*Note:*

*The following is an abridged transcript of Video 2 for the Analytical Writing portion of our course. Just like last time, this is not an exact transcript because I thought it would be best to spare you from having to read all of my “ums,” “likes,” and stutters, and because I wanted to make some things a little clearer here than they were the first time around. Still, the editing is pretty minimal here, with no accounting for grammar or structure, so it is conversational English and NOT representative of how you should be writing your exam responses (*do as I say, not as I do *in this case).*

*Hope you get some use out of this!*

*Carlos Caetano Leão*

**Introduction**

Alright, welcome back everybody to the second video of the Analytical Writing portion of your GRE prep course. Today we are going over the Analyze an Argument task in more detail. This is one of two tasks; the other one is the Analyze an Issue task. Today we are going to be very briefly going over the basics of what you’re supposed to be doing for this then we will look at three sample responses for one prompt, ranging from pretty bad to really good, to see what we can learn from those and what you should strive for when you’re answering this kind of thing.

**Argument Sample Prompt**

The prompt we’re working with is the same one from last week. Remember, the first thing we should do is read the instructions. The instructions here are:

“*Write a response in which you examine the stated and/or unstated assumptions of the argument. Be sure to explain how the argument depends on the assumptions and what the implications are if the assumptions prove unwarranted.”*

And the prompt is:

*“In surveys Mason City residents rank watersports (swimming, boating and fishing) among their favorite recreational activities. The Mason River flowing through the city is rarely used for these pursuits, however, the city park department devotes little of its budget to maintaining riverside recreational facilities. For years there have been complaints from residents about the quality of the river’s water and the river’s smell. In response, the state has recently announced plans to clean up Mason River. Use of the river for water sports is therefore sure to increase. The city government should for that reason devote more money in this year’s budget to riverside recreational facilities.”*

Let’s start by going over some of the assumptions past classes came up with for this prompt (I hope you came up with some assumptions of your own last time as well during the pause). Here are some of those assumptions:

* The person writing the argument assumes that the list given are the favored recreational activities of the town but we do not know the quality of that survey. How broad was it? How many people did it reach? How many different activities did it list? All of these things are important when you are using survey data.
* There is a stated assumption that use of the river for water sports should increase after clean-up but we are not sure if there is a link there. Maybe people don’t use the river for reasons other than the water quality or smell.
* There is the assumption that the money would actually be going towards the river and water sports but it could be that there are other things at these recreational facilities that aren’t directly tied to the river.
* There is the assumption that the river is appropriate for these activities. Maybe it just is not a good river for these sorts of sports.

This is the kind of exercise that you should be doing in the first seven minutes of receiving the prompt. Go through the argument and list every single assumption that they made that you can then elaborate on or pick apart. Other questions that we need to be asking include whether we need more information to support the argument. In other words, did they give enough information for the argument to be strong? What information could it be? So you could say, “if we knew \_\_\_, then we could believe this argument a little bit more,” or, “if they had proven this, they would have a stronger point.” What would help convince you that this is a strong argument to be making.

Let’s look at the sample responses. They are labeled A through C – these are not the grades, they’re just labels to differentiate between the responses. Let’s just dive in.

**Essay Response - A**

*“The problem with the arguement is the assumption that if the Mason River were cleaned up, that people would use it for water sports and recreation. This is not necessarily true, as people may rank water sports among their favorite recreational activities, but that does not mean that those same people have the financial ability, time or equipment to pursue those interests.*

*However, even if the writer of the arguement is correct in assuming that the Mason river will be used more by the city’s residents. The arguement does not say why the recreational facilities need more money. If recreational facilities already exist along the Mason River, why should the city allot more money to fund them? If the recreational facilities already in existence will be used more in the coming years, then they will be making more money for themselves, eliminating the need for the city government to devote more money to them.*

*According to the arguement, the reason people are not using the Mason River for water sports is because of the smell and the quality of water, not because the recreational facilities are unacceptable.*

*If the city government alloted more money to the recreational facilities, then the budget is being cut from some other important city project. Also, if the assumptions proved unwarranted, and more people did not use the river for recreation, then much money has been wasted, not only the money for the recreational facilities, but also the money that was used to clean up the river to attract more people in the first place.”*

So, the main points in this response are:

* People might like water recreational activities but that doesn’t mean that they can afford to spend time or money to do them. Maybe they just like the concept. The survey doesn’t show that people actually would do more water sports if the river were cleaner, it just shows that they like the idea of doing these sports.
* If the recreational facilities already have some income, it could be a problem to give them even more funding and take that away from other government projects. Maybe if the river is clean enough, the recreational facilities’ entry and rental fees would be enough funding. Just the river being clean would attract more people, which would then allow the recreational facilities to make more money and thus it is not necessary to give them more money.
* Is it really going to benefit people more to give funding to these recreational facilities rather than to other programs? That’s how funding tends to work. You can get more total funding sometimes but often you are just changing the allocation and diverting money from one program to fund another. This could possibly be a net harm.

I want you to pause in a second and think about what you see that could be hurting the score for this response and what you would add or take away. Just build on the basic structure of the response and think of what you would do to improve it.

Welcome back. I wish I knew what you guys had thought of during this time but all I can do is hope that you will email me your responses if you want feedback. Let’s go over some responses that past classes and I have thought of. First, this could use a lot more elaboration and examples. This is kind of a cursory response. They hopped through a couple points pretty quickly and did not elaborate on much, except for maybe in the second paragraph. Specific examples and specific terms would help too. For example, they could have said “people enjoy the concept of jet skiing but don’t have the money to jet ski even if the river is clean”. The more specific you can get and the greater the number of specific examples you can provide, the stronger your response will be. It makes your response less of a theoretical argument and takes it closer to real life. Again, elaboration is an issue. Paragraph 3 is very short. You want to avoid single-sentence paragraphs like the plague. While it is not necessarily a deal breaker if it is just one in your group of longer paragraphs, it is not ideal. You just can’t elaborate enough or get enough specificity and examples in just one sentence; it’s an easy way to spot something that’s just too short. Assume that your points don’t stand by themselves. Paragraph 3 is just a point with no support. You need to make a point then support it aggressively - add as much support as you can in the time that you have. Also, there’s the obvious stuff. “Argument” is spelled wrong four times. This is kind of a dumb one to get wrong since it’s in the prompt – if they give you a word, use that spelling. On the other hand, it’s good that they at least misspelled it consistently. They used the same spelling for “argument” throughout, which is actually better than changing the spelling part-way through. Consistently at least partially makes up for misspelling; just a little bit. They’re looking for a well-balanced response. They want a good balance between the number of points that you make and the amount of elaboration that you’re going for. In that aspect, this is not bad. These paragraphs are reasonably balanced. That said, they could all use a lot more elaboration – you don’t want your response to just be a list of points.

Now I want you to guess what the score was for this response. Remember, the scoring is from zero to six, but as long as you write something it’s actually from one to six. Guess the score and we’ll go over all of them at the end once we’ve gone over the rest of the responses.

**Essay Response - B**

*“This statement looks like logical, but there are some wrong sentences in it which is not logical.*

*First, this statement mentions ranking water sports as their favorite recreational activities at the first sentence. However, it seems to have a ralation between the first sentence and the setence which mentions that increase the quality of the river’s water and the river’s bad smell. This is a wrong cause and result to solve the problem.*

*Second, as a reponse to the complaints from the residents, the state plan to clean up the river. As a result, the state expects that water sports will increase. When you look at two sentences, the result is not appropriate for the cause.*

*Third, the last statement is the conclusion. However, even though residents rank water sports, the city government might devote the budget to another issue. This statement is also a wrong cause and result.*

*In summary, the statement is not logical because there are some errors in it. The supporting setences are not strong enough to support this issue.”*

OK, right off the bat, there are some things visibly wrong with this essay. There are many, many spelling errors and grammatical mishaps. These are kind of a big deal when they are throughout the paper like this. If you look at these spelling errors, you can see that they sometimes spell “sentence” correctly and then immediately spell it incorrectly, which is not great. It shows that you are really not sure and couldn’t just pick one option. To me the spelling errors in this response yell that this person is used to careless writing. This is something that all of us are guilty of to some degree – if you’re super used to writing with spell check and autocorrect, you just don’t pay that much attention to small spelling errors because they get fixed for you, but in this scenario it becomes an issue. Even if this person knows how to spell “sentence” correctly but their finger just misses the “n” a lot of the time and normally it’s no big deal, here it *is* a big deal. So remember, practice without spelling aides and then turn them on after you’re done. If there’s a word that you whiff all the time, pay attention and make sure that you can spell it right consistently. Then in the last two to five minutes of allocated time that you have, go back through and proof the crap out of your writing and make sure that everything is at least consistent.

Pause right now and imagine that you are an essay grader reading this. What are some thoughts that you would have on this paper? Pause here.

OK, coming back. First, you should assume that people don’t know what you’re talking about and that you need to do their work for them. This is true of a lot of academic writing to a degree – think presentations, studies, anything that you write – you need to assume that the base knowledge is low and specify exactly what you’re talking about. In this case, since we’re referring to another piece of writing, we need to specify what part of that writing you are talking about. Don’t say “In the first sentence, \_\_\_.” Rather, say what they actually said in the first sentence and build off of that or respond to it. Don’t make the reader have to keep track of where you are and have to cross-reference the writing you’re referring to, that’s too much work. Once you’ve done that, you then have to connect the dots of your argument with specific supports. Also, the grammar was very bad. Don’t let your grammar be that bad.

I want you guys to think about what the grade might have been for Essay Response B, we will come back to it in a little bit.

**Essay Response - C**

*“While it may be true that the Mason City government ought to devote more money to riverside recreational facilities, this author’s argument does not make a cogent case for increased resources based on river use. It is easy to understand why city residents would want a cleaner river, but this argument is rife with holes and assumptions, and this, not strong enough to lead to increased funding.*

*Citing surveys of city residents, the author reports city resident’s love of water sports. It is not clear, however, the scope and validity of that survey. For example, the survey could have asked residents if they prefer using the river for water sports or would like to see a hydroelectric dam built, which may have swayed residents toward river sports. The sample may not have been representative of city residents, asking only those residents who live upon the river. The survey may have been 10 pages long, with only 2 questions dedicated to river sports. We just do not know. Unless the survey is fully representative, valid and reliable, it cannot be used to effectively back the author’s argument.*

*Additionally, the author implies that residents do not use the river for swimming, boating, and fishing, despite their professed interest, because the water is polluted and smelly, While a polluted, smelly river would likely cut down on river sports, a concrete connection between the river’s lack of use and the river’s current state is not effectively made. Though there have been complaints, we do not know if there have been numerous complaints from a wide range of people, or perhaps from one or two individuals who made numerous complaints. To strengthen his/her argument, the author would benefit from implementing a normed survey asking a wide range of residents why they do not currently use the river.*

*Building upon the implication that residents do not use the river due to the quality of the river’s water and the smell, the author suggests that a river clean up will result in increased river usage. If the river’s water quality and smell result from problems which can be cleaned, this may be true. For example, if the decreased water quality and aroma is caused by pollution by factories along the river, this conceivably could be remedied. But if the quality and aroma results from the natural mineral deposits in the water or surrounding rock, this may not be true. There are some bodies of water which emit a strong smell of sulphur due to the geography of the area. This is not something likely to be afffected by a clean-up. Consequently, a river clean-up may have no impact upon river usage. Regardless of whether the river’s quality is able to be improved or not, the author does not effectively show a connection between water quality and river usage.*

*A clean, beautiful, safe river often adds to a city’s property values, leads to increased tourism and revenue from those who come to take advantage of the river, and a better overall quality of life for residents. For these reasons, city governments may decide to invest in improving riverside recreational facilities. However, this author’s argument is not likely significantly persuade the city goverment to allocate increased funding.”*

In case it wasn’t obvious, we have a winner. I want you to once again pause and think of things that you noticed here, good or bad. Pause here.

OK, welcome back. First, immediate observations: This was very cohesive. It reads like something that someone spent a day or two working through. It is stressful to think that this is what you are going for but it is what you are going for. You want your response to seem like the prompt wasn’t just something sprung on you but rather like something that you had time to think about. Learning to make it sound like you’ve had a long time to think about something when you really just came up with it on the spot is a skill that can be trained, so practice a lot. There are tons of examples and elaborations on every point. Every single paragraph is nice and chunky, with one point and lots of elaboration. They gave hypotheticals – “if this, then that,” or, “if this were shown, I would believe this argument. Since it’s not shown, then I don’t.” That’s great! Hypotheticals are a really good way to critique an argument because you can either show that the argument met the set of hypothetical conditions or it didn’t, and thus it is either a valid or invalid argument. After they gave those hypotheticals, this person suggested improvements to the author’s arguments. If you are able to suggest improvements to an argument, that means you really understand it. That’s a great thing to do here. They showed that they have a good understanding of what an argument is, which is the only way you can suggest an improvement. We’re gonna come back to C in a second, first I want you to see if you can guess what this grade was.

Response A was a four, Response B was a two, and Response C was a six. Notice that Response C is not perfect. There are some grammatical errors, there are typos, common misspellings, apostrophes in the wrong place on occasion, etc. They’re not really looking for perfect – if you get a 96% in something that’s still an A even though you missed those last four percent points, right? Your response does not need to be perfect to get a six.

Let’s go back to looking at what makes C such a great response. Graders tend to go through and read the topic sentence of each paragraph and go from there. So, first off, have a topic sentence for each paragraph. Once you make sure that you have a topic sentence for each paragraph, vary up the structure. If you vary up the structure, it shows that you understand how sentence structure works, you have good vocabulary, and you can show off this deeper understanding of what makes good writing. Don’t start every paragraph with “Additionally,” “Also,” “Another point,” etc. Look at how they did it here. “Citing surveys of city residents, the author reports. . .” “Additionally, the author implies that. . .” “Building upon the implication that residents do not use the river due to the quality of the river’s water and the smell, the author suggests that. . .” Same general idea, different structure. This is what they’re looking for. Even in the last paragraph, the sample author didn’t start with “In summary” or “In conclusion”, which the graders will read a million times. This is instead an interesting and attention-grabbing beginning sentence for the conclusion. They didn’t even say “conclusion” in the conclusion – which is not even necessarily required but if you can make your conclusion paragraph clearly a conclusion paragraph without saying “summary” or “conclusion”, you’re better for it because it shows that you know how to write in an interesting way. Look also at the specificity of the examples and the amount of elaboration in each paragraph. In paragraph two, they are trying to tell you that maybe the survey is not legitimate evidence, so they give examples of bad surveys that would not be good evidence. “For example, the survey could have asked residents if they prefer using the river for water sports or would like to see a hydroelectric dam built, which may have swayed residents toward river sports.” They give an example then go on to say why that example could have led to bad survey results. Then they provide two more sentences with examples. Three examples for one point!

This is the general structure that they are using for the three supporting paragraphs in the middle. Check out this annotated version of the middle three paragraphs:

*“Citing surveys of city residents, the author reports city resident’s love of water sports. It is not clear, however, the scope and validity of that survey. For example, the survey could have asked residents if they prefer using the river for water sports or would like to see a hydroelectric dam built, which may have swayed residents toward river sports. The sample may not have been representative of city residents, asking only those residents who live upon the river. The survey may have been 10 pages long, with only 2 questions dedicated to river sports. We just do not know. Unless the survey is fully representative, valid and reliable, it cannot be used to effectively back the author’s argument.*

*Additionally, the author implies that residents do not use the river for swimming, boating, and fishing, despite their professed interest, because the water is polluted and smelly. While a polluted, smelly river would likely cut down on river sports, a concrete connection between the river’s lack of use and the river’s current state is not effectively made. Though there have been complaints, we do not know if there have been numerous complaints from a wide range of people, or perhaps from one or two individuals who made numerous complaints. To strengthen his/her argument, the author would benefit from implementing a normed survey asking a wide range of residents why they do not currently use the river.*

*Building upon the implication that residents do not use the river due to the quality of the river’s water and the smell, the author suggests that a river clean up will result in increased river usage. If the river’s water quality and smell result from problems which can be cleaned, this may be true. For example, if the decreased water quality and aroma is caused by pollution by factories along the river, this conceivably could be remedied. But if the quality and aroma results from the natural mineral deposits in the water or surrounding rock, this may not be true. There are some bodies of water which emit a strong smell of sulphur due to the geography of the area. This is not something likely to be afffected by a clean-up. Consequently, a river clean-up may have no impact upon river usage. Regardless of whether the river’s quality is able to be improved or not, the author does not effectively show a connection between water quality and river usage.”*

In the green, we have what the *argument* says. That goes back to specificity – rather than saying “in the first sentence” like they did in Response B, they actually state the argument from the prompt. In the green, they identify which part of the prompt they are referring to. In the yellow, there is some sort of critique explaining why that part of the argument is bad or weak. Finally, in the blue, they have some sort of conclusion or recommendation. In the first supporting paragraph, they conclude “Unless the survey is fully representative, valid and reliable, it cannot be used to effectively back the author’s argument.” Great. In the next paragraph, the closing line is “To strengthen his/her argument, the author would benefit from implementing a normed survey asking a wide range of residents why they do not currently use the river.” Also great, that’s a suggestion for improvement and if you can suggest improvements that shows deeper knowledge and understanding of how this works. In the next paragraph, right after the first sentence they do an “if this, then that” and also put a larger conclusion sentence at the end. Excellent. Every one of the supporting paragraphs has that structure and it is what you should be aiming for.

This person’s process is probably something like: read the prompt, write out every assumption that the argument made (the green stuff), go through and write critiques and conclusions for each of those points, then glue it together into one cohesive essay with an introduction and a conclusion and transitions in between. Keep the structure strong but interesting. This is what makes a six. Luckily, this is actually pretty easy to practice. I have posted on the Community page links to all the sample prompts for both Analytical Writing tasks. You can look through dozens, maybe over 100, sample prompts and pick them at random to practice. Pick them at random or, even better, pick ones that you don’t like. Maybe start with an easy one so you get a feel for it then move to harder ones quickly. Go through and make bullets (assumption 1, assumption 2, assumption 3… maybe even 4). For each one, write several critiques and a conclusion and/or a suggestion for improvement. Then mash it together into one cohesive paper and write an introduction and a conclusion. That’s pretty much the whole deal for this writing task. If you break it down, it’s a lot less scary than if you try to tackle the whole thing at once.

That’s it for today. Please, please email me questions, concerns, requests for practice tips, things that I missed, anything you guys want to talk about – I’m around. My email is leao001@cougars.csusm.edu. Hope this was helpful!