideas, beliefs, philosophies, does the author seem to accept as mutually understood between himself or herself and the audience? Are these **assumptions** valid?
- Identify and evaluate the **reasons** the author gives for making the **main claim**. Are they really *good* reasons? Are they relevant to the **main claim**? Sometimes authors present only one or two reasons, often spending much time developing and supporting just one reason.
- Identify, analyze, and evaluate the **evidence** given in support of the **reasons**. What kinds of evidence are given (data, anecdotes, case studies, citations from authorities, research studies)? Is the evidence *good* (sufficient, accurate, relevant, credible)? Question evidence in terms of both quality and quantity.
- Note **refutations**. These are efforts the author makes to anticipate objections and answer them in advance. Try to determine whether or not the author demonstrates clearly why these objections, or **counterclaims**, do not undermine the basic argument the author is trying to make.
- Note **key terms**. Does the author define these adequately? Would most readers agree with these definitions? What clarifications might be needed?
- Note **analogies** and **comparisons**. What connections does the author make between ideas and concrete examples? Are these appropriate? Are the things being compared truly similar.

NOTE: A **critical analysis** paper contains some summary of the article being analyzed, but the summary should be secondary to the analysis you make of the argument being developed in the article. Remember to structure your **critical analysis** paper in good writing format, with an **introduction** clearly identifying the topic, the article, the author’s **main claim**, and, briefly, your assessment of the **argument**; **body paragraphs** in which you present your detailed **analysis** of the argument; and a **conclusion** summarizing your evaluation of the author’s argument.

Created by Mary Jo Pride, Spring 1999

Work Cited: Crusius, Timothy and Carolyn Channel. The Aims of Argument. 2nd ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1998.

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