

Process Analysis

Not Just “How To”



One of the more challenging essays in a college composition class is the process analysis. The process analysis is an essay that describes the steps of a process, and it is often (mistakenly) called a “how to” essay. A process analysis is actually quite different from a “how to” in practice, however, because it has a different purpose. Where the purpose of a “how to” is to *instruct*, the purpose of a process analysis is to *explain and analyze*. A “how to” essay often directly addresses its readers (“Gather your ingredients.” “Bake the cake.” “Drain the oil from the oil pan.”); a process analysis doesn’t – instead, it describes the process itself (“Once the batter is properly mixed, the baker puts it in a cake pan and then the oven.”). A process analysis isn’t like a recipe; it’s more like narration for a documentary. There is an analytical component to a process analysis that is usually not present in a “how to” (also called a *directional* essay). To put it simply, a process analysis is more than merely a list of instructions.

Choosing a Topic

In a process analysis, it’s important to choose a topic that can be described in steps. Since a process analysis is *not* a set of instructions, be careful not to choose a topic that is likely to turn into that. In other words, a recipe for some type of meal is probably not the best choice for a topic. When you pick a topic for the process analysis, it needs to be one that you can *explain* without *instructing*.

In other words, think of the process analysis less like a cooking show and more like a documentary. How do hurricanes form and dissipate? How does a pilot fly an airplane? How does a four-stroke engine work? These are some questions that you might use a process analysis to answer. You can even go back to the familiar topics, but frame them differently. For instance, instead of writing a directional essay on how to change the oil in a car, perhaps try writing a process analysis on how a mechanic performs an oil change.

Organizing the Essay

A process analysis is organized much like any other essay: there is an introduction that establishes the topic and gets the reader’s attention, a clear thesis statement outlining the contents of the paper, body paragraphs that cover the topic in detail, and a conclusion that ties everything neatly together.

For a process analysis, you should consider the steps in the process and see if you can sort the steps into three (or more) logical groups that can form the body of the essay. For example, if you’re writing an essay about how a pilot flies a plane, your three groups might be takeoff, cruise, and landing. Obviously each of those parts of the process will have different steps, but that is a good overall pattern for organizing the essay.

Introducing the Topic

For the introduction, the best way to start is by making some statement that will get the reader’s attention. If we stay with our airplane example, our opening attention-getter might be something like this:

Powered flight has been around for over a hundred years, and flying machines have come a long way since the Wright brothers first put their machine in the air.

This opening sentence gets the reader into an aviation mindset with talk of flying machines and common-knowledge aviation pioneers like the Wright brothers. The next step is to establish some sort of common ground – something most or all readers will be familiar with.

In fact, most people have probably been on a plane at least once.

From there, you need to turn the focus into something that reaches into the process.

Most passengers just take their seats and follow the flight crew's instructions, unconcerned with what the pilots are doing in the cockpit.

Thesis Statement

Now that you've established the fact that the essay is about a process, you need to finish your introduction with a strong thesis statement. The thesis statement should be a preview of the whole process. Remember those three groups of steps we talked about? This is where they come into play. You need to create a thesis statement that clarifies exactly what process you're discussing and the distinct parts of it. For example:

Most people probably envision an airplane cockpit as a complex maze of buttons and switches, but the process of flying an airplane under normal circumstances is a smooth routine from takeoff, through cruise, to landing.

Describing the Process

The body paragraphs of a process analysis should be a smooth process. The flow of a process analysis is not altogether different from a narrative: everything is in chronological order (that is, in order of time – first step first, and so forth), and each part of the action should include some sort of transition. When you're organizing the body paragraphs of your essay, follow your thesis statement and make sure each paragraph has an opening sentence that acts as both a clear transition point and a solid topic sentence for that paragraph. For example:

The first part of the flying process is, of course, getting the airplane into the air.

From there, write all of the steps connected to that first main point, in chronological order. In a process analysis, it's really important to use words that indicate time scales – words and phrases like, "While this is happening," "Next," and "After that," among many others.

Remember to keep the process organized; you're going to have different steps, but all of your steps should be relevant to the paragraph where you put them. For instance, continuing with the example of airline flights, if you're describing the step of doing the pre-flight checklist, you would include that step in the paragraph describing the takeoff, not the paragraph about landing.

Cautions and Warnings

Since a process analysis is not a set of instructions, cautionary statements should *not* read like warning labels. Instead, they should be presented as cause-and-effect statements. Instead of warning the reader not to do something, instead present the negative outcome that is being warned against. A cautionary statement, like the rest of the essay, should not be instructional in nature. For instance:

Make sure to extend the spoilers, or the plane might not have enough runway to stop. (WRONG)

If the pilot fails to extend the spoilers, the airplane may be moving too fast on landing to come to a safe stop before reaching the end of the runway. (RIGHT)

Creating the Conclusion

The conclusion of a process analysis should be treated much the same as the conclusion of any other essay: a summary that leaves readers with all of the essay's key points fresh, and an enlightenment that serves as its own reward. In a process analysis, it's important to keep the conclusion brief, but not too short. The best thing to do is find a balance; summarize your key points, but don't repeat yourself. If we return to the airliner example, your conclusion might include a sentence like, "From takeoff, through cruise, to landing, the process of flying an airliner is usually as streamlined as the airplane itself." That sounds a great deal like a thesis statement, but the conclusion often does. The difference is that the context of the conclusion gives it a sense of completion. You'll wrap up your paper with something meaningful that connects the topic to the audience. For instance, "Understanding the process of flying a jetliner can make flying a much more relaxed experience."

Finalizing the Essay

The last thing to do before turning your paper in is to make those last checks over the paper: is the paper organized well? Are your steps in a clear, logical sequence? Are there adequate transitions between your steps and your main points? Is the paper free of instructional statements and second-person point of view? All of these things are important to check before you turn your paper in, but once you've made sure the process is clear and flows smoothly, the essay will be polished and professional.