



School of Liberal Arts

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Critical Analysis and Development of an Argument

An **analysis** assignment calls for a close reading of one piece of writing and the use of specific details from the piece to support an **assessment** you make of that particular piece of writing. Your assessment in a **critical analysis** states whether or not you think the author successfully supports the **argument**, or **claim** through the logical presentation of convincing **reasons** backed up by appropriate **evidence**. The argument referred to in such articles does not mean an angry, confrontational tirade or outburst. Instead, argument means a reasoned presentation of details which contribute to the support of a particular argument (point of view, or position) concerning a controversial topic.

You will need to read the article closely, examining its **assumptions**, assessing its reasons and evidence, and weighing its **conclusions**. Then, in your critical analysis paper you state your decision about whether the argument in the article is clear and about whether the author is convincing, based on the details the author includes, not on whether or not you agree with what the author says. Critical analysis papers are usually written in the third person, not using first person pronouns such as "I," "me," or "my," or second person pronouns such as "you."

REMEMBER TO FOLLOW YOUR INSTRUCTOR'S SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS

GENERAL GUIDELINES

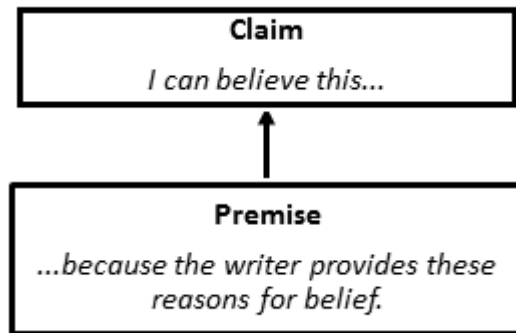
- Examine the situation which prompted the author to write the article, often referred to as the **rhetorical context**. Try to determine why the article was written. Is there an ongoing debate in other articles about the topic which has prompted this author to write the article? Is the article directed toward a specifically identifiable audience? What characteristics, interests, and/or experiences would the people in this audience have in common? Would they be likely to have any biases concerning the topic? What does the author hope to achieve by writing this article?
- Identify the **author**. What is his or her occupation? Personal background? Political leanings? Sometimes you will need to consult other sources to find information about the author, such as the Internet or biographical dictionaries.
- Look at the **title**. What does it tell you about the argument the author will be developing in the article?
- Look over the **format** of the article. Are there subdivisions that might give you some idea of the structure of the argument?
- Determine whether the article is a **primary** or **secondary** source of information. Primary sources are original sources: documents, speeches, laboratory studies, field research reports, eyewitness accounts, observations based on personal experience. In secondary sources writers make comments about their observations of what others have said or done.

- Summarize the main claim, or **thesis**, of the article. What is the main point the author is seeking to make? The author may or may not state this directly, but you should always state your idea of his or her main claim in your analysis as a complete sentence. What are the **qualifiers** (exceptions) the author includes about the claim? (What words or phrases does the author include to indicate the claim might not hold true in every situation or circumstance? What are the circumstances under which the claim is true? Look for phrases such as “on the whole,” “typically,” “usually,” or “most of the time.”)
- Determine what underlying assumptions the author might have. What ideas, beliefs, philosophies, does the author seem to accept as mutually understood between himself or herself and the audience? Are these assumptions valid?
- Identify and evaluate the reasons the author gives for making the main claim. Are they really *good* reasons? Are they relevant to the main claim? Sometimes authors present only one or two reasons, often spending much time developing and supporting just one reason.
- Identify, analyze, and evaluate the evidence given in support of the reasons. What kinds of evidence are given (data, anecdotes, case studies, citations from authorities, research studies)? Is the evidence *good* (sufficient, accurate, relevant, credible)? Question evidence in terms of both quality and quantity.
- Note **refutations**. These are efforts the author makes to anticipate objections and answer them in advance. Try to determine whether or not the author demonstrates clearly why these objections, or **counterclaims**, do not undermine the basic argument the author is trying to make.
- Note **key terms**. Does the author define these adequately? Would most readers agree with these definitions? What clarifications might be needed?
- Note **analogies** and **comparisons**. What connections does the author make between ideas and concrete examples? Are these appropriate? Are the things being compared truly similar.

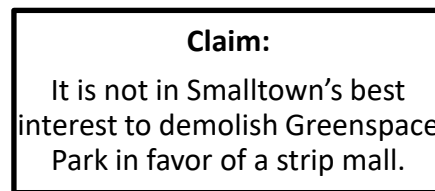
NOTE: A critical analysis paper contains some summary of the article being analyzed, but the summary should be secondary to the analysis you make of the argument being developed in the article. Remember to structure your critical analysis paper in good writing format, with an **introduction** clearly identifying the topic, the article, the author’s main claim, and, briefly, your assessment of the argument; **body paragraphs** in which you present your detailed analysis of the argument; and a conclusion summarizing your evaluation of the author’s argument.

DEVELOPING AN ARGUMENT OF YOUR OWN

Now that you have analyzed an effective argument and understand its construction, you can begin to develop your own. Start with your main claim and at least one premise.

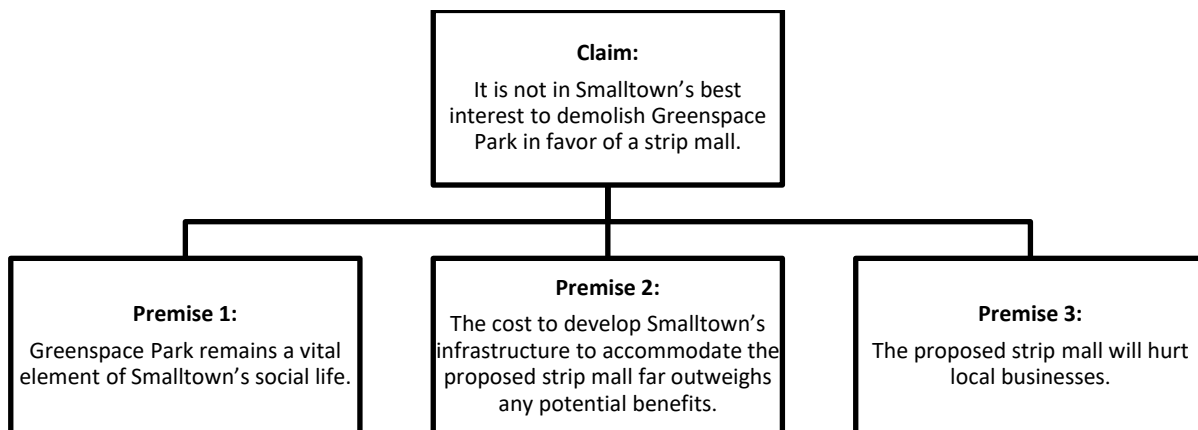


For example, imagine that a writer is struggling with the issue of whether to tear down Smalltown’s town park, Greenspace Park, so that a strip mall can be built in its place. A claim our author might offer is:



This claim is not very useful by itself. Imagine having a conversation with someone who gladly offers his opinion on a subject but then refuses to explain why he believes as he does. This person’s opinion is weaker if unsupported.

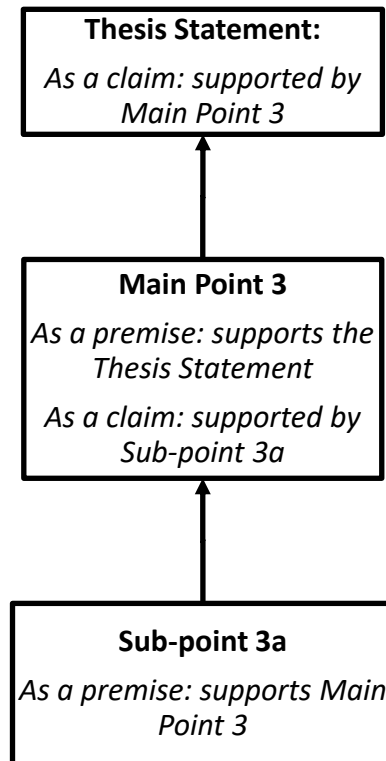
So, our writer needs to provide evidence supporting the belief that Greenspace Park should be preserved. This evidence, the argument’s premises, have been added to the claim below:



Essays contain many arguments like the one above; however one central argument should sit “above” the others. This central argument provides structure and focus to the writer’s presentation. The claim of this argument, often called the central claim, is more commonly known as the **thesis statement**. One might also hear the central claim called an **enthymeme** or **hypothesis**. The premises that support the thesis statement are called **main points** (or **evidence**). This language helps set the central argument apart from other arguments which play supporting roles.

Developing Main Points

Up to this point, the only claim in question has been the thesis statement, for which the writer has offered three main points of support. Though these main points support the thesis, they must also be supported with evidence. The example below shows how Main Point 3 (called Premise 3 in the previous chart) both supports the thesis statement as a premise and as a claim which is supported by Subpoint 3a:



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