

Writing and Tutorial Center

Critical Analysis of Nonfiction

Analyzing a work of nonfiction means paying close attention not just to what the author says, but to how and why they say it. Rather than summarizing the text, your goal is to think critically about the author's ideas, the evidence they provide, and the strategies they use to frame their argument.

WHAT IS NONFICTION?

Nonfiction refers to writing based on real events, people, or concepts. It aims to present information objectively, drawing on historical, scientific, logical, or other forms of empirical evidence (i.e. observable). Nonfiction can take many forms, including:

Essay Writing – Personal statements, argumentative essays, analytical essays, comparative essays

Life Writing – Memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, diaries, letters, journals, obituaries

Journalistic Writing – News articles, investigative reports, opinion pieces, editorials

Academic Writing – Research papers, scholarly articles, case studies, scientific journals

Reference Works – Encyclopedias, dictionaries, textbooks, almanacs, atlases, thesauri

Critical Writing – Literary criticism, art criticism, film criticism, cultural criticism

Persuasive Writing – Speeches, manifestos, press releases, promotional materials

READING THE TEXT

Before you begin writing your analysis, read the text closely and carefully. As you read, consider annotating by underlining or highlighting key passages and jotting down brief notes or questions in the margins to guide your thinking.

UNDERSTANDING THE AUTHOR'S ARGUMENT

Most nonfiction is written to inform, persuade, or critique. In analyzing a text, focus on identifying its central claim and examining how the author develops their argument. Look for:

Thesis – What is the author trying to convince the reader of?

Evidence – What kinds of sources or examples does the author use?

Audience – Who is the author addressing, and how does that inform their approach?

CONSIDERING THE CONTEXT

Situate the text within a wider framework. This might include:

Author's Perspective – What do you know about the author's background or point of view?

Historical and Cultural Setting – What was happening in the world when the text was written?

Publication – Where was the text first published, and who was the intended audience?

Understanding context can help you interpret the text more clearly and uncover implicit assumptions or biases.

DEVELOPING YOUR THESIS

After you analyze the text, take a clear position. A strong thesis goes beyond simply agreeing or disagreeing. It should make a specific, arguable claim about how the text works and why it's significant—one that you can support with evidence throughout your writing.

EXAMPLES

A Weak Thesis:

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes about racism in America and shares his personal experiences.

This statement is too general and simply summarizes the text without offering analysis.

A Strong Thesis:

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates weaves personal narrative with historical reflection to confront the reader with the emotional and generational trauma produced by systemic racism.

This statement offers a clear argument about how the author writes and what the text communicates.

ORGANIZING YOUR ANALYSIS

Before you begin writing, consider creating an outline for your analysis. While it may evolve during the writing process, a strong outline helps organize the main arguments that support your thesis, identify where to include evidence, and ensure your ideas progress logically from one paragraph to the next.

USING EVIDENCE EFFECTIVELY

When you quote or paraphrase the text you're analyzing, always introduce it and follow it with your own analysis. Don't assume the evidence speaks for itself. Instead, explain what it shows and why it's relevant to your argument. The same applies to any outside sources you include. Always remember to cite properly!

CONCLUDING WITH PURPOSE

Your conclusion should use your main arguments to explore the broader significance of the text. To help deepen your insight, consider questions such as:

Why is the text relevant today?

What does the text reveal about its subject, cultural context, or historical moment?

How does the text challenge or reinforce dominant ideas or assumptions?

What are the limitations of the text, and what perspectives might be missing?