



Discipline Specific

Summary-Analysis-Opinion

In college classes, you are often asked to read something and comment on it, or collect information on a topic and advance an argument. There are different ways to think about the information you've been given. Summary, analysis and opinion are three that people often confuse; they are related but different.

Summary

- **Summarizing means looking at information – a story, a collection of facts, someone else's argument – and saying briefly what the writer is saying, or what the facts are. Summary is what you see at a glance.**

A summary takes a lot of information and condenses it. It might take a series of experiments, for instance, and describe them together – *we grew bacteria in five separate solutions* – rather than explain each experiment separately.

Example: I'm going out to clean the pasture spring.
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away.
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I shan't be gone long – you come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
that's standing by her mother. It's so young
it totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I shan't be gone long – you come too.

– “The Pasture” by Robert Frost

Summary: Someone is going to a pasture to see water and cows. They ask some one else to come along.

This is a poem, but the idea is the same with historical facts, lab reports, economic tables, business proposals, and personal statements. *A summary means telling someone else, in your own words, what you see on the page or on the lab counter.*

Analysis

- **Analysis means thinking about those words, facts or arguments: not just what they say, but what they mean.**

We do this naturally every day, with people. If your roommate snaps at you or swears at the coffee pot, you may realize she's angry. She doesn't have to *say* she's angry for you to know it. If she yells at you, and you know she has a chemistry exam tomorrow, you may understand what she's really upset about.

Analysis (continued)

In the same way, writing can show more than it tells. If you are looking at scattered facts—the results of experiments, or bones and tools and names on gravestones—analysis is thinking about how they fit together. *Summary might tell you when bacteria grew in a petri dish and when they did not; analysis would suggest why they lived or died.*

- **Analysis means asking questions like “What’s really going on here?” and “Does this make sense?”**

It can start with the journalist’s questions: who? what? when? where? why? and how? Take the example above:

- **Who is talking?**

Someone who cares for cows and cleans water; likely a farmer or a farmer’s child. (The speaker could be a woman or a man, and so could the person listening.)

- **Where is the speaker?**

Near a pasture, but they will have to go outside to get there; most likely a farm house or barn. Somewhere sheltered, indoors.

- **Who is the speaker talking to?**

Someone the speaker wants to be with, while they do quiet things.

- **Why is the speaker talking, or what does the speaker want?**

The speaker won’t be gone long but wants the listener to come. The speaker doesn’t want to be apart from this person, even for a short time.

An analysis of someone else’s writing, like this, might also ask: what is the writer doing? An analysis of an argument, for instance, might ask what points the writer is making, what evidence the writer is using, and whether that evidence means what the writer says it means. In this case:

- **What kind of images is the poet using? Do they have anything in common? What work do they do?**

New, fragile, clear images: images of birth, of spring, of giving care to let something grow — cleaning away a film of leaves or a film of birthing fluid.

So a **summary** might say: this is a poem about farm life

An **analysis** might say: this is a poem about friendship

- **You may also be asked to give an analysis of someone else’s argument – an analysis of an analysis. In that case, you need to evaluate the argument.**

You’re answering two main questions: what is the writer saying and *do you agree?* Did the argument persuade you? Do you think the writer is right? Could you make a different argument from the same evidence?

If you had an essay that made the argument above, you’d want to ask: Do you think this poem is about friendship? Could it be about anything else? Look at the points the argument makes and decide whether they make sense. Do the images suggest anything else to you? What images does

Opinion

- **Analysis explains what the facts mean, and it can explore the broader implications of that meaning. Your opinion is what you think about it but must be supported by your exploration of the evidence.**

In one way, an analysis is always an opinion: you are writing about what you think a set of facts or someone else's words mean. But there is a difference between what you think a set of facts mean and what you think *about* what they mean. It's the difference between "I think this is what Frost is saying" and, as the hero of a Sharon Creech novel put it, "I think Mr. Robert Frost has way too much time on his hands."

For the example above, you could give an opinion on the poem or on the poet. Is the poem well written? Do you like poetry that rhymes, or poetry at all? You could also give an opinion on farming or the relationship between these two people. Does this kind of friendship sound deep and sincere or all on the surface?

Giving an opinion about a set of facts works the same way. For example, an analysis of bacteria in different solutions might tell you that a chemical toxic to people, or an addictive chemical, is also toxic to the bacteria. The analysis might suggest that we should use that chemical in a medication. If you had enough information, you could broaden the analysis and discuss what might happen, for good and for bad, if we had this medication: people might survive the bacterial disease and die from the cure. You could then give your opinion on whether we should develop this medication or not.

Example:

Penicillin can cure syphilis. However, in advanced stages of syphilis, the data indicate that a dose of penicillin can cause sudden death (**analysis**). Since the instance of death is very small, and the recovery rate is high, we, nevertheless, should administer penicillin to all syphilitic patients, because the benefits outweigh the costs (**opinion**).

This handout was created by Katherine Abbott for the Robert J. Connors Writing Center © March 2006.