

Rhetorical Analysis

Throughout your college career, you may be asked to do a rhetorical analysis. While the specifics of rhetorical analysis will differ across disciplines (always follow your instructor's directions!), this resource will review some of the defining features of a rhetorical analysis and offer some general tips on how to complete a rhetorical analysis.

What is a **rhetorical analysis**? In a rhetorical analysis, you strive to identify the strategies by which the rhetor (the writer/speaker of a text) attempts to persuade their audience, why the rhetor might have chosen to use those strategies, and how the intended audience would likely react to those strategies (would they find them persuasive or not?).

Before continuing with this resource, we recommend reading our resource on “**The Persuasive Appeals.**” While the four persuasive appeals aren't the only rhetorical strategies you can analyze, it is often good to keep an eye out for them as you read and annotate a text in preparation for analyzing it.

First Steps: Reading and Understanding the Text

Before analyzing a text, you need to understand it. Think of rhetorical analysis as “reading between the lines” of a text. Before you can read between the lines, you have to read the lines themselves first! To make sure you have a firm understanding of the text you're about to analyze, utilize some of these critical reading strategies:

1. Read slowly and deliberately. Make sure that you can concentrate on what you're reading; free yourself from distractions.
2. Annotate. This means marking up the text with circles, underlines, writing notes in the margins, etc. (the particular method of annotation doesn't matter as much as just doing it). This helps you stay engaged with the text, and it forces you to slow down and pay attention to every word. This is crucial for the upcoming rhetorical analysis. If possible, access a printed copy of the text and mark that up physically with a pen and/or highlighter.
3. As you read, keep asking the “why?” question: why did the rhetor say it this way? Why did the rhetor say this and not that? Why DIDN'T the rhetor say this? While you might not have figured the answer out yet, this will get you in the habit of reading critically and thinking about the words you are reading.
4. Read multiple times. You will often notice new things about the text every time you read.
5. Summarize the text. Sometimes you will be required to do this before you analyze, but even if you aren't, you should test yourself to see if you can summarize the text accurately and concisely. First, see if you can summarize it in a paragraph of 4-5 sentences, and then gradually work your summary down to just one sentence.

Read “Around” the Text

Next, take some time to consider the context of the text, the surrounding factors that are not in the text itself but still could determine how the rhetor makes their argument and how the audience receives it. These are elements of what we call **the rhetorical situation**.

1. Identify whom you believe to be the intended audience(s) for the text, being as specific as possible—go beyond just “the general public.” Whom does the rhetor appear to be arguing toward? Whom is their argument meant to persuade? This will be essential for answering the “how?” question later.
2. Take note of when the text was created. This can give you some clues into how the audience might have responded to it at the time and how kairotic (timely) it was.

3. Do some research on the rhetor themselves, whether that's an individual person or a larger organization. Who are they? What credentials do they have to speak on this topic? What perspectives are they approaching this topic from?
4. Take note of the medium of the text. Is it a written, printed text? Is it an audio/visual text? Observe the genre, too: is it a news article? A TED Talk? A poem? A song? These will again affect how the rhetor argues and how the audience responds to the argument.
5. Think about the rhetor's purpose for creating this text. What are they trying to do with it?

Choose the Rhetorical Strategies to Analyze

It is unlikely that you will have the space to analyze every single rhetorical strategy the rhetor uses in the text. Therefore, you will probably need to select a handful of what you think are the most prominent strategies in the text. Here are some options:

- Any of the persuasive appeals (ethos, pathos, logos, or kairos)
- The way the text is organized/structured
- Any visuals the text uses (images, visual representations of data like graphs and charts, etc.)
- Any audial qualities of the text, such as vocal delivery, music, sound, etc.
- Any visual components of delivery, such as posture, facial expression, and eye contact
- The rhetor's tone and word choice (e.g., is it more formal or informal?)
- How the text treats its sources, such as citation

Answering the "What?" Question

The first step of rhetorical analysis is answering the "what?" question: What is the rhetor doing? Here is where you provide textual evidence of the rhetorical strategy in action. Consider using direct quotation or paraphrase from the text. Example:

In her article, Jennings uses a pathos appeal by referring to a burglary case where the victim lost due to being unable to afford a high quality lawyer. Jennings writes, "Sasha Owens might have received justice had she not been forced to live on minimum wage" (36).

Answering the "Why?" Question

After you've provided evidence of the rhetorical strategy, you must analyze this: "Why did the rhetor use that strategy?" In other words, what effect(s) are they trying to achieve on their audience by using that strategy? This is where "reading between the lines" comes into play, as the rhetor will probably not tell you the answer to the "why?" question themselves; it's up to you to figure it out. Example:

Through this appeal to her audience's sense of compassion but also outrage, Jennings strives to bring attention to the suffering of those who lack the means to afford good legal representation.

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<https://cottey.edu/campus-community/kolderie-center/learning-center/writing-center/>

Answering the “How?” Question

Since the success of a text ultimately hinges on whether the intended audience is actually persuaded, the “how?” question is perhaps the most important of the three: “How would the intended audience likely react to this rhetorical strategy?” Would they find it persuasive, not be moved at it at all, or even be dissuaded by it? Again, you will probably not be given the answer to this (unless, say, you hear the audience applaud), so you must argue your own case for how the audience would respond. Example:

Jennings’ reference to this case gives her audience a personal, visible example of injustice in action, making her argument more persuasive to them than if she just provided facts and statistics.

Or...

Jennings’ reference to this case likely falls flat for the audience, who would be more compelled by statistical analysis of trends than the embellished story of just one individual.

As you can see, this is where it becomes essential to identify the text’s intended audience, as that will determine how persuasive the rhetorical strategy is. Keep in mind that you may or may not be part of that audience, so analyze from their perspective, not your own. Just because you find a strategy persuasive (or not) does not mean the intended audience would find it persuasive (or not).

More Tips

-Remember that the goal of a rhetorical analysis is to analyze the text’s rhetorical strategies and their successfulness, not to discuss your personal response to the text or its subject matter. Your personal response is important and valuable to consider, but it is not what readers of a rhetorical analysis are looking for.

-Most rhetorical analyses entail a relatively formal, academic tone of writing. Therefore, it is generally a good idea to avoid the first person (“I”) and second person (“you”). For example, instead of writing, “I found this persuasive” or “You are persuaded,” write, “The audience likely finds this persuasive.” This helps you stay focused on the audience’s response, not your own.

-Good rhetorical analysis means sticking close to the source text and providing plenty of examples through quotation and/or paraphrase. You can often find more than just one example of the rhetorical strategy in the text. If you feel that your analysis is coming up short, return to the text to provide more evidence and examples of the rhetorical strategies, followed by your answers to the “why?” and “how?” questions.