Improving clarity and analysis in writing

Before:

The paragraph below is too vague: it “floats” on the surface of the points being made and thus is not analytical. The language makes sense, but the passive voice, the“-ing” and “to be” verbs, and wordiness make it complicated and hard to read.

In Roland’s society it was as if war was a religious idea, and people used it to rule over others.  Soldiers were prepared for battle by going through what were religious services.  There was a religious tone put on something warlike that was nothing like religion. They took communion.  Then they were having visions of the afterlife.  You would never know they were getting ready for battle.  However, that was how they felt they were going to win  lots of land and convert the pagans.

After:

The language in the following paragraph is a lot more concise and more analytical.

Roland’s 12th century society fused religion with war to create an effective tool for domination. This combination of geo-political and spiritual values blatantly appears when soldiers prepared for battle by taking communion and focusing their thoughts on the afterlife. They invoked God’s participation in war because they viewed religion itself as a type of battle by which they would extend their values across Europe and the Holy Land.

Use active, interesting verbs

1. Try verbs other than “to be” verbs; AVOID “is,” “are,” “was,” “were” when possible.
2. A more active and specific verb (“fused,” “created,” “invoked”) will help you refine exactly what you want to say.
3. Get rid of “-ing” verbs whenever possible, especially if they express the passive voice.
4. Avoid putting three and four verbs together. Usually you can tighten the action into one or two verbs.

Avoid repetition/wordiness

1. Get rid of as many prepositions as possible, especially the “in” at the beginning of a sentence — unless a precise date (“In 870 the first battle was fought”) or location (“In France the Pope’s authority was not always honored”) needs to be indicated.
2. Do not repeat verbs or nouns (“it was as if war was” should be “war was” OR “In Roland’s story Roland  fought bravely” should be “Roland fought bravely”). Tighten phrases and sentences by eliminating unnecessary words or combining very similar phrases and ideas.
3. Get rid of  words such as “it,” “there,” “what,” “that,” “lots,” “something,” “nothing,”  and “this” when they are vague place holders by omitting or defining the “place holder” word used.
4. Combine short, choppy sentences, but let readers know how the ideas work together (“Roland fought bravely. Roland was stubborn. He got a lot of his men killed.” could be combined into “Roland’s brave but stubborn stand against the Saracens resulted in his troop’s decimation.”).

Make ideas concise

1. Make a practice of using the best words, not the most words.
2. Be sure you are not just rewording the same idea in several sentences (DON’T ramble).
3. Be more detailed: specify how and why war was a vehicle for religion.
4. Remember analyzing in-depth does not require you to be wordy.