

Analyzing an Argument

➤ WHAT IS THE WRITER'S CLAIM OR THESIS?

1. Can you summarize the principal claim that's being asserted?
2. What assumptions—stated and unstated—are being made by the writer about the subject and the audience of the piece, and do you buy them?

➤ WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT OR EVIDENCE IS OFFERED ON BEHALF OF THE CLAIM?

1. Are the examples and the analogies relevant, and are they convincing?
2. Do statistics and data, if they're used, seem accurate and complete? Are they manipulated to allow only for the writer's interpretation? Can they be interpreted differently?
3. Are authorities or references cited in the work actually authorities on the subject, can they be regarded as impartial?
4. Are important terms satisfactorily defined?
5. Is the logic valid and the reasoning sound?
6. What kind of appeal is the writer making to the audience—emotional, ethical, moral, political, theocratic? Is this kind of appeal acceptable? Does it fit the subject?

➤ DOES THE WRITER—AND THE ARGUMENT—SEEM FAIR TO YOU?

1. Are counterarguments adequately considered? Do they even need to be?
2. Do you see evidence of dishonesty, or attempts by the writer to manipulate the audience?
3. How does the writer establish the image of herself or himself that you sense in the writing—what style, tone, and voice has the writer chosen in order to convey the underlying "message" of the piece, and the position of the writer his- or herself?

➤ CAN YOU CHARACTERIZE THE KIND OF WRITING THIS IS, AND THE TYPE OF LANGUAGE THAT'S BEING USED?

1. Is the piece a polemic (an argument), an expository (an explanation) or descriptive piece, narrative (a story) or lyric (a song or poem)—or a blend of more than one of these?
2. Is the language mostly concrete, or mostly abstract—does it deal mostly in things or ideas? Does this strategy work for the piece?
3. Do the sentences and paragraphs have variety, balance, economy, complexity, poetry?
4. What kinds of symbol, image and metaphor does the writer deploy? Where? Why?
5. Does the opening of the piece grab your attention with something colorful or controversial or compelling? Why does this make the paragraph more interesting? How does it help frame the rest of the piece?
6. Is the piece of writing clear, is the organization effective, do the transitions between paragraphs and between ideas work well, make sense?

➤ WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN THE WRITING AND THE READER?

1. What are you, as reader, being asked by the writer to do or believe? Why?
2. Is the intended audience of the piece clear? Who is that audience, and why has the writer chosen that audience for the piece?

➤ IF YOU WERE ASKED TO RESTATE THE WRITER'S INTENTION—HIS OR HER IMPLICIT AGENDA BEHIND THE PIECE OF WRITING—WHAT WOULD THAT BE?

1. Are you able, during your reading of the piece, to separate facts from judgments from opinions that the writer offers up?
2. Is there a political or emotional bias to the writing? What is it? Is it okay with you, as reader?