Developing Analytical Literacy: The Template Approach
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Argument is an important form of discourse that lies at the heart of intellectual and popular culture. Historians seek to justify the contention that the civil conflict in Rwanda counts as genocide by citing the definition of genocide and by providing evidence from historical events that the intentions and actions of the aggressors in this conflict fit that definition. Medical researchers make a case for the use of vitamin D as a possible cancer preventative based on epidemiological studies. Politicians with an environmental agenda seek to establish the negative impact of global warming on the planet by citing evidence of open seas and melting icebergs in the high Arctic. Groups and individuals constantly vie for our adherence to their way of seeing things, and our acceptance of their view of what is true, important, and worth doing. In each case, the scholar or advocate is deploying the device of argument, which is to say they offer evidence or reasons to justify the claims they would have us believe.

It is because of the centrality of argumentative discourse in popular and intellectual communication that people need to become competent in reading and analyzing argument. For the purpose of this essay, this kind of competence will be called "analytical literacy." Individuals who are analytically literate display three abilities in their reading and writing: the ability to read and respond to argument with intelligence and discernment (analytical reading), the ability to construct an argument that is rationally persuasive (analytical writing), and the ability to discern when argumentative analysis is called for and when it is not.

Typically, universities have left the task of training students in analytic reading and writing to courses in critical thinking or reasoning skills which are usually taught by philosophy departments. These courses provide students with opportunities to engage in and practice the analysis and construction of argument. The results of students' work here are encouraging: psychological studies—such as the research done by Kuhn, Shaw, and Felton—indicate that students who take critical thinking courses become better able to evaluate the argumentative content in oral and written material, and they develop some facility in adducing and assessing evidence in their own academic writing.

But the system of providing special courses in this kind of analysis has limitations. For one thing, not all students actually take courses in critical thinking or reasoning during their tenure at university. In such cases, they are left to acquire analytic skills when they can, through work in courses that have no special mandate to provide training in such skills. Obviously, this self-instruction is a hit-and-miss affair. Not only that, but becoming analytically literate is a process that necessarily occurs over time. This means that students—including those who have received the requisite training—will need to practice and develop their analytic reading and writing skills on an ongoing basis. This practice can, and arguably should, occur beyond the critical thinking class, in the diverse curriculum environments provided by the wider university.

How might this be accomplished? I suggest that instructors might require their students to conduct analytic reading and writing according to common templates. The templates I propose are designed to prompt students to engage in analytical reflection appropriate to the tasks of reading and writing, respectively.

Consider analytic reading. Engaging in reading of this kind involves identifying the basic structure of the argument within the text. Readers proceed by asking and answering four simple, but conceptually pivotal questions:

1. What is the issue?
2. What is the author's position?
3. What evidence does the author provide in support of this position?
4. (The evaluative question.) Does the evidence provide adequate justification for the position? Is it worthy of belief?

These questions represent the foundation of analytic reading. In asking these four questions, readers distinguish evidence from the position the evidence supports. Imposing these categories on the material enables readers to decide whether the position promoted is likely to be true, and thus worthy of belief.

In analytic writing, a slightly altered template is called for. Instead of identifying and evaluating someone else's argument, writers create and evaluate their own argument structure. Writers proceed by asking four questions:
1. What is the issue (that I am dealing with)?
2. What is my position?
3. What evidence do I have to support this position?
4. (The evaluative question turned inward.) Does this evidence provide adequate justification for the position I am advocating? Should I believe it?

There are, of course, other questions that could be included in these templates. In the case of the writing template, an additional question that prompts reflection about possible counter-evidence could be included: "is there other evidence challenging my position, which I have not taken into account?" A similar question could be added to the reading template: "is there other evidence challenging the author's position, which the author has not considered?" These questions have the virtue of prompting thoroughness of reflection on the part of the reader or writer. They are important, but not absolutely necessary. The four-question reading and writing templates represent the minimum core that needs to be addressed in analytic reading and writing. Simply put, the readers or writers must understand what the issue is, what the position on the issue is, and the evidence for the position, before they can make an intelligent, informed judgment as to what they will or will not take on as a belief.

I have used these analytic reading and writing templates in a number of my own philosophy classes. The templates have worked particularly well with first-year students who need considerable guidance in reading and writing. In general, I require students to perform an exercise in analysis once a week. For reading assignments, I provide a short article—sometimes on a philosophical topic, sometimes from the popular press—and ask the students to read the article according to the reading template. They record their answers under the rough headings: "the issue," "the position," "the evidence," and "my evaluation." Students soon discover that the questions need to be answered in sequence. Obviously, they cannot identify the author's position until they know what the position is connected to (the issue) and so on. Analytic writing follows essentially the same pattern. In this case, students are asked to write on the curriculum topic or a current news item, according to the four-question writing template.

What are the benefits and deficits of the reading and writing template approach? Let us start with the benefits.

1. I believe that the templates have the potential to take the mystery out of analytic reading and writing. The templates provide a solid framework for students' reflections on the issue they are considering. In following the templates, students can be assured that they are deploying the right concepts—the concepts of evidence and justification—and that they are asking the right analytic questions. In a given case, of course, they may fail to answer the questions correctly. They may not read carefully enough to accurately identify the author's position, or they may have difficulty articulating their own position. Successfully completing this part of the task of analysis takes a good deal of practice. But students can be confident that they have a structure for analysis that can be widely deployed, and that following this structure means they are proceeding in an analytical direction.

2. The questions contained in the writing template encourage self-reflective thought. This is to say that the questions require students to think about their own thoughts and to engage in reflective internal dialogue. For instance, the question, "is the evidence I have adequate to support my belief?" invites students to engage in deliberate and honest evaluation of their own beliefs and the reasons for those beliefs. Answering this question requires students to distance themselves from their beliefs, and to treat them much as they might treat the beliefs of another person. They test their beliefs against possible objections: "I believe that torture is a useful tool in the war against terrorism. But torture is morally abhorrent, there is considerable evidence that torture does not always reveal the truth, and there is always the possibility that the authorities will misidentify someone as a terrorist," and so on. Engagement in this kind of inquiry heightens students' awareness of their cognitive propensities. They come to know things about themselves that they would do well to know. They may, for instance, come to know that they are inclined to be credulous: "I tend to be unduly influenced by the views of my peers." But, armed with this knowledge, they are in a position to correct for it: "is this happening to me now? Am I simply adopting this belief because it is popular with my friends? I should look into the facts more carefully." This type of reflective thinking is better known as "metacognition," which has been studied by the developmental psychologists John Flavell and Deanna Kuhn.
3. The templates are relatively easy to deploy in a classroom setting. I find that an analytic reading of a two-page article, including class discussion, can be completed in about thirty minutes. This means that it is feasible to incorporate analytic reading and writing exercises into course work, without taking an excessive amount of time away from other curriculum activities.

This being said, the reading and writing templates do have limitations. Though they are well-suited to a number of disciplines—including philosophy, anthropology, biology, and marketing—they do not address the reading and writing issues of disciplines for which argument is not the core form of discourse. This is to say that the templates have wide, but not universal, applicability across the university curriculum. However, the analytic reading and writing templates could conceivably be used to illustrate the kinds of questions that do not get asked when considering a work of art or literature from a creative, imaginative, or emotive perspective. In such a case, students would be learning the third skill required for analytic literacy: the skill of discerning when argument analysis is called for, and when it is not.

Let me conclude by providing an example of an analytical reading. In August of 2005, Time magazine published a one-page article entitled, "Blood on the Home Front." The article discusses the violent deaths of four women during a seven-week period on the military base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Four soldiers, recently involved in the American military intervention in Afghanistan, were accused of killing their wives. In the article, the author notes that that the deaths of these women had received a good deal of media attention. The author also notes that the popular explanation for the violent behavior of the accused was that the men were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder acquired via their military service. In deploying the reading template, we need to ask and answer the four analytical questions: (1) What is the issue? (2) What is the author's position? (3) What evidence does the author provide in support of this position? (4) Does the evidence provide adequate justification for the position? Here is what the answers to these questions might look like:

**THE ISSUE:** What caused the murders of four military wives at Fort Bragg?

**THE POSITION:** The author contends that the cause of the murders was likely garden-variety domestic violence, rather than post-traumatic stress from participation in the Afghan conflict.

**THE EVIDENCE:** The author cites three items of evidence. (1) The fact that four women were killed in seven weeks at Fort Bragg by their spouses is not statistically significant: this number of violent deaths out of a population of 20,000 reflects the average for the non-military population. (2) Only two of the four accused could have suffered post-traumatic stress, as only two actually saw active service in Afghanistan. (3) There was a pattern of domestic violence in the households of at least two of the accused men prior to the murders.

**MY EVALUATION:** The evidence put forward by the author of the article is sufficient to establish a greater likelihood of domestic violence than of post-traumatic stress as an explanation for the murders. The most telling piece of evidence here is the statistical evidence, which indicates that the deaths are not unusual, so there is no need to employ a special explanation for them.

Clearly, there is a lot more that can be done with this article. For instance, students could be asked to consider domestic violence as a social issue, or they could discuss the responsibility of the popular press to report in a non-sensational manner. They could begin to examine the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress, or they could inquire into the nature of causal explanation. Worthy as they are, these subsequent inquiries, depend first and foremost on the students' abilities to interact with the text in a literate manner. This is to say that students need to be able to read and understand the basic theses that authors promote, and the arguments that they provide in support of those theses. Analogously, in writing, students need to be able to clearly identify and articulate their own theses, and they need to be able to generate a competent argument in support of them. And, perhaps most importantly, students need to be self-reflective and self-critical enough to know when they have not succeeded in accomplishing these tasks. This kind of literacy, which I have called analytical literacy, is something that students as creators and consumers of ideas need to be able to do. If students do not develop a capacity for analytical literacy, then they cannot go forward to perform the various social, political, and moral analyses that we, as educators, want them to perform.

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**Works Cited and Consulted**

