

Teaching Students How to Write an Analytical Essay



In this section, I share guidelines and tips for teaching students how to write an analytical essay on a literary text. The first time you work through the process with students, I suggest using a text the entire class or group has read, perhaps a read-aloud you've completed, or a short text, such as a myth, folk tale, or short story, that all students have read and discussed. You might have to repeat the lesson with another text common to all students before inviting them to use a guided or independent reading text.

In addition to the guidelines and tips, I have included these forms as resources:

- *Criteria for an Analytical Essay* (separate versions for grades six, seven, and eight; adjust the criteria for the population you teach)
- *Writing Plan: Analytical Essay*
- *Peer Evaluation: Analytical Writing Plan*
- *Peer Evaluation: Analytical Essay*

You can find more information for teaching students to write an analytical essay as well as student examples in my book *Teaching Nonfiction Writing: A Practical Guide* (2004). In-depth lessons for writing an analytical essay can be found in my curriculum *Smart Writing: Practical Units for Teaching Middle School Writers* (2012).

Guidelines for Teaching Analytical Writing



Follow these guidelines for teaching students how to write an analytical essay:

- Choose a text that students have enjoyed, discussed, and understand.
- Help students form a claim or thesis that takes a position on the central idea, how and why the character changes, and so on. Or you can write two to three claims or thesis statements and have students select one to argue for or against.
- Give students criteria for the analytical essay before they plan. Discuss the standards in the criteria and explain that you will use the criteria to offer feedback and give a grade.
- Have students use the criteria and text to complete a writing plan. You'll need about two class periods. Peers can edit and offer feedback on each other's writing plans.
- Circulate among students and initial plans that are detailed. On a sticky note jot suggestions for students who need more details and give them the sticky note as a reminder.
- Have students compose a first draft referring to their writing plans. As students draft, circulate and provide support for those who need it.
- Have peer partners read and offer suggestions for revising the first draft.
- Ask students to use peer feedback, their writing plans, and criteria to revise and edit the first draft.
- Have students organize their writing with the plan at the bottom, the first draft and peer suggestions next, edits and revisions, and the second draft on the top.
- Read students' second drafts and offer feedback based on criteria and their process.

Some students will need to complete additional revisions based on your feedback. You might have to confer with students one-on-one or in small groups to move them forward.

I suggest that you give two grades: the first grade is for the content; the second grade is for craft, style, and writing conventions. In my classes, students can improve their grade by revising and editing their second drafts.

Tips for Analytical Writing



Steps to Forming a Thesis Statement

The procedure that follows, developed by Jim Burke (2010), is ideal for helping students develop a thesis statement. First, review the steps for the topic of “growing up.” Then, practice with students using some of the topics in “Through the Tunnel”: separating from a parent; meeting a tough challenge independently. Finally, before students work on their own to develop a thesis, have them work with a partner.

Topic: *growing up*

1. Identify the subject.	1. Decisions and solving problems can lead to growing up.
2. Turn the topic into a question.	2. How can decisions and solving problems lead to growing up?
3. Answer your question with a statement.	3. When decisions and solving problems show an individual accepting responsibility, that's a sign of growing up.
4. Refine your statement into a thesis statement.	4. Growing up means that an individual can make good decisions and accept responsibility for his/her words and actions.

Integrating a Claim or Thesis Into an Introduction

The introduction to an analytical essay can open or end with the claim or thesis statement. In addition, I ask students to include the title and author of the text as well as some general ideas related to the theme or central idea of the story. Here's an example for “Through the Tunnel.”

The path for a young teen to move toward becoming an adult includes making decisions independent of peers or adults. [general statement] Doris Lessing, in her

short story “Through the Tunnel” shows that one way to separate from your mother and move toward being an adult is by setting a challenging and dangerous goal and meeting it on your own. [claim or thesis]

Supporting the Claim or Thesis

The support section should have three text details and/or logical inferences that can support the claim. It’s fine to differentiate the amount of text evidence needed to support a claim. For example, a struggling reader and writer or an English language learner might work on successfully integrating one piece of text evidence in an essay. Once that student experiences success with one piece of evidence, ask him or her to try including two, and then three.

To teach students how to locate specific text evidence in a text, show them how to skim and reread parts looking for details and inferences. Tell them to jot notes on their writing plan, making sure that the notes cite specific evidence from the text in their own words.

Advise students to write a separate paragraph for each detail and/or inference and clearly explain how the details and/or inferences support the claim or thesis. Making these connections for readers is the key to a successful analytical essay.

Wrapping Up With a Strong Conclusion

The conclusion should do more than summarize the key point of the essay. An effective conclusion teases out an idea related to the claim and adds it to the conclusion to keep the reader thinking. Here’s an example for “Through the Tunnel.”

By swimming through the tunnel, Jerry achieved his goal of making decisions on his own. Careful preparation and practice holding his breath gave Jerry the confidence to complete this difficult task [summary of key point]. Why do you think Jerry never told his mom about the tunnel, before or after meeting his personal challenge? [question to keep reader thinking]