

# CREATIVE WRITERS TEACH TECHNIQUES FOR ANALYZING ANY TEXT

## Techniques for Analyzing any Text

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To become a good writer, it is important to analyze other texts by looking closely at specific details to explain or interpret the author's intended meaning and purpose. This analysis is crucial in helping students develop and improve their own writing by reflecting and drawing on the techniques implemented by other writers. This chapter explores Kiese Laymon's essay "Mississippi: A Poem in Days" to show how audience, argument, evidence, and stance are relevant tools used to decipher an author's text. Instructors and students should be aware that the writer uses racially explicit language.

## Audience

When a person hits share on an Instagram post a lot of thought probably has gone into the picture. Before posting that one photo, more than likely, the person has taken several pictures, reviewed the lighting, colors, angle, and even the items in the background of each picture. They've thought about who would gravitate toward this particular picture, who would like it, respond with a comment to spark conversation within a community, or even share the photograph with other like minds. In other words, they've selected the particular photo with a specific audience in mind. An audience is an individual or group of people who share similar ideas, beliefs, situations, and struggles.

Though some steps may vary, writers make similar decisions before publishing their writing. For instance, a nonfiction writer will determine which portions of their lives to share in a story. A college professor who writes an essay about the impact of Covid-19 on their class instruction, will probably include different details than if they were composing an essay about their experiences as a mother while working, during the Covid-19 pandemic. If only writing about being a professor during Covid they may discuss how different it feels to teach solely online, the challenges of community building, or the strangeness of teaching to black boxes when students don't turn their cameras on. Other educators who share similar experiences would be drawn to an essay that has these particular details.

If this same professor decides to write about being a mother and a professor she might write about managing her own and their children's Zoom schedules, chronicles of recording content with her children in the house, attending meetings, or presenting at conferences while still being responsible for the health and well-being of her children. Though the essence of the essay is about a professor, the added layer of motherhood invites another audience.

One might argue that the readers of the two essays mentioned above could overlap, and while I agree that this is true, what makes one essay distinct from another is the details the writer decides to include in the essay. Just like the details in the photograph the Instagrammer selected were tailored or will naturally connect to particular audiences, the word choices, images, tone of voice, and parts of their lives that a writer decides to elaborate deeply on will connect to particular audiences. I don't want to insinuate that all writers or Instagrammers purposely burden themselves with curating or composing their art hoping that specific audiences will engage with their material. What I'm trying to make clear is that the topics selected for the material will draw the attention of particular readers.

As an example, by day two of Laymon's essay readers understand that he is unsure if he should travel during the coronavirus due to his Grandmama's health, yet he affirms, "These are the events where I make most of my money." Here Laymon is in conversation with an audience of working people who are caretakers of elderly and were facing similar difficult decisions surrounding finances. Like the Covid pandemic, Laymon's audience is layered. Though he begins his essay with a broad conversation about working people who are also caretakers, by day six, Laymon's audience becomes more finite with the statement, "I never assumed it would take my students." He shares his experience as a mourning educator, and therefore serves as a voice to amplify the fears of other educators.

Laymon's student doesn't die as a result of being at school, yet mentioning her death is still important for this essay. Her death invites readers to ponder how schools handled the Covid pandemic. In doing so Laymon's audience expands to include not only parents, but students, and educators who were also navigating the pandemic, and further extends the conversation to include government officials and school administrator's handling of the pandemic.

The death of a student due to Covid is a teacher's fear. Laymon's mention of the death of his student invites readers to gain insight into the thoughts of a teacher. In the opening sections of this essay, Laymon's immediate concern is about the elderly and people with compromised immune systems. Laymon simultaneously broadens the conversation to educators, while also narrowing the conversation to include the lives of students. The author's details about himself as a caretaker of the elderly, as a person who needs to work, and a teacher are specific details he includes to relate to and grab the attention of his audiences.

## Activity

For each day of the essay use a graphic organizer to document Laymon's intended audience. Work with a partner.

## Argument

Argument is one of those terms that some people run from because it seems synonymous with aggression and hostility. There's also the fear of being "wrong," which carries the unfounded connotation of ignorance. On the contrary, the ability to argue merely means one can support conclusions and interpretations with logical reasoning and evidence. This signifies the ability to not only think for oneself but process and weed out illogical views and ideas. Regarding being wrong, it's important to understand that an argument is an opinion. As such, like people, opinions should be developing, growing, changing, and evolving as knowledge and experience increase. In short, an argument is a personal and/or logical claim/belief that is justified through the interpretation of evidence. Keep in mind, the phrasing of the argument will vary from reader to reader. However, if the author does their job, mirroring themes and ideas will appear.

For example, in the Mississippi essay, Laymon consistently references racial descriptions to set up the racial discrimination that Laymon wants the reader to process. He starts off by implying the impact this racial awareness has on his interpretation of himself, as well as how he perceives others interpret him. For example, the author writes, "White people treat Black people who smell like old cauliflower like Black People." Scientifically, cooked cauliflower gives off a sulfuric odor that has been described as overpowering and unpleasant. The author suggests that white people who view certain Black people as disagreeable see it fitting to avoid or remove them in some way. The addition of the cauliflower also provides the negative connotation desired with the repetition of the phrase

“Black people,” helping the reader see the issue with treating Black people like Black people. Laymon goes on to connect everyday practices and beliefs such as these to larger acts of discrimination with Tate Reeves’s college and current political acts. These kinds of references and allusions appear throughout the work from the racial description of the driver to the color of Laymon’s own clothes.

Time is also used to support the racial argument. It’s important to note the length of time these beliefs and ideas have spanned, taking note of the narrator’s recollections from college all the way to the present day. The time lapse is reinforced in the quote with the inclusion of the word “old.” A simple term but telling since it takes time for something to become “old.” Color and time are consistent motifs that are utilized to connect racial disparities and/or attacks. Ultimately, his constant awareness of his own physical identity and the identity of others is crucial to his argument. The time references establish how deeply the information has been embedded in the narrator and society. This awareness and time coupled with the negative connotation attached to only Black people and the acts of society and politicians is meant to insinuate much larger cultural and social disparities. Specifically, Laymon wants the reader to understand that the longevity and practice of racism is so rooted in America that violence and discrimination against Black people is an acceptable and routine practice. Essentially, this norming of violence and disrespect has allowed these disparaging ideas and beliefs to become as natural as breathing, blinding society to the true impact of racism.

## Activity

In a Tweet no more than 140 characters, find an alternative argument supported in the essay. Share Tweets on Twitter and tag the author @KieseLaymon

## Evidence

Evidence is one of those terms that, intellectually, we understand. It’s only when we try to define it that the word begins to bleed into other ideas and concepts, becoming a literary tie dye. But, like everything in an English Composition class, the definition is not as important as the identification of the concept or the execution of the skill. That being said, it’s always good to have a working definition. The one this chapter will use is anything such as direct and indirect quotes, paraphrases, statistics, facts, figures, and personal stories that qualifies as credible. Now, in order for something to be credible, it has to logically and intelligently support the information in the essay. That ranges from supporting the argument, the stance, or the audience. Keep in mind, you can have as many facts and figures and stats as you want. It means nothing if it doesn’t support the essay’s components. Also know that evidence doesn’t have to be lifeless numbers or charts. Vivid language, dynamic stories, and even personal interpretations can qualify as evidence. If the connections are executed successfully, the reader can consciously and/or unconsciously follow the author’s logic and reasoning, thus finding cohesion and comprehension.

This section will focus on Laymon’s argument to demonstrate how evidence functions efficiently. Specifically, he utilizes personal stories and a careful attention to word choice to show how both Black and non-Black people have accepted that racial violence and discrimination are understood and acceptable everyday practices. For example, Laymon includes the story of his experiences with the future Governor Tate when they were both college students. He states,

I have never written about the heartbreak of seeing the future governor of Mississippi in that group of white boys, proudly representing the Kappa Alpha fraternity and its confederate commitment to Black suffering...it hurt my feelings to see Tate doing what white boys who pledged their identities to the Old South ideologies were supposed to do.

Laymon outlines the persistence of racism through the connotations of the words incorporated. He starts off by establishing his argument with the phrase “supposed to do,” insinuating that racial violence and discrimination are expected experiences Black people must learn to navigate through. He builds on that idea with the inclusion of the fraternity. Through this word, the reader is brought back to college life and students. For many, college students are seen as vulnerable and impressionable, though still capable of rational and logical decision making, using college as a way to transition into adulthood. Furthermore, fraternities can be associated with youthful experimentation, the creation of life-long connections, and the development of personal identities. It is through these references the reader is led to understand how racial ideas are passed down, and thus embed themselves throughout history.

Laymon further achieves the necessary connections by including “the Old South ideologies” and “confederate commitment,” bringing the reader back to slavery days. Even though history has taught that neither the North nor the South were concerned with the wellbeing of enslaved Black beyond their monetary value, slaves were known to run to the North because of the heightened cruelty endured in the South. This phrase combined with the assumptions surrounding fraternity life solidifies the author’s reasoning that racial disparities are engraved in the everyday lives of people. Through his language, Laymon establishes how the racist past has infiltrated impressionable minds and ensured its continued existence. Tate being a member of a fraternity which “proudly represent[s]...its confederate commitment to Black suffering” shows the reader the longevity of these ideas. This longevity is what has made these practices and ideas a regular fixture in the foundation of America.

## Activity

Partner with a peer. Then find at least 3-4 pieces of evidence to support the argument your partner Tweeted.

## Stance

Just as the details that an author decides to include in a text will speak to a specific audience, so will an author’s voice. Authors often adjust their voice to express and align with their viewpoints. Within a text, an author’s viewpoint is called a stance or the position taken, or the beliefs held about an argument, usually conveyed through tone, evidence selection, argument formation, and information organized for a specific/intended audience.

In this chapter, we have discussed Laymon’s selection of specific details to converse with an audience of people who are caregivers, educators, Black themselves, and others who are concerned with the safety of Black lives. Laymon is not simply speaking to a specific audience, he is a member of the groups for which he speaks. His membership shapes his stance, and it is his decision to use personal anecdotes as evidence for his argument, which centers his identity as a part of his stance. Laymon’s word choices, and the space he gives to various topics within the essay including race, education, and the coronavirus, help us pinpoint his stance.

Within Laymon’s essay, clear and bold statements are anchored down by a tone of fear. To profess, “I am forever a fat Black boy from Jackson Mississippi,” calls attention to Laymon’s size, racial identity, and geography. In just one sentence, readers are given the context surrounding Laymon’s writing. By bringing attention to details of his personal body, and his position in the world as a writer who is from Mississippi, Laymon escalates his locality. Due to historical violence against Black bodies, present day racist offences including the fact that “thirty-two percent of the state’s African Americans live in poverty,” Jesmyn Ward says that “racism is built into the very bones of Mississippi.” Thus by calling out his state, Laymon brings our attention to the history of Black people in Mississippi and signals the longevity and normality of racism in America.

This fact that this essay was written just weeks after Breonna Taylor’s death deepens who we understand Laymon to be. We know

Taylor's death and other recent Black deaths are on his mind and kindles the fear that fuels Laymon's thoughts as he writes. In day five's section we are clear that Laymon is aware and disturbed by American's racial history. Through plain images which recall recent ways Blacks have been killed we gain an understanding of the impact these deaths have on Laymon's mental state, his anger and fear for his own life. He states,

I sit in this house, once the site of a confederate mansion, alone, afraid to go outside, afraid to let anyone outside see me. I am afraid of being killed while dreaming. Driving while Black. Jogging while Black. Dreaming while Black. Fighting while Black. Loving while Black.

Thus by calling out his state, and writing about present day violences against Black people, Laymon brings our attention to the history of Black people in Mississippi and throughout the US, which signals the longevity and normality of racism in America. In doing so, Laymon expresses himself as a Black man who is aware of the racial tension in America and its impact upon himself and other Black people. With these specific details Laymon reflects a stance of a writer who fears for his life because he could suffer simply because of his location and his race.

## Activity

Choose three or four images that you would post to an Instagram page to reflect Laymon's stance. Provide a brief caption for each image.

## Discussion Questions

- Pick a specific audience and explain what details or information the author could have included to reach that audience. How might these new details impact the essay?
- Explain how the coronavirus is significant to Laymon's argument.
- Explain how "Day 9" supports or detracts from Laymon's argument.
- Examine a text that you plan to analyze, make a list of word choices the author uses that show stance.

## About the Authors



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Lisa E. Wright is a PhD candidate at Oklahoma State University, in Creative Writing Nonfiction. She currently serves as an Assistant Director for OSU's Writing Center and First-Year-Composition program. Her work has been published in or are forthcoming in Hippocampus Magazine, Praxis, and Writing Center Journal. She is currently working on a memoir which focuses on Black maternal health and her own home births.

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Natasha Tinsley is an Assistant Professor and the Writing Center Coordinator at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. She is a two-time graduate from Oklahoma State University, where she earned a Bachelors in English and an MFA in Fiction. She also holds a Master's in Education from Cameron University. Her research and written works focus on African American people and culture, including but not limited to ideologies surrounding identity, gender roles, and motherhood. Natasha has also presented at several writing center conferences themed around racial injustice, as well as published academic pieces and poetry in The Writing Center Journal and Arcturus. She uses her academic and creative skills to offer truths she hopes will provide to others the same catharsis and enjoyment she receives.