



4.1 Defining Analysis

4.1.1 What is Analysis?

Analysis can be defined as...

the process of breaking down any object or 'chunk' of information into its component parts, looking at how those parts are related, and interpreting these relations.

In other words, it involves thinking about the **connections between bits of information**.

The activity of analysis has three distinct dimensions indicated by the following verbs:

Describing	content
Discovering	relations
Interpreting	relations

We will return to these later in this section when we apply our analytical skills to both a written and visual text.

4.1.2 Why is Analysis important?

Much of the analysis which we perform in our daily lives happens almost unconsciously, and allows us to make judgements about how to best proceed in any given situation which requires a decision.

Our brain is perfectly equipped for sorting, dividing, classifying and comparing the myriad of data which it encounters. In practical terms, our brain classifies data into that which is useful, meaningful, relevant, reassuring or even threatening.

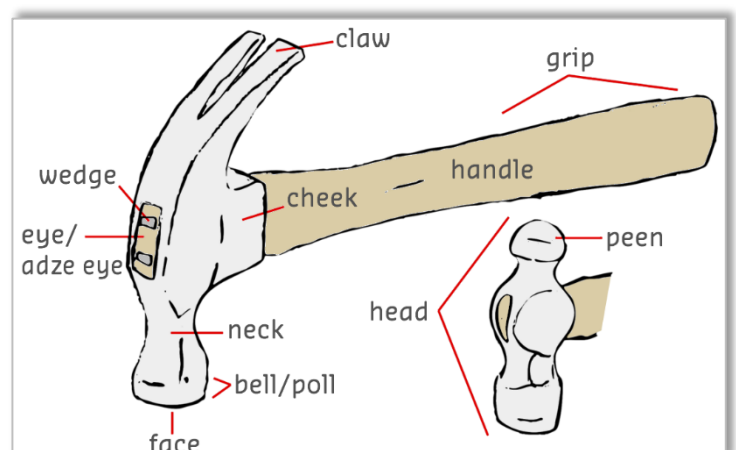
In academic contexts, we need to be more explicit and conscious about the analytical processes we are engaged in. Analysis can often be the most appropriate starting point for dealing with the information or 'data' which we have gathered.

Take the example of a hammer.

Did you know that a hammer has the following nine parts?

Handle, grip, cheek, neck, bell, face, eye, wedge, claw

To a carpenter, a hammer is a constructive tool used for building. To a demolition expert, a hammer is used for dismantling and breaking. And yet, if we ask both the carpenter and the





demolition expert to analyse the hammer, they will both have to start at the beginning, with the observable 'data' or apparent 'facts' in front of them.

When asked to describe a hammer, both will observe that they see a 'handle', 'face', 'claw' and so on. The materials from which the hammer is made could be confirmed as being 'wood', 'steel', or 'fibreglass'.

For a culture that digs for food in the form of roots and tubers, the claw part of the hammer would be excellent. But for a group that eats nuts, seeds or shellfish, the head of the hammer would be more useful. And for a group that uses wood to construct buildings, the benefits of the hammer would be obvious.

In the end, therefore, our process of analysis will be initially guided by our **OVERALL PURPOSE**, which will point us in the direction that our enquiry needs to take. As we gather additional information and insights, it can then be modified accordingly.

A group of individuals may start their analysis of the hammer by agreeing on the parts which they encounter. However, depending on their interpretation (guided by the overall purpose of their investigation), each individual could end up with a very different argument about the particular usefulness of the hammer for fulfilling that purpose.

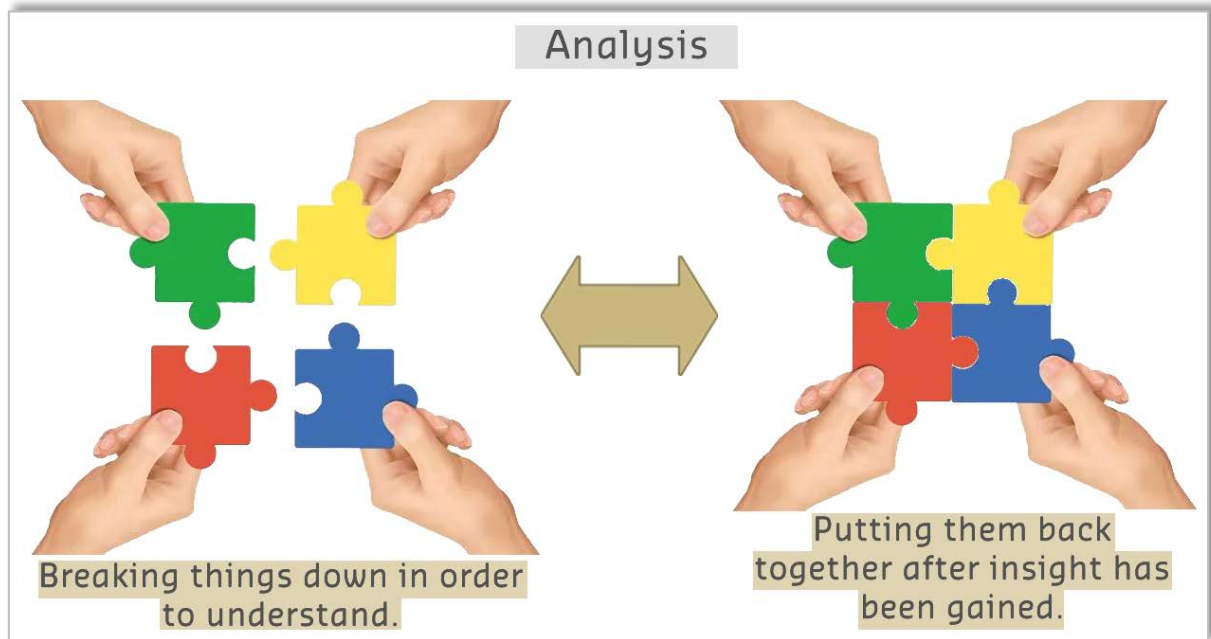
4.1.3 Is analysis 'positive' or 'negative'?

Depending on the context in which it is performed, analysis could be viewed in a somewhat negative light. Analysis could be described as destructive rather than constructive, negative rather than positive and reductive rather than expansive.

It is true that both the analytical and argumentative dimensions of academic writing are, to some extent, processes of **reduction**. However, this kind of process could be seen in negative *or* positive terms, depending on your point of view. In an academic paper or a thesis, analysis usually precedes discussion and argumentation. Of course, after breaking things down into their component parts, the analysis needs to put things back together again.

So, any process of dis-integrating should also be one of re-integrating, after insight about the relations and connections has been gained, so that the 'big picture' can remain in view. Therefore, this tension between the 'negative' and 'positive' aspects of analysis should be seen in the following way:

Analysis is...		
destructive	in order to be	constructive
negative	in order to be	positive
reductive	in order to be	expansive



We should see analysis as a creative process which does reduce things to smaller units, but also aims at rebuilding them into more complete systems. Both the breaking - down and the rebuilding processes aid our understanding.

In a seemingly paradoxical way, by being apparently ‘destructive’, analysis enables us to construct clearer and more comprehensive insights into the objects of our enquiry. Such a process also prompts us to ask further questions which in turn lead to better critique and a more convincing argument.

4.1.4 What kinds of things can be analysed?

Any object which is made up of identifiable parts can be subject to analysis.

For example,

(i) the results of a scientific experiment



(ii) the origins and development of a political movement





(iii) a case study outlining and evaluating patient care in a hospital



(iv) a building,
(Guggenheim Museum)



a painting,
(Picasso's Weeping Woman)



SONNET 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken:
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height
be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and
cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.
-William Shakespeare

a poem,
(Shakespeare)

or a
piece of music.
(Für Elise, Beethoven)



Analysing an Idea

Of course, the object of analysis does not have to be 'concrete' or tangible. Even an abstract thing like an *idea* or *concept* can be analysed, if different dimensions or aspects can be identified and listed.

As an example, let's take the idea of 'democracy'.

After thinking and doing some reading, we come up with a list of different aspects of democracy which might include the following:

- Freedom of speech
- Rights of the citizen enshrined in law
- Responsibilities of the citizen enshrined in law
- The right of free association
- An emphasis on consensus rather than conflict
- Transparency of government decision making
- The right to liberty and self-determination
- Egalitarianism
- Well-developed anti-discrimination laws
- Equal access to justice
- Guarantee of the rule of law
- The right/responsibility to vote
- The right to access information

We can see from this list, that the idea of 'democracy' is quite complex.



As an object of analysis, it has been broken down into the various dimensions, connotations and related concepts which come to mind whenever the term is used.

If we are looking for a pattern of repetition, we immediately notice that the term 'right' appears *explicitly* in at least four items on the list, and is included *implicitly* in several others. We could then ask the question: what is the opposite of the term 'right'? Perhaps the idea of 'responsibility' seems to contrast with the idea of 'right'.

Our analysis has not only identified something which repeats, it has perhaps also identified an important oppositional structure:



So, after doing some simple 'analysis', it is clear that even a conceptual object like the term 'democracy' has many complex dimensions. We should welcome this insight because although analysis aims to simplify, it can achieve this aim while embracing complexity and making it comprehensible.