

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'll 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: if you're not discovering something in the writing of 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.
- (2) yields an answer that is not obvious. In a question such as "Why did Hamlet leave Denmark?" there's nothing to explore; it's too specific and can be answered too easily.
- (3) suggests an answer complex enough to require a whole essay's worth of argument. If the question is too vague, it won't suggest a line of argument (e.g., "Why are there so many references to acting in the play?"). The question should elicit analysis and argument rather than summary or description.
- (4) can be answered by the text, rather than by generalizations or by copious external research (e.g., "Why did Shakespeare depict madness in the way that he did?").

Tips to keep in mind:

- "How" and "why" questions generally require more analysis than "who/what/when/where."
- Good analytical questions can highlight patterns/connections, or contradictions/dilemmas/ problems.
- Good analytical questions can also ask about some implications or consequences of your analysis.

Thus the 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.

What Is an Interpretive “Problem”?

- (1) A good essay about film (or literature) addresses a genuine dilemma or problem relating to the interpretation of a film/text. This might be any confusion, paradox, ambiguity, obscurity, contradiction, inconsistency, overlooked connection, conflict, etc. that will potentially hinder our understanding of the film. It might be helpful to frame the problem (at least for yourself) as an analytical question—see handout “Asking an Analytical Question.”
- (2) The problem addressed by your essay must be a problem for an implied audience; your implied audience usually consists of people who are already familiar with the film in question and want their understanding of that film to be better. Therefore, your goal in writing the essay is to “solve” a problem that has heretofore hindered your audience’s understanding of the film. It’s important to note the difference between a problem for your reader and a problem for a character. The sentence “Orlando is grieved because Oliver treats him cruelly and tries to have him killed” articulates a very real problem for Orlando, but not an interpretive problem for the reader.