

## **What's the Difference Between Descriptive and Analytical Writing?**

What does it mean when you receive feedback from a lecturer which says that your essay is “too descriptive” and “needs to demonstrate more analysis”?

What about when you have an essay title that asks you to “critically analyse” a particular idea, phenomenon, or theory?

Analytical writing is the cornerstone of academic writing, and your assignments are often designed to encourage critical engagement and analysis. Knowing how and when to write analytically - and how to avoid writing too descriptively - can help strengthen your essays.

The first step is learning the key defining characteristics and purposes of each type of writing.

### **Descriptive Writing**

Descriptive writing is expository and informative. It seeks to present the facts or details to the reader, but not interpret their meaning. In other words, descriptive writing states ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’ - but does not evaluate the ‘why’, ‘how’, or ‘so what?’

- **The defining characteristics of Descriptive Writing are...:**
  - States facts or recounts events
  - Gives an overview of a particular topic
  - Observes and reports the characteristics of a person, place, thing, or phenomenon
  - Explains a theory or idea
  - States the ‘what’, ‘who’, or ‘where’- but not the ‘why’, ‘how’, or ‘so what’
- **The purposes of Descriptive Writing are...:**
  - To provide context or background information
  - Informative: provides factual detail
  - Expository: explains something
  - Examples: newspapers, reviews, summaries, synopses, popular journalism

### **Analytical Writing:**

Analytical writing is evaluative and critical. It seeks to go beyond the descriptive presentation of facts or details to the reader, and instead evaluates and investigates their significance. In other words, analytical writing demonstrates the ‘why’, ‘how’, and ‘so what’, interpreting the significance and meaning of the ‘who’, ‘what’, and ‘where’.

- **The defining characteristics of Analytical Writing are...:**
  - Engages with and applies theoretical concepts
  - Evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of ideas

- Unpacks the significance of evidence
  - Synthesizes and engages with sources to support and create an overall argument
  - Answers ‘why’, ‘how’, or ‘so what’ - goes beyond the ‘who’, ‘what’, and ‘where’
- **The purposes of Analytical Writing are...:**
    - To uncover the deeper meaning of specific ideas or evidence
    - To critically illustrate the connections between diverse ideas or evidence
    - Evaluative: assesses the strengths and weaknesses of a particular issue or approach
    - Examples: Academic essays, scholarly articles and monographs, literature reviews, the discussion section of reports, some longform and investigative journalism

### Examples:

What do these differences look like in practice? The following examples demonstrate the differences between descriptive and analytical writing. Each sentence is concerned with the same event, theory, or idea. You may notice that the descriptive examples state the details, whereas the analytical examples show deeper critical engagement.

- **Writing about Events:**
  - **States what happened (Descriptive):** On 1 September, 1939, the German army, under the direction of Adolf Hitler, invaded Poland.
  - **Identifies the significance (Analytical):** The German army’s invasion of Poland on 1 September, 1939 instigated the Second World War, as Adolf Hitler began his ruthless military campaign to invade all of Europe.
- **Writing about Theories:**
  - **Explains what a theory says (Descriptive):** In nursing, the theory of cultural competency states that nurses should be aware of their own internalised biases and should approach patients in an open-minded, non-judgemental manner.
  - **Shows why something is relevant or suitable (Analytical):** By practicing cultural awareness, a nurse can foster trust with patients of diverse backgrounds and overcome any communication barriers which may hinder accurate symptom reporting and diagnosis.
- **Writing about Details:**
  - **Lists details (Descriptive):** Impressionism can be defined as a nineteenth-century painting technique which employs many tiny, thin brush strokes to create an overall impression of an object, person, or scene.

- **Evaluates the relative significance of details (Analytical):** The techniques of Impressionist painting, such as the tiny, thin brush strokes used to create an overall impression of an object, person, or scene, represents a radical departure from the nineteenth-century Realist school of art which seeks to recreate more lifelike images.

### **Practice:**

How can you implement your new understanding of these key differences into your own writing practice? The following sample questions and tips can help guide you through the beginning stages of analytical writing.

- **Ask yourself...**
  - What does this evidence mean? What is its significance?
  - How does this point relate back to my central argument?
  - What is the connection between these different ideas?
  - What does this theory or methodology reveal about this particular topic?
  - What is the relevance of this evidence or this point? How can I link it to my main thesis statement?
- **Further tips for Writing Analytically:**
  - Evaluate the evidence - do not merely state it
  - Unpack the meaning of terms, ideas, and definitions
  - Synthesize secondary material into your overall argument
  - Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of other arguments, studies, or methodologies
  - Engage with theory and apply it to your argument

### **Further Reading:**

Have further questions?

The following resources, which were consulted during the construction of this handout, may be helpful for you.

Monash University. 'Analysis vs Description.' <<https://www.monash.edu/rlo/assignment-samples/assignment-types/writing-an-essay/analysis-vs-description>>. Date of access: 24 March, 2020.

University of Bradford. 'Descriptive Writing Versus Critical Analytical Writing'. <<https://www.bradford.ac.uk/academic-skills/media/academicskillsadvice/documents/academicskillsresources/criticalanalysis/Infosheet-Descriptive-Vs-Critical-Writing.pdf>>. Date of access: 24 March, 2020.