

longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly. But, as I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death. I laid the pencil down again.

The legs agitated themselves once more. I looked as if for the enemy against which he struggled. I looked out of doors. What had happened there? Presumably it was midday, and work in the fields had stopped. Stillness and quiet had replaced the previous animation. The birds had taken themselves off to feed in the brooks. The horses stood still. Yet the power was there all the same, massed outside, indifferent, impersonal, not attending to anything in particular. Somehow it was opposed to the little hay-colored moth. It was useless to try to do anything. One could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom which could, had it chosen, have submerged an entire city, not merely a city, but masses of human beings; nothing, I knew, had any chance against death. Nevertheless after a pause of exhaustion the legs fluttered again. It was superb this last protest, and so frantic that he succeeded at last in righting himself. One's sympathies, of course, were all on the side of life. Also, when there was nobody to care or to know, this gigantic effort on the part of an insignificant little moth, against a power of such magnitude, to retain what no one else valued or desired to keep, moved one strangely. Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead. I lifted the pencil again, useless though I knew it to be. But even as I did so, the unmistakable tokens of death showed themselves. The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. The struggle was over. The insignificant little creature now knew death. As I looked at the dead moth, this minute way-side triumph of so great a force over so mean an antagonist filled me with wonder. Just as life had been strange a few minutes before, so death was now as strange. The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am.

### Writing a Close Analysis Essay

We're going to look now at steps you can take toward writing a close analysis essay. Good writing comes from careful reading, so the first steps will always be to read, reread, ask questions, and either annotate or create a graphic organizer for the text you will be working with. We're going to look at a 1947 letter from comedian and film star Groucho Marx. Marx performed with his brothers Zeppo, Chico, and Harpo—they were known as the Marx Brothers. The letter is a part of his correspondence with the film production company Warner Bros., which had concerns about an upcoming Marx Brothers film entitled *A Night in Casablanca*; the company worried that the title was too similar to the title of its 1942 film *Casablanca*. Read the letter carefully, and then read it again. Ask some questions, and either annotate the letter or make a graphic organizer. Pay close attention to the diction and syntax choices Marx made and how they might help him achieve his purpose.

Dear Warner Brothers,

Apparently there is more than one way of conquering a city and holding it as your own. For example, up to the time that we contemplated making a picture, I had no idea that the city of Casablanca<sup>1</sup> belonged exclusively to Warner Brothers. However, it was only a few days after our announcement appeared that we received a long, ominous legal document warning us not to use the name "Casablanca."

It seems that in 1471, Ferdinand Balboa Warner, your great-great-grandfather, while looking for a shortcut to the city of Burbank, had stumbled on the shores of Africa and, raising his alpenstock,<sup>2</sup> which he later turned in for a hundred shares of common,<sup>3</sup> named it Casablanca.

I just can't understand your attitude. Even if you plan on releasing your picture, I am sure that the average movie fan could learn in time to distinguish between Ingrid Bergman<sup>4</sup> and Harpo.<sup>5</sup> I don't know whether I could, but I certainly would like to try.

You claim you own Casablanca and that no one else can use that name without your permission. What about "Warner Brothers"? Do you own that too? You probably have the right to use the name Warner, but what about the name Brothers? Professionally, we were brothers long before you were. We were touring the sticks as the Marx Brothers when Vitaphone<sup>6</sup> was still a gleam in the inventor's eye, and even before us there had been other brothers—the Smith Brothers; the Brothers Karamazov; Dan Brouthers, an outfielder with Detroit; and "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" (This was originally "Brothers, Can You Spare a Dime?" but this was spreading a dime pretty thin, so they threw out one brother, gave all the money to the other one, and whittled it down to "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?")

Now Jack, how about you? Do you maintain that yours is an original name? Well it's not. It was used long before you were born. Offhand, I can think of two Jacks—there was Jack of "Jack and the Beanstalk," and Jack the Ripper, who cut quite a figure in his day.

As for you, Harry, you probably sign your checks sure in the belief that you are the first Harry of all time and that all other Harrys are impostors. Offhand I can think of two Harrys that preceded you. There was Lighthorse Harry of Revolutionary fame and a Harry Appelbaum who lived on the corner of 93rd Street and Lexington Avenue. Unfortunately, Appelbaum wasn't too well-known. The last I heard of him, he was selling neckties at Weber and Heilbroner; but I'll never forget his mother, she made the best apple strudel in Yorkville.

<sup>1</sup>Casablanca is the title of a romantic—and perennially popular—film released by Warner Bros. in 1942 that won the Academy Award for Best Picture. It starred Humphrey Bogart in his first romantic role.—Eds.

<sup>2</sup>Walking stick.—Eds.

<sup>3</sup>Common stock in a company.—Eds.

<sup>4</sup>The beautiful female star of *Casablanca*.—Eds.

<sup>5</sup>Harpo was Groucho's brother and part of the Marx Brothers; he wore a red, curly-haired wig and did not speak, communicating instead by blowing a horn or whistling.—Eds.

<sup>6</sup>Vitaphone was the process developed by Warner Bros. for adding sound to film.—Eds.

Now about the Burbank studio.<sup>7</sup> I believe this is what you brothers call your place. Old man Burbank is gone. Perhaps you remember him. He was a great man in a garden. He was the wizard who crossed all those fruits and vegetables until he had the poor plants in such confused and jittery condition that they could never decide whether to enter the dining room on the meat platter or the desert dish.

This is pure conjecture, of course, but who knows—perhaps Burbank's survivors aren't too happy with the fact that a plant that grinds out pictures on a quota settled in their town, appropriated Burbank's name and uses it as a front for their films. It is even possible that the Burbank family is prouder of the potato produced by the old man than they are of the fact that your studio emerged "*Casablanca*" or even "*Gold Diggers of 1931*."

This all seems to add up to a pretty bitter tirade, but I assure you it's not meant to. I love Warners. Some of my best friends are Warner Brothers. It is even possible that I am doing you an injustice and that you, yourselves, know nothing about this dog-in-the-Wanger<sup>8</sup> attitude. It wouldn't surprise me at all to discover that the heads of your legal department are unaware of this absurd dispute, for I am acquainted with many of them and they are fine fellows with curly black hair, double-breasted suits and a love of their fellow man that out-Saroyans Saroyan.<sup>9</sup>

I have a hunch that this attempt to prevent us from using the title is the brainchild of some ferret-faced shyster, serving a brief apprenticeship in your legal department. I know the type well—hot out of law school, hungry for success and too ambitious to follow the natural laws of promotion. This bar sinister probably needed your attorneys, most of whom are fine fellows with curly black hair, double-breasted suits, etc., into attempting to enjoin us. Well, he won't get away with it! We'll fight him to the highest court! No pasty-faced legal adventurer is going to cause bad blood between the Warners and the Marxes. We are all brothers under the skin, and we'll remain friends till the last reel of *A Night in Casablanca* goes tumbling over the spool.

Sincerely,

Groucho Marx

<sup>7</sup>Movie production studios located in Burbank, California, a city close to Los Angeles where many movie production companies have their headquarters. Although there is a Luther Burbank Middle School in Burbank, the city is not named after the botanist Luther Burbank—who invented the Idaho potato—but after a dentist named David Burbank, who was originally from Maine. *Casablanca* was filmed at the Burbank studio.—Eds.

<sup>8</sup>A double play on words. Dog-in-the-Manger is one of Aesop's fables, about a dog that didn't eat the grain in the manger but wouldn't let the other animals eat it either. Walter Wanger was a film producer who produced the first Marx Brothers talkie.—Eds.

<sup>9</sup>A reference to William Saroyan, a writer and dramatist whose work was known for its optimism in the face of hardship.—Eds.

There is some doubt about whether Warner Bros. had actually objected to the title of the Marx Brothers film; but there's little doubt that this letter was primarily a publicity stunt by Groucho. In any case, it is a great example of the persuasive powers of humor. Groucho's style was instantly recognizable to fans of popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century. Now let's ask some questions to help determine the purpose of Marx's letter, what makes his style so distinctive, and how this style helps him achieve his purpose.

1. Why does Marx begin with "Apparently"?
2. Why does he say he had no idea that the city of Casablanca belonged to Warner Bros.?
3. What is the effect of Groucho's short history of Casablanca (para. 2)?
4. Would it really be difficult to distinguish between Ingrid Bergman and Harpo Marx (para. 3)?
5. Why does Marx offer so many examples of "Brothers" (para. 4)?
6. What is the effect of the parenthetical story about "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime" (para. 4)?
7. Why does Marx bring up Luther Burbank's experiments with fruits and vegetables (para. 7)?
8. Why does Marx qualify his statement that he loves Warners (para. 9) with "Some of my best friends are Warner Brothers"?
9. Why does Marx suggest that the source of Warner Bros.' concerns about his film come from an ambitious young lawyer, referring to him as a "pasty-faced legal adventurer" (para. 10)?

### Developing a Thesis Statement

Answering these questions or others like them may help you to get some ideas for a thesis statement, the first step in writing a close analysis essay. You may change it as you go along, but having an idea about the argument you want to make will help you stay focused. As we mentioned, Groucho Marx uses humor to create his argument; we might even call this letter a kind of **satire**—the use of sarcasm or irony to criticize—so let's think first about Marx's purpose in writing the letter and why he might have chosen to use humor. Even if this letter was a publicity stunt, we can imagine that Marx wanted to highlight the differences between his film and the romantic adventure *Casablanca* to show Warner Bros. that it had little to fear from the Marx Brothers film *A Night in Casablanca*. It's also likely that Marx wanted to comment on the hot air that sometimes emerges from big corporations and their lawyers—especially, in this case, the enormous and powerful movie studio Warner Bros. But he chooses not to take these goals on directly.

As you think about a thesis statement, you will want to be careful that your thesis isn't too broad or just a summary:

Groucho Marx uses humor to defend his movie.  
And you will also want to make sure that it's not too narrow or just your personal opinion:

Groucho Marx's letter to Warner Bros. is rude and disrespectful.  
Most important, a close analysis essay must focus on the choices writers make to help them achieve their purpose. Here's a thesis statement that might work:

Rather than take on Warner Bros. directly, Groucho Marx jabs and feints until the studio couldn't possibly take its own claim seriously.

### A Sample Close Analysis Essay

Once you have a working thesis statement (remember, you may change it as you plan and write), think about the ways you will support it. Your essay may look closely at different style elements; it may focus on the way the writer organized the paragraphs and developed his or her argument; it may be a combination of both. It is important to cite the text, weaving quotes into your essay and explaining each example with at least two sentences of analysis or commentary. Take a look at this sample essay:

Like a boxer who weighs less than his opponent, Groucho Marx circles the great movie moguls — the Warner Bros. — baiting them, drawing them out, blinding them with his fancy footwork in his response to a letter from the studio forbidding the Marx Brothers from using the word “Casablanca” in the title of their upcoming film, *A Night in Casablanca*. Rather than take Warner Bros. on directly, Groucho Marx jabs and feints — humorously, of course — until Warner Bros. couldn't possibly take its own claim seriously.

Marx opens the letter with an intentional misunderstanding, the first way he highlights the absurdity of Warner Bros.' threat of legal action. He claims not to have understood that Warner Bros. had conquered the city of Casablanca until he received their “long, ominous legal document.” It's not a big leap from there for Marx to imagine Ferdinand Balboa Warner, conveniently named after a real explorer, claiming the city of Casablanca by “raising his alpenstock.” The image conjures up scenes from the lavish epics of early Hollywood, casting Warner as Moses in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. Marx extends his misunderstanding by imagining that the studio's main worry might be the trouble that the “average movie fan” will have in distinguishing Ingrid Bergman from Harpo Marx. Humbly, Marx says he “certainly would like to try.” This slightly salacious offer reinforces the silliness of Warner Bros.' worries: Bergman was beautiful, blonde and dignified; Harpo Marx was a short, bewigged mute clown.

Marx creates a sense of familiarity, which serves his purpose by reminding his audience — Warner Bros. and their legal team — that they're all in the same boat, Brothers absurdist humor Groucho claims that he and his brothers — the Marx Brothers — have been around longer than Harry and Jack have and that they might have more right to use the word "Brothers" in their name. He piles on a list of other sets of brothers: "the Smith Brothers" (of cough drop fame), "the Brothers Karamazov" (title of a nineteenth-century Russian novel), a baseball player with the last name of "Brouthers." He even riffs a bit on the song "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" He gets even more personal, addressing each Warner brother by name: "Now Jack, how about you?", "As for you, Harry," and throws in some well-known examples of Harrys and Jacks, just for good measure. Unwilling to stop, Marx even questions the right of Warner Bros. to name its workplace "Burbank studio," suggesting — "pure conjecture, of course" — that Luther Burbank's survivors might not be happy to be associated with the Warner Bros.' body of work. One can imagine the effect of Marx's onslaught of examples on the movie studio's large and serious legal team, who also come under fire.

Content to let the logic of his defense rest, Marx gives Warner Bros.' legal team a break, suggesting that the letter was the brainchild of a young lawyer "hot out of law school, hungry for success and too ambitious to follow the natural laws of promotion." He claims sympathy and admiration for the heads of the legal department, "fine fellows with curly black hair, double-breasted suits and a love of their fellow man," a formulation he uses twice — the second time slightly truncated and ending in "etc." Effortlessly, Marx calls up a vision of mindless automatons, led astray by the "pasty-faced legal adventurer" who Marx calls responsible for the possible "bad blood between the Warners and the Marxes." Here he reinforces that bond between moviemaking families — "brothers under the skin" — and highlights once more the absurdity of imagining that the reputation or box office receipts of *Casablanca*, the 1942 Academy Award winner for Best Picture, will be sullied by a film made by the likes of Groucho and his brothers.

In this hilarious letter — and in the two letters that followed — Groucho Marx underscored the ridiculousness of comparing the classic *Casablanca* with the silliness of a Marx Brothers film in very much the style of his own films. Fast, clever, not especially logical, but certainly tireless, Marx wore out his bigger opponent. It took two more letters from Marx to get Warner Bros. off his back: each one outlined plots that were so far-fetched as to be nearly incomprehensible, and Warner Bros. finally gave up.

#### • ACTIVITY •

Read the following essay written by Christopher Morley in 1920. Annotate it or create a graphic organizer; generate some questions about its style. Develop a thesis statement, and write an essay in which you analyze the ways that the style of the essay helps Morley achieve his purpose.