

ANALYSIS AND ELABORATION

One of the most frequent comments professors make about student writing is “needs more analysis,” or “elaborate upon this point further.” This is good! Essentially the professor is asking you to think harder and deeper about what you are saying: you have made an interesting or important point, but there’s more to it than you’ve indicated or maybe even realized. To help develop your ability to analyze and elaborate:

Ask Probing Questions

Unlike yes-or-no questions with a clear answer, hypothetical questions that call for speculation, or rhetorical questions for which answers aren’t necessarily sought, probing questions are intended to make you think more deeply about the matter at hand. They usually follow from questions that seek an initial description or assessment of an issue, and take you from there to the heart of the issue in greater depth and complexity. Examples include: *Why do you believe X to be the case? What makes you describe or characterize X in this way? What is another way to think about X? What would have to happen for X to be different?* Try posing such questions to yourself in the following case study.

Case Study

In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short story “May Day,” it’s 1919 in New York City and, with World War I nearing its conclusion, a Yale alumni group is hosting a big formal. This well-heeled crowd is partying a little harder than it should, and Peter Himmel has drunkenly wandered down a back hallway; he spots two men hiding in a janitor’s closet who, unbeknownst to Peter, are two soldiers, Private Rose and Private Key. They were discharged from the front lines only three days previous and have managed to sneak into the Yale party; they are tired, hungry, and traumatized by their experiences in battle. Peter engages them in friendly conversation:

“Now,” continued Peter easily, “may I ask why you gentlemen prefer to lounge away your hours in a room which is clearly furnished, as far as I can see, with scrubbing brushes. And when the human race has progressed to the stage where seventeen thousand chairs are manufactured on every day except Sunday”-- he paused. Rose and Key regarded him vacantly. “Will you tell me,” went on Peter, “why you choose to rest yourselves on articles intended for the transportation of water from one place to another?”

At this point Rose contributed a grunt to the conversation.

“And lastly,” finished Peter, “will you tell me why, when you are in a building beautifully hung with enormous candelabra, you prefer to spend these evening hours under one anemic electric light?”

Rose looked at Key; Key looked at Rose. They laughed; they laughed uproariously; they found it was impossible to look at each other without laughing. But they were not laughing with this man-- they were laughing at him. To them a man who talked after this fashion was either raving drunk or raving crazy.

“You are Yale men, I presume,” said Peter, finishing his highball and preparing another.*

From what transpires here, a number of initial assessments can be made: this is a case of mistaken identity, Peter does not understand where Rose and Key are coming from, they laugh at Peter because he sounds like a pompous jerk, etc. However, probing questions such as the following can help you arrive at a more detailed or nuanced analysis of what is taking place in this passage.

1. What specific phrases in the passage support your assessment? Identify and comment on each.
2. Why do Rose and Key laugh at Peter? List as many reasons as you can.
3. What are the results of Peter’s incorrect assumption that Rose and Key “are Yale men”?
4. Think about the larger context of this story, taking place as it does near the end of World War I. How does Peter’s claim that “the human race has progressed to the stage where seventeen thousand chairs are manufactured on every day except Sunday” fit in with this context or not?

*F. Scott Fitzgerald, “May Day” (1922), in *Jazz Age Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1998), page 247.