

## Understanding Analysis

Writing prompts use a variety of action words to tell you what to do. A writing prompt may ask you to “consider,” “contrast,” “describe,” “investigate,” “explain,” or take any number of other actions. Looking closely at the specific words your teacher uses may provide important insight into your teacher’s expectations. However, no matter what specific words your teacher uses, nearly every assignment you receive in college will be asking for an analysis, whether the prompt uses the word “analyze” or not.

So what is “analysis?” You analyze something when you try to get to the bottom of its purpose or meaning, when you attempt to discover its cause, classify it, or use it to suggest a course of action. Analysis involves breaking something into parts, examining each part, exhaustively interpreting each part, and then putting those interpretations together to form some kind of conclusion. The good news is that you already know how to “analyze.” In fact, you do it all the time. When you meet someone for the first time, you pick apart their outfit, their tone of voice, their body language, and their words to arrive at a first impression. Ditto for when you enter a party and quickly assess the total number of people attending, the percentage of people you know, the quality of the music, the noise level, and the ambiance, and decide to either stay or go.

**analysis = dissection + interpretation**

For example, let’s analyze this image:



First, let’s break it into parts. Here are a few of the elements you might notice: the woman’s crouched pose, which suggests she’s about to run a race; the matching track suit that looks like it came from the 1970s; the athletic headband that also looks like it came from the 1970s; the intent and rather goofy expression on the woman’s face.

Next, let’s interpret each part.

Interpretations of the **headband**:

The woman wants to keep sweat and hair out of her eyes.

The woman is fashion-conscious and wanted to complete her outfit.  
This picture was taken in the 1970s, when athletic headbands were popular.  
This picture was staged to look like it was taken in the 1970s, when athletic headbands were popular.  
The woman is dressed to look as goofy as possible, and the headband is the crowning touch.  
The headband is concealing a pimple, bruise, or other mark on the woman's forehead.  
The headband is a hachimaki, or karate-style headband, and the woman is a karate master.  
The headband is keeping the woman's head together (I'm kidding, but hopefully, you catch my drift. All guesses are fair game at this stage. If we were doing this exhaustively, like this handout suggests, we'd keep going until the ideas got more and more far-fetched and we'd completely run out of ideas.)

Interpretations of the **tracksuit**:

The woman is fashion-conscious and wants to look like a serious athlete.  
This picture was taken in the 1970s, when matching tracksuits were popular.  
The woman is wearing a matching tracksuit in order to poke fun of herself.  
And so on and so forth . . .

If we were doing this for real, we would go on to “exhaustively interpret” the other elements in the photo, such as the woman's pose and expression, and other elements we haven't named—the location, the lack of spectators and competitors, and so on and so forth. Then, finally, we would put all our interpretations together to arrive at the most likely conclusion. Remember, **analysis = dissection + interpretation**. We've pulled the pieces apart and we've interpreted them. Now we're ready to put our interpretations together into an analysis.

One plausible **analysis**: This photo is comedic. The woman is attempting to make us laugh. This explains her choice of 70s fashion and her intense expression in the absence of any real competition. She is poking fun of herself, poking fun of the 1970s, poking fun at the sport of track and field . . . Actually, we're not sure what she's poking fun of, but we're fairly sure that she's poking fun of something.

### **Doing Analysis vs. Writing a Paper Using Analysis**

**Important note:** There is a difference between *doing* analysis and *showing proof of that analysis* in a paper. Unlike in high school, when evidence to support claims was often enough, professors want you to *do* something with that evidence—to use it to come up with a claim that is more complex, interesting, and unique than the kind of claim you made in high school. Professors want to see that you're *thinking*. To ensure that this happens, use your early drafts to think your analysis through in writing. As you analyze your topic deeply, you will likely change your thesis. It's common for later drafts to demonstrate completely different opinions than the opinions expressed in the early drafts. This is evidence of what's called an *evolving thesis* and it's a positive sign. It shows that you are refining your thinking, developing the strongest argument possible.