

## HOW TO READ ESSAYS YOU MUST ANALYZE

1. Take a pencil in your hand.
2. Read the essay over once, quickly, looking for the main idea, for what the essay is about in general, and for what the author seems to be saying. Don't get bogged down in details. (If you come to an unfamiliar word, circle it but go on reading).
3. Check the meaning of unfamiliar words. If they seem to be key words, i.e., if the author uses them more than once, scribble a brief definition at the bottom of the page or at the end of the essay.
4. Now re-read more slowly and carefully, this time making a conscious attempt to begin to isolate the single most important generalization the author makes: his thesis. Follow his line of thought; try to get some sense of structure. The thesis determines the structure, so the structure, once you begin to sense it, can lead you to the thesis. What is the main point the author is making: Where is it? Remember, examples or "for instances" are not main points.

The thesis is the generalization the author is attempting to prove valid. Your job, then is to ask yourself, "What is the author trying to prove"?

Another way of identifying the thesis is to ask yourself, "What is the unifying principle of this essay"? or "What idea does everything in this essay talk about"? or "Under what single main statement could all the subdivisions fit"?

If the author has stated his thesis fully and clearly and all in one place, your job is easier. The thesis is apt to be stated somewhere in the last few paragraphs, in which case the preceding paragraphs gradually lead up to it, or else somewhere right after the introduction, in which case the balance of the essay justifies the statement and refers back to it. Sometimes, however, the author never states the entire thesis in so many words; he gives it to you a piece at a time. Never mind. You can put it together later.

5. When you think you have grasped the main point, the whole essay goes to prove, underline it and write thesis in the margin. If you find you have several possible theses, don't panic; they all fit together somehow. One or more will probably turn out to be supporting the thesis rather than part of it.

Now re-read for structure. You are looking for the main divisions of the essay. There will (probably) be an introduction: draw a line clear across the page after the introduction and write into in the margin. Now tackle the body of the essay. You are already pretty sure what the main idea is. What are the main points the author makes in leading up to his thesis, or in justifying it?

You will find in a longer essay that you are now dealing with groups of paragraphs, all having to do with the same subdivision of the main subject. Draw lines between the main

groups and give the groups labels. In an essay about how to take an English I final, for instance, you would undoubtedly find a group of paragraphs all of which could be labeled "preparation", and another group that could be called "typical exam questions". Under each group there would be sub-groups: under "preparation" there might be "reviewing essay", "memorizing terminology", etc.

Occasionally, you will find a paragraph that doesn't seem to accomplish much. Some paragraphs, for instance, are purely illustrative: the "for example" type of paragraph. Some are just comments or impressions by the author. The "that reminds me" type. A third very common type is the transitional paragraph, which just takes you rather gracefully from one point to another. When you come across a paragraph like one of these, label it in the margin.

6. Within each structural subdivision find out what points the author is making. (In the essay about the English 1 final, find out specifically what the author says to do in order to prepare for the exam.) In other words, identify the topic sentence of each important paragraph. Underline the sentence. Sometimes the topic sentence is at the beginning of the paragraph and sometimes at the end. Sometimes the topic is not stated but is only implied

7. You now have the skeleton of the author's argument and should be able to follow his reasoning. If you are still having trouble, try scribbling a word or two in the margins and summing up the paragraphs as if you were annotating a textbook. In the essay about the English 1 final, for instance, you might write "Mark up textbooks" in the margin after one paragraph, and "but not too much" after the next. You can also underline key transitional or structural words or phrases like "but", "however", "moreover", "on the other hand", "nevertheless".

8. Now write out, at the beginning or end of the essay, a thesis statement for the essay. Remember, the thesis was his guiding PURPOSE? What audience did he have in mind? What assumptions did he make i.e., what did he take for granted his audience already knew, or already believed, or both? Is his audience hostile or friendly?

9. Finally, and very important, consider two other questions: WHY did the author write this, and for WHOM? What audience did he have in mind? What assumptions did he make, i.e., what did he take for granted his audience already knew, or already believed, or both? Is his audience hostile or friendly?

10. If you know you are to be examined on the rhetorical techniques the author uses, now is the point to go on a deliberate hunt for them after you have thoroughly understood the essay.

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