

Rhetorical Analysis

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Analyze means to *unloosen* or to *undo*. When conducting a rhetorical analysis, you need to open up the material by examining each piece to see how the parts function as a whole (such as intended audience, purpose, rhetorical appeals, fallacies, etc.). Think of a car mechanic: in order to determine why a car doesn't run, the mechanic will investigate various parts to determine how they are working as a whole. Rhetorically analyzing a text can allow you to understand how writers and speakers sway others, and, in turn, how we can be more persuasive ourselves. Such texts can include websites, essays, advertisements, and much more.

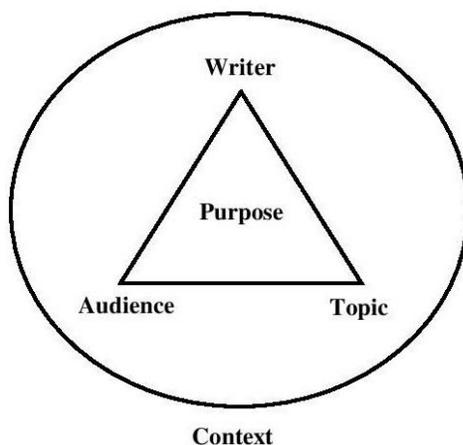
Before drafting your rhetorical analysis essay, be aware that you are *not* merely summarizing the content of a text. Rather than describing or summarizing **WHAT** the author has written, you will instead discuss **HOW** the writer writes. Keep in mind that even while writing a rhetorical analysis, you will still be arguing whether the text is effective or ineffective. For your paper, you will still need a thesis, but it will take on a slightly different form (see below under Formulate a thesis).

The Rhetorical Situation:

Arguments take place with real people and situations, not in isolation. The aim for any writer is to respond to a set of circumstances:

- The writer
- The writer's purpose
- The writer's audience
- The topic
- The context

Most often the rhetorical situation is represented as a triangle to show how each force exerts power over the text:



To start, the **writer** picks a particular **topic** and considers the **audience** to which he/she is writing. All of these elements influence the **purpose** of the document. Is it persuasive? Informative? Expressive? Sometimes the purpose also determines the audience a writer is seeking to reach. Since writing does not take place in a bubble, all of these factors are influenced by the **context**. For example, are there laws that were recently passed that change the way the topic is viewed? Have types of expressive writing become unpopular?

By considering the rhetorical situation, you can think about why a writer's text or a visual text makes specific claims or choices and consider how it might affect the persuasiveness of the argument.

How to Write a Rhetorical Analysis:

1. **Consider your purpose:** Here is your opportunity to begin doing some preliminary digging. Think about what you find interesting in the text you are examining. If you're not convinced by the text, try to determine why. When you have completed an initial brainstorm, consider how you might answer the following question:

What is the main idea I want to convey in my analysis of this work?

2. **Locate an analytical principle:** Now that you have thoroughly read or examined your source text, you are looking for a principle or definition to anchor your own analysis. This might be the use of background space in visuals or it might be examining fallacies or appeals in written texts (see our handout on Fallacies and read more about appeals below). Your goal is to determine whether the end product that you are examining is persuasive. If an analytical tool the writer has used is flawed, the analysis that follows from it will be flawed as well.

For example: *My goal is to raise awareness of the dangerous ties between counterfeiters who sell fake luxury merchandise and the international criminal organizations that support terrorism and child labor by using eyewitness accounts.*

If you were examining a text that used such a statement, you would have to determine whether the principle examination tools are valid. Eyewitness accounts means that most likely the writer would be using emotional appeals (pathos) to try and persuade the audience. You might be arguing whether emotional appeals are the most effective way to examine this topic. Consider the following questions when searching for analytical principles:

Is the writer accurate?

Are the ideas well accepted? Do you accept them?

What are the arguments against the writer? What are the limitations?

3. **Formulate a thesis:** A rhetorical analysis thesis often takes a similar form to persuasive essays, but the content in the thesis is a bit different. You may be trying to create a general overview of the approach you are taking. However, you should also consider ways to be more specific by pointing out specific analytical principles from the source text in your thesis. A general overview can often lead to a thesis with specifics.

General overview: *Riley sets out to answer this question by discussing what a college diploma means in our current social and economic state.*

Specific analytical principles: *Riley utilizes logical appeal, and the organization of her article to convince readers that society is moving away from the mindset of needing a college diploma to get a well-paying job. However, Riley weakens her argument by using a sarcastic tone, the ad hominem fallacy, and failing to fairly refute the opposing argument.*

Make sure to answer the following question:

What am I trying to argue about the text I have observed or read?

4. **Develop an organizational plan:** Effective organization means determining what parts of the object you want to examine. In order to look at different parts, you will also need to determine what analytical principles you will be using to do so.

Will you be using rhetorical appeals (see below)?

Will you be examining fallacies?

Be sure to think about your organization. When a rhetorical analysis is poorly organized, it can affect your reader. For example, if you examine a text paragraph by paragraph, you're going to be switching back and forth between your analytical principles. This will most likely feel like watching a tennis match to your reader because they will have a hard time following the ideas that are bouncing back and forth. Instead, consider discussing all the material under one analytic principle in a single area of your paper, which still may employ multiple paragraphs.

For example: *In the Riley paper mentioned above, the writer examines how all the essay's rhetorical appeals are convincing and then all the ways the rhetorical appeals fail.*

5. **Draft and revise your analysis:** See handout on Planning Your Paper and Revising, Editing, and Proofreading.

Understanding the Rhetorical Appeals:

In Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*, he determined that there were three different rhetorical appeals, and we still use these appeals today. They are as follows:

ethos: an appeal to credibility or authority

logos: an appeal to logic

pathos: an appeal to emotion

Each writer can choose different appeals based on the rhetorical situation, and in a single argument more than one appeal can be used. The degree to which each appeal is used is also based on the audience and purpose of the text in question.

You may be asked to **assess the effectiveness of ethos** in an argument. To do so, here are some questions that you might ask:

- Does the person making the argument demonstrate knowledge of the subject?
- What steps does the person making the argument take to present its position as reasonable?
- Does the argument seem fair?
- If the argument includes sources, do they seem both reliable and credible? Does the argument include proper documentation?
- Does the person making the argument demonstrate respect for opposing viewpoints?

You may be asked to **assess the effectiveness of logos** in an argument. To do so, here are some questions that you might ask:

- Does the argument have a clear thesis? In other words, can you identify the main point the writer is trying to make?
- Does the argument include the facts, examples, and expert opinion(s) needed to support the thesis?
- Is the argument well organized? Are the points the argument makes presented in logical order?
- Can you detect any errors in logic (fallacies) that undermine the argument's reasoning?

You may be asked to **assess the effectiveness of pathos** in an argument. To do so, here are some questions that you might ask:

- Does the argument include words or images designed to move readers?
- Does the argument use emotionally loaded language?
- Does the argument include vivid descriptions or striking examples calculated to appeal to readers' emotions?
- Are the values and beliefs of the writer apparent in the argument?
- Does the tone seem emotional?

Analyzing Visuals

Not every visual is an argument. Some merely portray information. However, when examining those that are trying to persuade a viewer, here are some elements for you to consider:

- The individual images that appear
- The relative distance (close together or far apart) between images
- The relative size of the images
- The relationship between images and background
- The use of empty space
- The use of color and shading (for example, contrast between light and dark)
- If people are pictured, their activities, gestures, facial expressions, positions, body language, dress, and so on

You may also want to consider how the rhetorical appeals may fit in. For example:

- Does the facial expression of the person in the foreground look to elicit sympathy or anger? (pathos)
- Is there text combined with the image? Does the text seek to portray facts? Are the facts believable? (logos)
- Does the person creating this image have the authority or credibility to make the argument contained in the image? (ethos)

Works Consulted:

Purdue University Online Writing Lab (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/725/>); *Practical Argument*, 2nd ed. (Kirszner and Mandell); *What It Takes: Writing in College* (Behrens and Rosen); *Transitions: University of New Hampshire Composition Program*, 2013-2014 ed. and 2016-2017 ed.