

Process Analysis

The following discussion has been excerpted from *The Compact Reader: Short Essays by Method and Theme*, 6th ed. Ed. Jane E. Aaron. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.

1. What is process analysis?

Process analysis explains how to do something (play a computer game, change a tire), how to make something (a butterfly sanctuary), or how something happens (how the modern firehouse has evolved). Specifically, it explains a sequence of actions with a specified result (the process) by dividing it into its component steps (the analysis). Basically, it answers the question **how** something happens.

2. What is the purpose of process analysis?

The main purpose of process analysis is to explain; however, it might also prove something about the process itself (perhaps its ease or difficulty) or evaluate it (perhaps its close parallel to guidelines issued by an authoritative agency).

3. What varieties of process analysis are available?

Processes might include *mechanical* (a car engine), *natural* (cell division), *psychological* (acquisition of sex roles), or *political* (the electoral process).

4. What are the two main types of process analysis?

The two main types are *directive* or *explanatory*.

- A *directive* process tells how to do or make something: make enchiladas, repair a wagon wheel, negotiate an argument, write an essay. It should outline the individual steps completely so that anyone can duplicate them and achieve the specified result. It permits the use of second-person *you*, concentrating on words that tell the reader what to do, or the use of imperative (commanding) mood of verbs (“Add an egg and stir vigorously”).
- An *explanatory* process provides the information necessary for readers to understand the process, but more to satisfy their curiosity than to teach them how to do something. Third-person *he*, *she*, *it*, and *they* is more common with this type process than is second-person.

5. How is a process analysis usually organized?

All process analyses usually follow a *chronological* sequence, especially a directive analysis, in which order is important to the desired outcome. For both types of process analysis, however, it is often useful to create *phases or stages*, which, in turn, can be divided into *steps*. Both phases/stages and steps should be presented in proper sequence.

The *phases or stages* for changing a tire may include jacking up the car, removing the flat, putting on the spare, and lowering the car. The *steps* for just one of those stages—jacking up the car—may be setting the emergency brake, blocking the other wheels, loosening the bolts, positioning the jack, and raising the car.

To ensure that the reader can duplicate the process or understand how it unfolds requires fully detailing each step and specifying the reasons for it. Indeed, the process must make clear to the reader the sequence of steps, their duration, and where they occur. Occasionally, the chronology contains interruptions or modifications to suit it to your subject. For instance, it may require background information, definitions of specialized terms, explanations of how one step relates to a preceding or following step, examples, or explanations of steps that are performed simultaneously.

6. What kind of thesis is required for a process analysis?

A process analysis thesis should contain two elements: (1) the **main point** of the analysis and, if possible, (2) the **organizational format** for exploring the main idea—in this case, process analysis. If possible, it also previews the stages in the process.

Example: Building a table is a simple, three-stage process of cutting, assembling, and finishing.

In this example, the main point of the process is reflected in the word *simple*, which suggests the ease of the process. The words *cutting*, *assembling*, and *assembling* obviously suggest the stages.

To increase interest and variety, the thesis might also convey other details:

- A reason for the process: Changing a tire does not require a mechanic's skill: on the contrary, a ten-year-old child can do it. (emphasizes its ease)
- A more general principal: The process of getting a bill through Congress illustrates majority rule at work. (emphasizes its relation to an important political principle)
- An assertion that the process is inefficient or unfair: The overly complicated registration procedure forces students to waste time standing in long lines.

7. What kind of transitional expressions are used in process analysis?

In order for readers to grasp the time and place of each stage or step in the process, these and similar signal words help keep the chronological sequence straight: *after five minutes, meanwhile, to the left, before pumping the jack, and below.*