

A BRIEF GUIDE TO RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

La Salle University Writing Handouts



CONTEXT AND AUDIENCE

Texts do not exist in a vacuum, and in order to understand their rhetorical power, we must always consider how various factors motivate and shape them.

- What, exactly, is at issue in this text, what critical situation is it responding to, and how does it engage that moment? Even if a text does not directly address an explicit situation, remember that it is still embedded in time and place, for particular readers.
- Consider the place of publication as a good starting point. When was it written, published, delivered, etc., and what is the effect of such its format? Who would read and encounter this text, and how does it seem to anticipate such readers?
- To follow up on that last question, how do the beliefs, “common sense,” and commonplaces of the community or audience influence the text? (For instance, consider how ideals of equal rights and equal opportunity affect US readers.)

CHARACTER, CREDIBILITY, AND ETHICAL PROOF

- How does the author or speaker draw on his/her reputation, background, expertise, or experience to establish credibility and authority?
- Does s/he rely on situated or invented ethos? In other words, does s/he enjoy credibility by virtue of an established position or reputation, or does s/he construct credibility through the text itself (i.e. actively demonstrating good character, knowledge, and a sense of good will)? Consider carefully how the author demonstrates these characteristics through language, style, and rhetorical devices.
- How does the author address the audience? Formally or informally? Does s/he presume intimacy and close identification or a formal distance with less identification? (Small details such as the presence of colloquialisms often offer clues about how the author relates to readers and what rhetorical distance s/he assumes.)

REASON AND LOGIC

- What **premises** or claims (stated and unstated) does the author use to construct a reasonable argument? How do these premises work together or in a particular sequence to lead to logical conclusions (what we might call an **enthymeme** or **line of reasoning**)? (For instance, if good writing is clear and concise and your paper is clear and concise, then we might draw the conclusion that your paper is well-written.)
- How does the author move the audience through such lines of reasoning? **Inductive** (from general claims to specific points/conclusions)? **Deductive** (from specific claims to general points/conclusions)? Describe this process.
- How does the author use comparison to reinforce his/her claims and conclusions? Look carefully at the text to see if and how the author draws on examples (historical or fictional) to defend a claim or conclusion. For instance, a politician might make the **analogy** that an opponent's proposal is just like putting a Band-Aid on a broken bone. In other words, it seems like a solution but will never solve the actual problem.
- What kinds of evidence does the author use to support his/her claims and reasoning (i.e. authoritative testimony, images, personal observations, statistics, etc.)? What effect do such choices have in building the text's claims and conclusions?

EMOTION

- What key words offer clues about the text's emotional appeals? How do particular word choices work to shape readers' emotional responses to the position or argument being presented?
- Does the author communicate his/her emotional investment in and connections to the issue? If so, how and to what effect? (You might also think about how this plays into the author's credibility and authority.)
- How does the author set an emotional tone for the audience or perceived **stakeholders**? How does s/he emphasize or de-emphasize emotional connections? (In other words, is the author working to "stir up" emotions or distance readers from strong feelings and reactions?) You might also consider whether (and how) the author uses **honorific** or **disparaging** language to reinforce the emotional tone.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Even though we might think of credibility, reason, and emotion as separate appeals, keep in mind that they often work in tandem and reinforce one another. For instance, consider someone who lobbies for stricter gun control after being injured in a school shooting. On the one hand, she has a certain situated ethos and credibility because of this experience. At the same time, the way she relates this personal experience and investment will likely stir feelings of sympathy and outrage and ultimately function to emphasize a causal line of reasoning (i.e. If we had stricter gun control policies, this might have never happened). In other words, the author's decision to relate a personal narrative could very well work as an appeal to reason, credibility, and emotion. If we were to categorize her narrative choice as only one of those, we would be missing much of her rhetorical power.

In constructing and organizing your rhetorical analysis, think about how you may best represent the central argument, its claims, and appeals. You might consider breaking the argument into parts or sections (not necessarily chronological) and demonstrating how each smaller component is communicated and rhetorically reinforced in order to build towards the overall argument. For instance, if we were to follow the above example, you might discuss how the author's position about the need for stricter gun control laws relies on several components or claims. (i.e. She relates her personal account. She uses her own example to generalize and make arguments about national policies. She offers a proposal about what readers can do to bring about change.) The author undoubtedly strengthens each of these parts with a range of appeals, and she needs each component to make her overall argument work effectively. This is just one idea for organizing your analysis, but this model does help you avoid treating the major types of appeals as distinct and separate phenomena. Keep in mind that while an appeal may do specific work, it rarely functions in isolation.

The notes on this handout are drawn from the following source. (See MLA citation below.)
Crowley, Sharon and Michael Stancliff. *Critical Situations: A Rhetoric for Writing in Communities*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2008.

