Description and Analysis
Summary Transcript

I'm often asked about the difference between description and analysis, or summarizing and analyzing. The difference is straightforward, and it applies to all fields.

Take an example from science. You've run an experiment, and you have the data from the experiment in front of you. That's your evidence. In your results section, you need to describe the data you obtained. What does it look like? What patterns, for instance, are evident? Your results section calls on you to describe those patterns.

But that isn't enough; it's really only description. What you now need to do is to tell us what that data or those patterns you found MEAN in relation to the question you asked or the hypothesis you stated.

In other fields, you're asked to analyze a film or a piece of literature. Summarizing what happens in that film or literature is just a plot summary, not an analysis.

Let's go a step further. Let's say that you were asked to explore the use of light and darkness in the film *Hidden Figures*. You watch the film carefully, and you discover that the main female characters are often shown coming out of darkness into light. You've gathered specific evidence from several points in the film to demonstrate that this pattern does occur, and you've described those moments.

So far, so good. But that isn't enough. You've found a pattern, you've described what happens, and you've provided evidence that this pattern exists. That's description. NOW YOU HAVE TO TELL US WHAT THAT PATTERN OR OBSERVATION MEANS. Each time you make an observation like this one – women coming out of darkness into light – you need to tell us what the evidence means in relation to the question being asked. Each time you describe something that happens, or a pattern of metaphors, or a pattern or disruption in data, we ask, "So what?" "What does that mean?"

In the case of *Hidden Figures*, that pattern might mean that these women are breaking the barriers of race and gender that have been imposed upon them. That's ANALYSIS, when you tell us the significance of your findings and your evidence. TELL US WHAT YOUR FINDINGS OR OBSERVATIONS MEAN TO MOVE TO ANALYSIS. ANSWER THE "SO WHAT" QUESTION.

Make this move from description to analysis – to telling us what your findings mean – for every major point or pattern you include in your paper. At the end, when you arrive at a full answer to your question, tell us the overall meaning or significance of that answer in relation to the question.

Let's look at one more example, this time from student Jonathan Clodman's award-winning paper, used for educational purposes with Jonathan's permission. Jonathan compared news coverage of the 2015 CUPE strike with news coverage of the public school teachers' strike

(ETFO), which took place two months later. According to Jonathan, CUPE strikers obtained public sympathy, while public school teachers did not. He therefore asked, "How did differences in news coverage between two incidents of job action contribute to such different public perspectives of the incidents [job actions] themselves?"

Midway through his essay, Jonathan studied the images that accompanied news coverage of each strike. Here's his paragraph about the photos that accompanied the public school strike coverage. Read this paragraph carefully. The first sentence tells us what to expect this paragraph to show us, and the first half of the paragraph describes the evidence that Jonathan has collected. That evidence consisted of faceless images of teachers or no images of teachers, with the most telling images included being those of the union president and the provincial government representative. Jonathan DESCRIBES his findings first. He then moves to ANALYSIS – to telling us what this evidence and these patterns MEAN in the last part of the paragraph, in the highlighted yellow text.

"In contrast, coverage of the ETFO job action barely featured individual members' faces or stories at all. In some cases, photos literally cut the faces of the teachers right out of the photo (680 News Staff, CBC News "Ontario elementary", Csandy). In other cases, the articles simply did not include photos of teachers, the very members of the union initiating the job action (Artuso, CBC News "ETFO, Wynne", Cohn, Morrow & Ross). Individual members and their stories were by no means the focus of those covering this job action. In their place was ETFO President Sam Hammond, juxtaposed against a spokesperson for the provincial government (Artuso, CBC News, Csanady), both photographed with the camera looking up at them, with neither side invoking empathy from readers. [Given the images of these men, who sat] alone indoors in their comfortable suits (CBC News, Rushowy), the implicit narrative that emerged suggested that both sides were equally rich and powerful. Without an underdog with which the public could identify, this job action was far less romanticized, and instead covered quite practically with great concern for the specific details of what the unions would allow and "forbid" their members from doing (Morrow & Ross, Rushowy). Without a real and personal focus, audiences were forced to engage with fine details in order to empathize with union members. Despite the fact that elementary teachers can be found in every single community in Ontario, the impersonal nature of the coverage made it more difficult for a reader to both figuratively and literally see the people at the centre of the story."

Always keep these steps in mind:

- Gather evidence that's related to the question you're asking or the thesis statement you're arguing. (Data, quotations, observations – whatever's appropriate for your field.)
- Organize your evidence or group it into main points.
- Provide the evidence for each main point and describe it.
- Move to analysis for each main point by telling us WHAT THAT EVIDENCE MEANS in relation to your question.