

Opinions vs. Ideas



A common question students ask instructors when they get a writing assignment: “So you just want my opinion?” Well, not exactly.

In the academic environment, instructors push students to move beyond just stating an opinion on a subject and backing it up. In fact, the college environment is all about getting you to complicate opinions that you hold - and to consider multiple perspectives. Developing *ideas* is more of the goal.

So what’s the difference between an opinion and an idea? Consider the following distinctions:

Beliefs	BS	Opinions	Ideas	Description/Report
<p>A belief requires little or no evidence, resists change, and is often accompanied by intense personal investment in the “truth” of the belief.</p> <p>Beliefs often encourage thinking in absolutes and binaries, and possibly exist mainly as a form of self-talk intended to confirm one’s moral compass. Beliefs can be shaken loose of course, especially as they move toward the realm of opinions and ideas.</p>	<p>BS is the attempt to misrepresent, deceive, or conceal in order to further a particular goal or defend a particular position. Analysis is usually bypassed in favor of persuasive intention.</p> <p>The BS-er is usually aware of the inaccuracy of the BS to the extent that evidence is carefully selected and/or distorted to further the BS.</p> <p>BS can also be just filler.</p>	<p>An opinion typically expresses an “argument” freighted with so much personal investment that it is defended against change rather than tested and complicated.</p> <p>Opinions usually precede observation: the defense will usually take a “side” and apply carefully selected evidence (albeit accurate evidence) as “proof” of the opinion.</p>	<p>An idea begins with a pointed question based on careful observation of specific evidence. (Observation precedes the idea.)</p> <p>An idea assumes change in the ongoing attempt to explore and develop this question through sustained application of evidence. This evidence is primarily used as a source of complication rather than confirmation.</p> <p>Ideas are attempts to build understanding and knowledge. In other words, the process of writing permits the ideas to emerge and creates new knowledge for readers.</p>	<p>Descriptions and reports are concerned with fact: publicly verifiable observation/ evidence.</p> <p>Reports admit minimum interpretation and ambiguity as they strive for accurate description and paraphrase. In this case, there isn’t much room for writers to develop their own thinking or ideas. Instead, the writer is summarizing or stating work that has already taken place. Some writing genres, such as a lit. review, might just be a summary of source material that the writer has collected (without interpretation or analysis/ commentary from the writer).</p>



On this continuum, you can see the critical place where opinions move into the development of ideas.

As you try to distinguish between opinions and ideas, consider what certain writing features look like.

What happens with *evidence*? *observation*? *complication*? *new knowledge*? *process/development*? *exploration*?

The Qualities of an Analytic Idea:

- An idea begins in
 - 1) careful observation of the data at hand. Systematic observation of this detail leads to
 - 2) contextual connections, which in turn lead to
 - 3) the analytic ideas which explore and explain these connections.



A complete idea should include these three components.

- An idea is essentially **a point of inquiry**, a very precise question that suggests a direction for further discussion. **An analytic essay is the detailed development of this inquiry through engagement with evidence.**
- However strong its claims, an effective analytic idea always remains **open to further revision**. This quality is largely what distinguishes ideas from the locked assertions of belief and opinion.
- An idea compels a certain amount of **reflection**: an analytic writer asks herself why she thinks what she thinks. This is often included in the essay—there is plenty of room for “I” in analytic writing.
- **Ideas emerge from observation**; they are not imposed on the data. Analytic writers seek to notice detail, making careful observations before leaping to unwarranted conclusions. They cultivate curiosity in their subjects, even if these subjects are unfamiliar.
- Ideas are tested through a range of questions **based on the specifics of a subject** rather than leaps to easy generalities. Analytic writers don’t settle too early for obvious connections.
- Ideas **complicate rigid dichotomies and pro/con arguments**. Analytic writers seek to reconcile the complexity in their subjects through consideration of complicating evidence, avoiding easy generalities.

