

PURPOSE

Almost every text makes an argument. Rhetorical analysis is the process of evaluating elements of a text and determining *how* those elements impact the success or failure of that argument. Often rhetorical analyses address written arguments, but visual, oral, or other kinds of “texts” can also be analyzed.

RHETORICAL FEATURES – WHAT TO ANALYZE

Asking the right questions about how a text is constructed will help you determine the focus of your rhetorical analysis. A good rhetorical analysis does not try to address every element of a text; discuss just those aspects with the greatest [positive or negative] impact on the text’s effectiveness.

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

Remember that no text exists in a vacuum. The rhetorical situation of a text refers to the context in which it is written and read, the audience to whom it is directed, and the purpose of the writer.

THE RHETORICAL APPEALS

A writer makes many strategic decisions when attempting to persuade an audience. Considering the following rhetorical appeals will help you understand some of these strategies and their effect on an argument. Generally, writers should incorporate a variety of different rhetorical appeals rather than relying on only one kind.

Ethos (appeal to the writer’s credibility)

What is the writer’s purpose (to argue, explain, teach, defend, call to action, etc.)?

Do you trust the writer? Why?

Is the writer an authority on the subject? What credentials does the writer have?

Does the writer address other viewpoints?

How does the writer’s word choice or tone affect how you view the writer?

Pathos (appeal to emotion or to an audience’s values or beliefs)

Who is the target audience for the argument?

How is the writer trying to make the audience feel (i.e., sad, happy, angry, guilty)?

Is the writer making any assumptions about the background, knowledge, values, etc. of the audience?

Logos (appeal to logic)

Is the writer’s evidence relevant to the purpose of the argument? Is the evidence current (if applicable)?

Does the writer use a variety of sources to support the argument?

What kind of evidence is used (i.e., expert testimony, statistics, proven facts)?

Do the writer’s points build logically upon each other?

Where in the text is the main argument stated? How does that placement affect the success of the argument?

Does the writer’s thesis make that purpose clear?

Kairos (appeal to timeliness)

When was the argument originally presented?

Where was the argument originally presented?

What circumstances may have motivated the argument?

Does the particular time or situation in which this text is written make it more compelling or persuasive?

What would an audience at this particular time understand about this argument?

WRITING A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS ESSAY

No matter the kind of text you are analyzing, remember that the text's subject matter is *never* the focus of a rhetorical analysis. *The most common error writers make when writing rhetorical analyses is to address the topic or opinion expressed by an author instead of focusing on how that author constructs an argument.*

You must read and study a text critically in order to distinguish its rhetorical elements and strategies from its content or message. By identifying and understanding how audiences are persuaded, you become more proficient at constructing your own arguments and in resisting faulty arguments made by others.

THESIS

A thesis for a rhetorical analysis does not address the content of the writer's argument. Instead, the thesis should be a statement about specific rhetorical strategies the writer uses and whether or not they make a convincing argument.

Incorrect: *Smith's editorial promotes the establishment of more green space in the Atlanta area through the planting of more trees along major roads.*

This statement is summarizing the meaning and purpose of Smith's writing rather than making an argument about how – and how effectively – Smith presents and defends his position.

Correct: *Through the use of vivid description and testimony from affected citizens, Smith makes a powerful argument for establishing more green space in the Atlanta area.*

OR

Correct: *Although Smith's editorial includes vivid descriptions of the destruction of green space in the Atlanta area, his argument will not convince his readers because his claim is not backed up with factual evidence.*

These statements are both focused on *how* Smith argues, and both make a claim about the effectiveness of his argument that can be defended throughout the paper with examples from Smith's text.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction should name the author and the title of the work you are analyzing. Providing any relevant background information about the text and state your thesis (see above). Resist the urge to delve into the topic of the text and stay focused on the rhetorical strategies being used.

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

Include a *short* summary of the argument you are analyzing so readers not familiar with the text can understand your claims and have context for the examples you provide.

BODY

The body of your essay discusses and evaluates the rhetorical strategies (elements of the rhetorical situation and rhetorical appeals – see above) that make the argument effective or not. Be certain to provide specific examples from the text for each strategy you discuss and focus on those strategies that are most important to the text you are analyzing. Your essay should follow a logical organization plan that your reader can easily follow.

CONCLUSION

Go beyond restating your thesis; comment on the effect or significance of the entire essay. Make a statement about how important rhetorical strategies are in determining the effectiveness of an argument or text.

ANALYZING VISUAL ARGUMENTS

The same rhetorical elements and appeals used to analyze written texts also apply to visual arguments. Additionally, analyzing a visual text requires an understanding of how design elements work together to create certain persuasive effects (or not). Consider how elements such as image selection, color, use of space, graphics, layout, or typeface influence an audience's reaction to the argument that the visual was designed to convey.