



RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

Among the most valuable skills you can take with you from college is the ability to think critically. Among the attributes of one who can think critically is the ability to objectively analyze arguments and to identify and assess rhetorical strategies in a variety of mediums, including political speeches, advertisements, sales pitches, or letters to the editor. Identifying rhetorical techniques such as emotional, logical, or ethical appeals doesn't necessarily discount what you read or hear, but it does enable you to evaluate the effectiveness of their use in given situations and to recognize when an argument is not adequately supported. Some rhetorical strategies are quite subtle. For example, does a political candidate's roots in Kansas really put him more in touch with the common man or woman than a candidate from Florida? Or, will this or that diet program really make you a happier person as an advertisement implies? Some tactics are more blatantly dubious. For example, should Jews be exterminated to protect the purity of the Aryan race? In short, we are barraged with arguments constantly, some more important than others, but many of which can make a difference in our lives. In other words, when you can separate out what is being said from how it's presented, you are free to make more informed and objective choices.

This assignment will give you practice in analyzing the rhetoric of an argument from your issues text. Your focus will be on how the writer establishes ethos through language and his/her use of emotional and logical appeals to an intended audience. In this process you will pay close attention to such things as the

author's diction, tone, and use of figurative language, in addition to other rhetorical strategies, in creating the three different types of appeals.

WHAT IS A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS?

Most of the time when we read we are primarily interested in *what* an author is trying to say; we try to understand the point he or she is putting across. When doing rhetorical analysis, however, we are more interested in *how* something is being said. That is, we pay special attention to *how* a writer attempts to achieve some sort of rhetorical effect. We look beyond the message to the strategies and tactics a writer uses in making an argument. In short, "rhetorical analysis" involves breaking an argument into its parts to understand how those parts contribute to the argument as a whole and determining whether the argument is successful.

For example, take a look at the beginning of Martin Luther King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech:

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity. But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free.

What can we notice right away? First, his opening phrase utilizes an allusion, echoing Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" with its dignified archaism of saying "Four score and seven years ago" instead of the more prosaic "eighty-seven years ago." As a result, King associates his language with one of our most respected national voices. Why is that significant? By this approach he makes an ethical appeal, attempting to establish himself as a trusted and authoritative orator, like Abraham Lincoln. He makes this appeal all the stronger by showing humility and respect in the following direct reference to Lincoln—"in whose symbolic shadow we stand." Thus, he uses Lincoln's language to establish an elevated rhetorical stance, as well as lending his speech an air of historical significance, and then adds to our sense of his moral character through his humility—another valued trait of Lincoln's.

Notice that such an analysis can find significance in the slightest turn of phrase. In these few words King strives to win his audience's respect and sympathy. But who is his audience and how will that knowledge condition our rhetorical analysis? Answering these questions brings up an important part of your prewriting. That is, to effectively analyze King's speech requires some research into the social, cultural, and historical moment in which he delivered it, when issues of civil rights and racial equality were in the forefront. But you will want to be much more specific than that, learning what circumstances led up to the March on Washington and why King's timing was so crucial in making his speech so historically significant. This information will enable you to evaluate the likely effectiveness of his rhetorical strategies and appeals.

Among the possible conclusions from contextualizing the speech, you might conclude that as a black man addressing both black and white audiences, King needed to take an approach that would enable him to both elevate his message and humble himself for his primarily white audience. Historically speaking, by placing the issue of civil rights in the shadow of the Emancipation Proclamation (King's speech was delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial), King identifies his time as a similar crossroads in history as the Civil War, wherein a new kind of freedom could be declared. The apt timing and style of King's speech about a great dream of racial equality is further emphasized by the fact that President Kennedy had given his visionary plan to get us to the moon within a decade just eleven months before, establishing his era to be one of new visions and dreams wherein all things might be possible.

This example of rhetorical analysis is meant to demonstrate some of the ways a writer or speaker can create ethical appeals by connecting with an audience in several ways. This example is also meant to show how your own analysis should be limited in its scope, not trying to point out every evident rhetorical device or linguistic turn used in the text you analyze. The idea is to go into convincing depth about a few rhetorical techniques that together demonstrate an explicit or implicit purpose of the writer.

One other thing. In the process of analyzing someone's rhetoric, including perhaps his ethical standards, it is important that your own ethical standards are high. Be careful, in other words, not to manipulate your analysis so as to suggest motives and meanings that aren't really there. While such twisting of others' words may be acceptable in political debates, a higher standard suggests that our writing be done with a sense of goodwill, cooperation, and compassion. Besides, your purpose in this assignment is not to debate with the text, but to do an objective rhetorical analysis of it.

PREPARING TO WRITE

Before writing, it will be necessary to read the article under consideration several times, noting its use of rhetoric in relation to its messages, stated and unstated. The idea here is to tune your mind to how the author uses language, and to note the types of appeals he/she favors—ethical, emotional, or logical. Take note of how language is used, including length and style of sentences, diction, tone of voice, figurative language, etc. Turning back to King's speech, for example, he uses a very elevated, emotionally charged style, full of biblical allusions to light and freedom. His speech is virtually a political sermon, appealing to the nation's faith in basic human rights as a context in which to consider current political injustices. Finally, in your several readings of the text, note where historical and social context may be significant and what areas may require a bit of background research. For example, the optimism of President Kennedy's inaugural address can best be understood by knowing of the general pessimism of the times, the financial instability of the day, and the tensions surrounding the Cold War.

Once you have gathered this data about your article, locate its most important means of persuasion. When you have identified a few areas that seem most significant, consider what it is that together they accomplish. The answer to this question will move you close to establishing a thesis. If you were analyzing King's "I Have a Dream" speech, for example, you might conclude that he uses language to stir a response in white audiences (since the black audience is already sold on civil rights). Thus, your thesis may look something like the following: "Martin Luther King uses a blend of religious and figurative language to build a bridge to his white audience and emotionally sway them to take a more active role in the civil rights movement." When you have a clearly defined and narrowed focus for your analysis, you are ready to begin organizing your first draft.

ORGANIZATION

A rhetorical analysis has no special or unique form, though you will want to organize it in the most effective way possible to achieve your purpose in writing. As a guideline the following outline is only general. The rhetorical analysis includes a title, an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

TITLE

The title includes information on the author and work to be analyzed, his subject/purpose, and the focus of your paper. For example, "Converting the White Audience: Biblical Figures in King's 'I Have a Dream.'"

INTRODUCTION

The introduction contextualizes the article being analyzed—who is the audience, what is the purpose, etc. This part of the introduction will be used to set up your thesis statement, which includes 1) the author’s persuasive purpose, 2) the author’s linguistic and rhetorical means of accomplishing that purpose, and 3) perhaps something that suggests how you will organize your essay. For example, the sample thesis above indicates that the author will organize his/her paper by examining “religious and figurative language” in King’s speech, first as a means of connecting with the white community and then for its emotional appeal.

BODY

The body of your essay will include an orderly use of evidence from the article to substantiate your thesis. This evidence will mostly be short, direct quotations from the text that you analyze. It is important that you first “show” the writer’s words before attempting to “tell” how they function in appealing to a specific audience for a specific purpose. The body of the paper will not follow the chronological, linear organization of the text you are analyzing. If analyzing the King speech, one of your paragraphs or sections may draw on biblical allusions from throughout the text, another paragraph or section may focus on metaphors, again drawn from throughout the text.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion should briefly summarize your findings and their significance. As with the introduction, it is important to end on a strong note—a new perspective or insight on your text, a particularly good quotation, etc.

ASSIGNMENT SHEET AND GRADING RUBRIC: RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

Task: In 4–6 double-spaced pages, analyze a persuasive text to determine whether the author uses rhetorical appeals persuasively. Select two or three of the author’s rhetorical strategies to analyze in depth to show your audience *how* the author uses language rhetorically and *whether* or *not* he/she effectively convinces a target audience. Your audience will be the instructor and your classmates.

___ The “A” Analysis (180–200 points)

The “A” rhetorical analysis makes an insightful claim about what makes the article persuasive, indentifying and evaluating various kinds of appeals (*ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*) and the strategies used for creating those appeals. Avoiding summary, the writer focuses on *how* the author creates a particular effect and provides incisive textual evidence for each specific strategy analyzed, blending in quotes effectively and seamlessly. The writer concludes with clear closure, reinforcing the claims (without rote repetition) and suggesting further implications.

An “A” rhetorical analysis is exceptionally well written, in addition to being thorough in its analysis. The title cleverly forecasts the focus of the analysis, and the introduction effectively catches the reader’s attention, contextualizes the text, and forecasts the organization of the analysis. The analysis itself is unified (i.e., each paragraph supports the thesis) and coherent (i.e., the writer uses effective transitions from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, and idea to idea). Each paragraph has a strong topic sentence, examples from the text, and focused analysis. The writer creates an appropriate ethos through diction and style, with varied sentence lengths and clear, concise sentences and diction, particularly when using rhetorical vocabulary. The writer avoids vague, wordy, or obscure sentences, and punctuation, grammar, spelling, and usage adhere to the highest standards of edited American English. The analysis follows MLA documentation and formatting conventions.

___ The “B” Analysis (160–179 points)

The “B” analysis makes a clear claim about what makes the article persuasive, indentifying and evaluating various kinds of rhetorical strategies and appeals for *how* they work on the audience, though the rhetorical strategies and appeals may not be as specifically described as they could be. The writer provides sufficient examples from the text and analysis of those examples, though the analysis might be a little obvious or might not be thorough enough. The conclusion summarizes the argument, but the writer may not address fully the implications of the argument or its analysis.

The “B” analysis is well written, including a serviceable title and introduction, though may lack the flare of the title and introduction of an “A” analysis. The analysis is generally unified and coherent, with slight lapses in unity and/or transitions; the writing is also engaging, though the voice may lack the distinctiveness of the “A” analysis, and the syntax and diction may not be quite as polished; rhetorical terms are not used as effectively as they could be. Sentences are generally clearly written. A few errors in punctuation, grammar, spelling, usage, and MLA documentation and formatting appear randomly throughout the analysis, but such errors do not interfere with the reader’s understanding.

___The “C” Analysis (140–159 points)

The “C” analysis makes a claim about the rhetorical strategies and appeals of a text, though the claim may be obvious and uninteresting or is not clearly stated or fully developed. The analysis might be at times vague, imprecise, or insufficient. The writer lapses into summary, and examples from the text are incorporated ineffectively or incorrectly. The writer might even waver between objectively analyzing the text and subjectively arguing with it, agreeing or disagreeing with its claims and arguments. The writer does not make the case that the article and the analysis are important, timely, or consequential.

The “C” analysis is readable but requires some effort on the part of the reader. The title and introduction may be uninteresting or may not announce the focus of the analysis well enough. The flow of the analysis is, at times, choppy and unclear, though the writer develops a main idea throughout the analysis. Transitions from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, or idea to idea might be weak. The writer’s voice does not do much to engage the reader, and syntax and diction lack sophistication and may be difficult to follow in places. Some errors in punctuation, grammar, spelling, and usage appear frequently, though the reader is generally able to understand the argument. Errors in MLA documentation and formatting likewise appear with some frequency.

___The “D” Analysis (120–139 points)

In a “D” analysis, a text is selected, and the writer writes about it, but clearly the essay is more summary than analysis. Rhetorical appeals or strategies might be identified, but the writer provides insufficient evidence from the text and little or no analysis. The writer may have misunderstood the argument of the text being analyzed, or the writer may argue with the text rather than analyze it.

The “D” analysis is laborious for the reader. The title is rudimentary and may not indicate the focus of the analysis, and the introduction is similarly boring and/or fails to announce the focus of the analysis. The analysis lacks shape: the arrangement is unclear; the writer may lapse into tangents or the flow from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, and idea to idea is rough and unclear. The meaning of sentences is generally clear, but there may be sentence fragments, run-ons, or comma splices, and the diction might be vague or inappropriate. The analysis is riddled with errors in punctuation, grammar, spelling, usage, and MLA documentation and formatting.

___The “E” Analysis (0–119 points)

An “E” is generally only given to a rhetorical analysis that falls well short of the minimum requirements of the assignment, is plagiarized, or violates a policy established by an individual instructor (e.g., a late-paper policy).

COVER SHEET**RHETORICAL ANALYSIS**

Name _____

Section _____

Paper Title _____

I have included the following documents in my portfolio:

- Assignment Sheet and Grading Rubric
- Reflection on writing process that describes the challenges you found in writing your paper, your paper's strengths and weaknesses, and what you learned about writing and how it will help you in the future
- Final draft of paper for grading
- Rough drafts, including drafts with instructor and peer comments
- _____
- _____

Note: If your portfolio is missing any of the items listed above, you may be docked points on your grade for this assignment.

If you agree to let future instructors of WRTG 150 use your paper (with name removed) for training purposes, check below:

- I agree to let instructors of WRTG 150 use my paper for training purposes.

*Name*_____
*Signature**Date*