

Below you will find an annotated version of a real student essay. Read the essay and then examine my annotations running along the right hand margin in order to get a really good sense of why this essay is such a good example of the kind of analysis you should be doing in your own essays for this class.

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Week 3 Assignment

In the excerpt entitled "Idiot Nation," Michael Moore discusses the state of the educational system in America and what he feels is the cause of its deterioration. Moore touches on a few key reasons why education in America is failing which include elected political leaders, a lack of qualified school teachers and corporations. His belief is that political leaders throughout America are more interested in building more "bombers" and holding hearings about inappropriate television shows than about focusing on improving America's educational system. Moore also points out the irony with politicians because they refuse to fund education but are angry about how America has fallen behind other nations in that aspect. A shortage of qualified teachers is also mentioned in Moore's excerpt as a reason why the educational system is failing. Moore cites the low salaries as the primary reason for this shortage which has resulted in uncertified teachers being brought from overseas to teach. Lastly, Moore addresses Corporate America's involvement with schools across the nation and what their true intentions are. He calls attention to the fact that corporations provide funding to schools in exchange for a number of things that may consist of advertising, access to children's search habits or exclusive rights to

Comment: The first 2/3 of this opening paragraph is simply a detailed, thorough introduction and summary of the work to be analyzed below – this student is doing a good job imagining an "ignorant" audience who has most definitely *not* read Moore's work and so needs *everything* explained to it

Notice that there are no direct quotations from the text in this opening paragraph – the writer has taken pains to summarize the text in his own words without relying on the author to say things for him

vending machines. Moore's use of his own credibility as a source, sarcasm and insults as argumentative strategies in his excerpt result in the reader questioning the validity of his accusations and becoming distracted from the true meaning of his argument and therefore are ineffective.

Throughout "Idiot Nation" Moore insults politicians and the people of America on numerous occasions. Although this may be his style, it can be a distraction to some who may feel insulted by the harsh words. For example, when Moore begins his excerpt and is pointing out how over 44 million people are unable to read in the United States, he states "A nation that not only churns out illiterate students BUT GOES OUT OF ITS WAY TO REMAIN IGNORANT AND STUPID is a nation that should not be running the world" (133). And in a statement describing President Bush, Moore states "An idiot leader of an idiot nation" (133). Some may not find this offensive, but others might which can result in the reader losing sight of the author's true intentions. Moore's attempt to convey his disgust with the educational system through insults is not an effective argumentative strategy and should be re-considered so that his true message is communicated to readers.

An additional example in which Moore uses an insult as an argumentative strategy is when he is talking about Bush and his speech to Yale graduates in 2001. He says "Our Idiot-in-Chief does nothing to hide his ignorance – he even brags about it" (134). An important component of an effective argument is ensuring that the author keeps in mind the audience's emotions and not solely his/her own. Moore fails to do this by being insensitive to the readers' emotions and by continuously insulting politicians throughout the excerpt.

A second strategy observed throughout "Idiot Nation" is the absence of sources that support Moore's statistics and accusations. Rather than supplying the reader with

Comment: Here the writer has presented us with a clear, focused thesis statement in which he sets forth for us the specific "argumentative strategies" he sees Moore using in his writing. The writer also makes an evaluation of the effectiveness of those strategies in terms of the overall success (or not, in this case) of Moore's writing – *exactly* what a thesis statement should do

Notice that this thesis does not hinge on the student's opinion of Moore's ideas or politics but rather on Moore's work as a communicator, as a writer

Comment: These are excellent topic statements for the paragraph because they immediately focus us on something specific Moore is trying to do in his writing in order to convince us of something, AND they tell us why the writing device or stylistic choice is in this case not working very well to build the credibility of Moore's arguments

Comment: Here, right after the textual quote meant to illustrate the paragraph's topic point, we get extended analysis which does two things: explain and explicate the quote we just read, and expand upon and link back to the paragraph's topic point *and* to the original thesis argument

This is the pattern that all of your internal paragraphs should follow. **Topic, Quote introduction, Quote / Textual Reference, Explanation & Analysis, Link back to Topic & Thesis**

Comment: Notice that every paragraph is anchored with a textual reference – in this case a direct quote, although the student could also have chosen to just paraphrase a given moment or passage from Moore's text (in which case he would still need to insert a parenthetical page citation marking where the idea came from in the text)

Comment: Here the student is reminding us that he is breaking down his examination of the text into separate, discrete strategies that he's analyzing in more detail. This phrase helps him organize his discussion and it helps us maintain our focus on his specific points about the text

references/sources to claims he makes, Moore relies on his own credibility as being sufficient.

For example, when citing a statistic about how many Americans cannot read in the United States, rather than supplying the information about where Moore obtained the statistic, he says “How did I learn this statistic? Well, I read it” (133). This strategy may prove successful with readers who are familiar with Michael Moore’s work and trust his word, but this may not be the case with readers who have never heard of Moore or for the more skeptical readers who prefer actual data.

Comment: The student uses this phrase frequently to introduce textual evidence – a very good habit to get in to because it signals to us the fact that he is about to back up his claims about the text with actual textual evidence

Comment: And again, the student has capped his detailed discussion of a specific textual moment with a fine evaluation of it as a piece of writing that either works or does not work – in this case does not – and why that is so

Another example in which Moore fails to provide an adequate citation is in a section regarding school enrollment. Moore states that “almost 10 percent of U.S. public schools have enrollments that are more than 25 percent greater than the capacity of their permanent buildings” (141). The above statement would be more credible if Moore were to supply where further information can be located should the reader wish to research Moore’s claims in more depth. This will enable credibility to be established more quickly and perhaps result in the reader being persuaded by Moore’s argument or at least more cognizant of the state of the educational system in America.

Comment: Here, as he does throughout the essay, the student has taken pains to integrate the textual quote into the rest of his sentence so that it all fits grammatically

He has quoted the text correctly: by using a lower case “a” for *almost* as the first word of his quote he is signaling that he has dropped off words from the beginning of the original sentence (instead of using three dots or ellipsis points, which in this case would be incorrect).

And he has made sure to put the period on the outside of the quotation marks, after the parenthetical page reference where it belongs.

A third argumentative strategy that Moore is notorious for is sarcasm. For example, when discussing requirements at colleges and universities across the U.S, Moore states, “Who cares if 70 percent of those who graduate from America’s colleges are not required to learn a foreign language? Isn’t the rest of the world speaking English now? And if they aren’t, hadn’t all those damn foreigners better GET WITH THE PROGRAM?” (136). Another example in which Moore uses sarcasm is when he is introducing the topic of how some groups are making a difference in our schools rather than just complaining about the state of the educational system. Moore says “Yes, it’s Corporate America, whose generosity to our nation’s schools is just one more example

of their continuing patriotic service” (143). At first it appears as if Moore is praising corporations for their help, but as the reader continues on, it is apparent that Moore is in fact being sarcastic. It is important to recognize here that readers may have a difficult time differentiating between the sarcastic instances and those intended to be serious. This may result in the readers becoming confused and thus unable to interpret Moore’s message successfully. The inability to interpret Moore’s message may leave readers discouraged and unwilling to read the remainder of his excerpt or other materials related to Moore.

Moore’s argumentative strategies are ineffective in helping to make his overall point. His continuous use of sarcasm and insults distract the reader from the overall argument and the lack of citations supporting his statements makes it difficult to establish credibility. Moore should explore other argumentative strategies that are suited for varying audiences and that prevent his own emotions from appearing so often throughout the text.

Comment: What’s nice about this summative analysis is that it keeps the focus on *us*, the readers, and how Moore’s decisions as a writer greatly affect and impact how we understand him. Here the student is really beginning to understand well the connections between form and content: he is recognizing, after a close analysis of Moore’s habits as a writer, that *how* one speaks has absolutely everything to do with *what* one wishes to convey about something, no matter what that is. Getting all of you to grasp this fundamental concept is one of the most primary goals of this class, of all of the writing you do here.

Comment: And here is a final summation of the detailed analysis and discussion he has just completed. It is a summation of what this student sees as the indubitable links between how Moore writes and what Moore manages, eventually, to communicate to us (or not). This student sees now that ultimately Moore’s ideas rise or fall not because we agree or disagree with them but because he has succeeded (or not) in communicating them well. His writing, ultimately, is about the writing, not about the ideas themselves.