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21L.001 Foundations of Western Culture: Homer to Dante  
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## Observation vs. Analysis

The best essays begin with lots and lots of interesting observations made while brainstorming, for it's here that you first notice the passages, words, and images that seem especially important, odd, or surprising. To make it into your essay, however, those observations need to become analytic; you need to commit to an argument about their significance. When writing, pay close and skeptical attention to any places you use words like important, interesting, surprising, significant, or ironic. Almost all of these words mean the same thing: "I know that I think this piece of text is meaningful, but I haven't yet figured out or committed to what meaning I think it has." Any time you claim that "it is interesting/important/surprising that..." make sure you explain as soon as possible the significance of that observation is; otherwise you haven't arrived at analysis.

Even excellent observations are worth little without analysis; consider the following:

1. "Heaney's description of the sword is *surprisingly* organic in his choice of the word 'wilt' (p. 111). Generally a plant wilts and dies, not a sword. . . ."

This is a great observation (note the classic "observation word" in italics), but it's not yet analysis: what does the author make of this allusion to plants? Why should she or her reader care? Here's one possible addition that would turn this into analysis:

2. "Generally a plant wilts and dies, not a sword. By linking the sword to the natural world of growing things, Heaney implies that battle is as integral a part of nature as plants are. Describing a previously valuable sword as 'wilting,' moreover, suggests that just as all living things must die, so too must any given man's prowess in battle. Beowulf emerges from this fight victorious, but the image of the melting sword looks forward to the time that he, like the sword, will fall and die."

Compare the original example above (#1) with the following:

3. "Heaney translates 'eases the fetters off the frost' . . . while Donalson's [translation is] 'loosens the frost's fetters.' . . . 'Eases' has a softer, gentler connotation than 'loosens,' making God sound more benevolent and kind in Heaney, which is apt, since God just saved Beowulf's life from a murderous force."

Here the author performs analysis, noting a difference between two specific words in the two different translations and arguing that one is more effective than the other because it reinforces another local element of the poem – here, the fact that God has helped Beowulf and thus demonstrated himself a "benevolent and kind" deity.