

UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

ASKING AN ANALYTICAL QUESTION

An important step in writing academic essays is to ask a good analytical question: one that poses a challenging way to address the central text(s) you will write about. Establishing that question won't be your first step—you will need to do some observing and annotating, and even some interpreting, as a way of developing the question itself. But focusing on what that question might be early in your analysis helps you approach your essay with something to explore: an idea to discover (that will inform your thesis) for both you and your readers.

Think of the question as something you're truly interested in exploring as you read—an exploration you want to guide your reader through, since not everyone reading the text will come away with the same impressions and interpretations you do. (One of the truisms of writing is that if you're not discovering something as you write your essay, your readers probably aren't either!)

A good analytical question:

1. **Speaks to a genuine dilemma in the text.** In other words, the question focuses on a real confusion, ambiguity or grey area of the text, about which readers will conceivably have different reactions, opinions, or interpretations. It is NOT responding to a misreading or an oversimplification of the text.
2. **Yields an answer that is not obvious.** In a question such as "Why did Romeo flee to Mantua" there's nothing to explore; it's too specific and can be answered too easily. (Because the Capulets wanted to kill him.) By contrast, a question such as "How does Romeo's reaction to his banishment complicate our understanding of his character?" will lead to an answer that is not immediately obvious.
3. **Suggests an answer complex enough to require a whole essay's worth of argument.** If the question is too vague—for example, "Why do the same kinds of people always appear in advertisements?"—it won't suggest a line of argument. The question should elicit analysis and argument rather than summary or description: for example, "How do the models who appear in cosmetics advertisements demonstrate a Western cultural obsession with youth?"
4. **Can be answered by the text, rather than by generalizations or by copious external research.** For example, "How did common Elizabethan attitudes toward mental illness affect Shakespeare's depiction of madness?" would require significant historical research. By contrast, a question like "How do the differences between Shakespeare's portrayals of madness in Ophelia and in King Lear demonstrate the author's differing gender expectations?" is readily answerable using the texts themselves.

Tips to keep in mind:

- “How” and “why” questions generally require more analysis and complex thinking than “who,” “what,” “when,” and “where” questions; they are thus generally better suited for essay writing.
- Good analytical questions have the potential to highlight relationships between different sources or phenomena: patterns, connections, contradictions, dilemmas, and problems.
- Good analytical questions can also ask about some implications or consequences of your analysis.

In summary, your analytical question should be answerable, given the available evidence—but not immediately, and not in the same way by all readers. Your thesis should give at least a provisional answer to the question, an answer that needs to be defended and developed. Your goal is to help readers understand why this question is worth answering, why this feature of the text is problematic, and to send them back to the text with a new perspective or a different focus.

Credit: Adapted from Kerry Walk by Doug Kirshen & Robert Cochran

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