

FAQs regarding the Art of Explication
Davis/A.P. Literature of Witness
rev. September 6, 2002

Please read the following and consider whether or not you have further questions. If so, please ask them today or another time SOON.

IS THE ABILITY TO EXPLICATE REALLY A LIFE SKILL?

Yes. Here is an example from my weekend. I went to a furniture store to pick up an end table that I had ordered. Taped to a window near the loading dock behind the store, I noticed the following sign: Er, I mean: I noticed the following sign taped to a window near the loading dock behind the store. (I just did a close reading of my own writing and found the misplaced modifier; in the first version, it says that I was taped to window. I wasn't.):

The paperwork to pull the merchandise you ordered was given to the warehouse staff in the order you arrived today at the front counter. Given that some purchases are larger than others, however, and that some merchandise is less accessible in our warehouse, other customers very well may receive their merchandise before you receive yours.

If your mind is convoluted enough to understand the above, please explain it to the others who are waiting. Thank you.

Note the expression “please explain it to the others.” Those who can explicate solve many of life’s mysteries for the rest of humanity.

HOW DO I KNOW I AM DOING IT RIGHT?

Let us take the example of the sign above. A good explanation of the first paragraph would most likely focus on the second, compound-complex sentence. The first sentence is straightforward enough to stand on its own; no explanation of it should be necessary. There are a few ways in which one person could explain this second sentence to another customer.

1. **Paraphrase.** “People with big orders or people with orders that have stuff in the back of the warehouse may not get their stuff as fast as people with smaller orders or orders that are easier to get at.” Using your own words is one method or level of explication. But paraphrase alone is not sufficient.
2. **Metaphors and similes.** “It’s like when you’re at the grocery store and you just have one item and the express lane isn’t open and somebody in front of you, who has a big order, lets you go ahead of him or her.” The use of metaphors in everyday speech colors our language and our lives, and it serves the art of explication well, on a second, deeper level.

3. **Symbolic representation.** One could draw a picture on the sidewalk, act out a dramatic version of the sentence, or otherwise provide a different representation of the message. This third level is one of the most sophisticated AND FUN methods of explication.
4. **Linguistic.** One could take the sentence apart, piece by piece, phrase by phrase, providing critical interpretations along the way. For instance, one could say, “By ‘Given that some purchases are larger than others,’ the author implies that no order of merchandise is the same as another. The word ‘purchases,’ it seems, serves as a noun, to represent the objects purchased.” Of course, in everyday life you most likely will come off as a nerd if you employ this method. You would do well to save this fourth level of discourse for critical writings.
5. **The finishing touches.** Finally, one should explain the deeper meaning of the text. For instance, “What they are saying, I think, is that we should be patient.”

Ask yourself, after you have completed your explication, “Have I used some or all of the methods outlined above?” “Have I established a clear expression of the MEANING of the text?” “Is my language clear enough?” “Have I examined THE ART OF THE AUTHOR, explaining what I believe he or she is saying?” If you can answer “yes” to these questions, then you have succeeded.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE SAID TOO MUCH (OR TOO LITTLE)?

As with all writing you do for an audience, give your work to a reliable editor and ask them to consider the length and clarity of your explication.

DOES EXPLICATION GET EASIER THE MORE I PRACTICE IT?

Yes. But as with any endeavor, you ought to practice this skill with a certified coach or mentor. For instance, young people who grow up playing street basketball may be very talented in that domain, but as soon as they move indoors and play the sport in uniform and under the watchful eyes of referees, they may fail miserably. For a feature-length explanation of this answer, see [Finding Forester](#).

HOW DO I INCORPORATE EXPLICATION INTO MY ESSAYS?

In general, when writing a critical essay on a work of literature, you will want to provide your readers with background information, some expression of the focus of your criticism, and a series of statements of your views. To support these views, explication of short passages of text—even of single sentences—is necessary. In other words, explication serves as the “evidence” to establish your points and to make them stick.

WILL YOU BE MY COACH? CAN YOU SERVE AS MY MENTOR?

With pleasure.