

Writing a Rhetorical Analysis

What is rhetoric?

Aristotle defines rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion”—in other words, rhetoric is the power to find and achieve the best argument to use in any given situation.¹ Rhetoric is concerned with the *force* of language—how it acts, persuades, invents—and the effect that it has on people.² So when we think about an essay’s or article’s rhetoric, we’re thinking about its ability to make a persuasive statement and how it affects people.

What is a rhetorical situation?

To answer this question, it helps to begin by thinking about how we define situations in general. A situation, of course, is what we call everything that’s going on in the background that can affect the way a person understands, interprets, or communicates. For example, when asking a friend for advice regarding a particular problem, we first have to explain the situation surrounding the problem so that our friend can give advice that is truly helpful and relevant. The term “rhetorical situation,” then, refers to all of the factors that can affect the rhetoric—the persuasiveness—of an argument. If a writer does not think about the context in which he or she is writing an essay and the context in which others will be reading it, the essay may not accomplish its goal of making a particular statement and persuading others. The four factors we typically identify as the rhetorical situation are **speaker**, **audience**, **purpose**, and **message**.

The **speaker** is the person who is writing the essay, but this also refers to the *persona* of the essay-writer, the personality and character traits that the writer wants his or her audience to see.

The **audience** is the group of people reading the essay, who themselves may have certain agendas, concerns, beliefs, etc., that the writer needs to consider.

The **purpose** of a piece of writing refers to the goal that the writer hopes his or her essay will accomplish, whether to change people’s minds about an issue or simply to provoke thought.

An essay’s **message** is the clear, crystallized statement that a writer plans to make, which then helps guide his or her actual writing.

Once a writer has determined the rhetorical situation, keeping these factors in mind throughout the writing process will help him or her to stay on target and determine the most appropriate and persuasive thing to say.

¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*. Trans. W. Rhys Roberts.

² James Click, “Lecture Notes February 23,” English 1301, Blinn College.

What are rhetorical appeals?

The term *rhetorical appeals* refers to the foundational qualities of an argument that make it truly persuasive. There are three different types of persuasive pull that an argument can have. An argument can convince readers through its *logos*, the soundness of its logic and reasoning; through its *ethos*, the establishment of the speaker's credibility and the fair and honest treatment of the issue; and through its *pathos*, the ability to engage the audience's sympathy in discussing the issue.

What are logical fallacies?

The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing defines logical fallacies, which are also known as informal fallacies, as "instances of murky reasoning that can cloud an argument and lead to unsound conclusions" (412). Arguments can contain fallacies of ethos, logos, and pathos. For further discussion of these, see *Writing Arguments* pages 426-33.

What is a rhetorical analysis?

Rhetorical + Analysis = a detailed examination of how persuasive a piece of writing is (or isn't) and why (or why not). In other words, this is an essay that takes a step back from the issue or topic that's being written about and instead focuses on the choices that the writer has made in trying to make her statements persuasive and appealing to her audience. In order to do its job, a rhetorical analysis must

- avoid weighing in on the issue discussed in the primary text
- give sufficient background on the primary text's message so that readers can follow the analysis of the text
- use direct quotations and paraphrases of the primary text to illustrate and support claims about the text's rhetoric
- consider the writer and the choices that he or she made in writing the text.

What exactly does a rhetorical analysis *analyze*?

A rhetorical analysis examines and evaluates the choices that a writer has made in creating his or her essay. In order to think about how a writer communicates persuasively, we need to dissect the essay a little bit, breaking it down into parts that we can then examine and analyze in detail. Almost every element of a text reflects a choice that the writer made based on the essay's rhetorical situation. Some of an essay's elements relate to its content—what the essay actually says—and some relate to its style—how it goes about saying what it says.

Elements of content include the thesis statement, main ideas, introduction, conclusion, use of sources, use of transitions, and acknowledgement of counterarguments.

Elements of style include the writing's tone, sentence structure, use of humor, and organization of ideas and points.