

## Summary vs. Analysis

In English 097 and 099, many of your essays will require analysis, not summary. When you summarize something, you merely retell what happened or what is already known without adding your own interpretations or explanations. Usually that will not be enough. Instead, you often will be writing analytic essays, which take things apart and explain how or why they work, or else produce some kind of comment on the item being discussed. Analysis often contains an implied thesis—such and such is this way because of these reasons, or is important for these other reasons, or is often perceived as being X when in actuality it is Y, for these third reasons. As such, analysis contains elements of an argument: it takes a side or has opinions and evidence. Two examples of summary and analysis may help clarify this distinction.

### Example 1

Original text: with regards to the danger of science and technology, the nature writer Ed Abbey once said “You can’t study darkness by flooding it with light” (91).

#### Summary

Edward Abbey, an essayist and novelist, believes that you cannot study some kinds of topics without first considering how your investigation might alter the subject. He implies that some aspects of nature are unknowable through traditional scientific methods, the way that using a flashlight to investigate darkness takes away the very quality (lack of light) you have come to discover.

#### Analysis

Edward Abbey’s anti-rationalist claim that “you can’t study darkness by flooding it with light” is an example of false reasoning. What he seems to be saying is that traditional science (often associated with images of probing beams or with ample sunlight, as in the expressions “the pure light of reason” or “the team shed some light on the problem”) is inappropriate for some topics (the dark, mysterious, intuitive world of nature). Yet he oversimplifies both sides of the equation. While it is true some processes can only be carried out in darkness (developing x-ray film for example, or studying the life cycles of cave animals, or having a dream), science has more options than just Abbey’s one image of a blundering fool coming into a room and turning on the light, spoiling everything. Scientists are not clumsy toddlers unable to think through the consequences of their actions nor are they simple-minded buffoons with only one or two tactics at their disposal. After all, a scientist has as many ways of investigating a problem as a poet does. To describe a cave, a poet might select a vocabulary with dark, mysterious connotations, or might choose a soft, lulling cadence. She or he might construct a narrative with winding passageways and sudden surprises. The writer selects the methods appropriate to the task. So, too, with a scientist: she or he can study some phenomena by using strobe lights or scanning electron microscopes,

but other subjects may require patient observation in a darkened chamber or remote sensing equipment left in place after the human observers have gone. There is no one single way to conduct intellectual study, whether somebody is an artist or a scientist. As a former National Park Service ranger and trained field biologist, Abbey knows this, or at least did once. One assumes this quotation—as with so much of his work—is intended more to mock authority than it is to offer an actual insight. The remark is funny, provocative, iconoclastic, and, ultimately, false.

### Works Cited

Abbey, Edward. *A Voice Crying In the Wilderness: Notes from a Secret Journal*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

### Example 2

Original text: instead of words, in this example our “text” is the movie *Titanic*, directed by James Cameron.

#### Summary

This film tells the love story of Rose and Jack, as they cross the Atlantic in 1912 aboard a doomed luxury liner. In the movie (as in history) the ship hits an iceberg and sinks, with great loss of life. *Titanic* was one of the longest movies commercially released by a Hollywood studio, was one of the most expensive movies to make, and was also one of the highest grossing movies of all time. It won eleven Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

#### Analysis

The 1997 movie *Titanic* has set records in almost every category—running time, initial cost, final profit, Academy Awards nominated for and received, audience loyalty, and on and on. It is turning out to be a combination of *Gone With the Wind*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and *Star Wars*. Why has it been so popular? While some critics fault the cliché dialogue, the shallow characterization, and the egomaniacal excesses of production, most audiences don't care about that. They see it as something broader. First of all there is the central visual metaphor itself, the vision of something huge and grand and tragic sliding out of sight beneath the water. From the story of Jonah in the Bible to the myths of Atlantis to Melville's *Moby Dick*, to disappear into the sea has been a very poignant and symbolic death. With exceptional cinematography and incredible special effects, the movie uses such images to brilliant effect.

Secondly, most audiences respond strongly to the many thematic ideas the film juxtaposes so vividly. These include the contrast of nature vs. technology, the issue of rich vs. poor, the uneasy truce between recorded history and personal memory, the

conflict of individual expression vs. societal obligation, and, of course, the eternal problem of Romeo-and-Juliet-style lovers separated by tragic circumstances. *Titanic* takes these issues and dramatizes them in a way few other recent films have been able to. Thus it is not just the drama of the actions which makes the movie so powerful, but the drama of the social contrasts.

The fact that this movie is based on an actual incident lends a gravity to the themes and yet surprisingly doesn't lessen our vicarious participation. Even though the audience knows the ship will sink, we get caught up in the action anyway, wondering not *if* somebody will die, but which characters it will be. This can be compared to the medieval "wheel of fortune" idea, wherein a person can be on top of the world one moment and destitute the next. In this case, the very inevitability of the forthcoming doom increases tension rather than reducing it. Some films have history, some have good special effects, some even have a compelling love story with world-famous stars. But few manage to combine all of these elements into a single epic, an epic which is so universal it can be appreciated by audiences from Albuquerque to Zurich. It is therefore hardly surprising that Cameron's 1997 retelling of the *Titanic* story has become an important part of our culture's visual vocabulary, and will likely remain so for many years to come.