

Writing a Rhetorical Analysis

What is rhetoric?

In his book *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines rhetoric as the ability to observe the means of **persuasion** in any given case. In other words, rhetoric is the power to determine the best argument to use in a particular situation to persuade the audience to accept an idea, point of view, or course of action.

What is a rhetorical analysis and what does it analyze?

A rhetorical analysis considers whether a piece of writing is persuasive (and why) or not persuasive (and why not). We are not debating the ideas in the text; rather, we are evaluating whether or not the writer's choices are persuasive to the audience. A rhetorical analysis includes an examination of the elements of content and style, the rhetorical situation, and the rhetorical appeals.

To be effective, a rhetorical analysis must

- Avoid judging the topic or ideas in the piece of writing.
- Consider the quality of the writer's methods of persuasion.
- Give sufficient background on the primary text's message so the reader can follow the analysis.
- Use direct quotations and paraphrases to illustrate and support claims about the text's rhetoric.

Elements of content and style

To assess how a writer is persuasive, a rhetorical analysis dissects the piece of writing to examine its parts in detail. Some of an essay's elements relate to the content, what the essay actually says, and some relate to its style, the way it is said. A rhetorical analysis looks at both of these types of elements:

- **Elements of content**—Thesis statement, main ideas, introduction, conclusion, sources, transitions, and counterarguments.
- **Elements of style**—Tone, sentence structure, humor, and organization of ideas and points.

The rhetorical situation

The rhetorical situation is the **context** of the piece of writing and the factors that can affect the argument's persuasiveness. If we ask someone for advice, the person may want to know the factors involved, asking "What's the situation?" Four factors are typically identified as the rhetorical situation:

- The **speaker** is the person writing the essay, or the *persona*, the personality and characteristics the writer wants the audience to see.
- The **audience** is the group of people reading the essay, who may have their own agendas, concerns, or beliefs that the writer needs to consider.
- The **purpose** of a piece of writing is the goal that the writer wants to accomplish, whether to change people's minds about an issue or simply to provoke thought.
- The **message** is the crystallized statement that a writer plans to make, which then helps guide the actual writing.

What are rhetorical appeals?

Rhetorical appeals are the foundational qualities of an argument that make it truly persuasive. To make a convincing argument, a writer appeals to a reader in several ways. The four different types of persuasive appeals that an argument can have include **logos**, **ethos**, **pathos**, and **kairos**. For example, in making a request of a friend, we might make give a logical reason for the request, demonstrate its validity, make an emotional appeal, or present the request at an appropriate time.

One way to understand a rhetorical analysis and the appeals is by an analogy of a courtroom trial. We are not considering the facts or forming an opinion about the trial itself; rather, we are focusing on how well the attorney argues his or her case.

- **Logos—Soundness of logic and reasoning**
How clearly and logically does the attorney state the case? Perhaps in opening remarks, the attorney might say, “I am going to prove to you that my client is innocent.” Through the course of the trial, the case is laid out in a logical and understandable manner, with evidence, witnesses, experts, and counterarguments.
- **Ethos—Establishment of the speaker’s credibility and fair and honest treatment of the issue**
The attorney might speak of the client’s strong reputation, achievements, or standing in the community. The case is handled with honesty, rather than name calling or harassing the opposing side. The attorney may draw upon legal precedents, or rulings in other court cases.
- **Pathos—The ability to engage the audience’s sympathy**
An attorney often uses pathos in a trial to appeal to the jury’s emotions. The defense attorney may emphasize the client’s disadvantages or difficult childhood. The prosecuting attorney may emphasize the victim’s age, whether young or old, or the severe loss to family life.
- **Kairos—The element of timing**
Timing can be important in a trial by bringing in facts or witnesses in the right time and order. Some questions may be delayed for re-examining a witness to present testimony that can now be disproven. An attorney may call a surprise witness who changes the direction of the trial.

Summary

In writing a rhetorical analysis, we consider whether the writer’s arguments are persuasive or not persuasive. We determine the rhetorical situation, or context of the writing, including the speaker, audience, writer’s purpose, and message. Then we examine the elements of content and style, or what is said and how it is said. We analyze the different appeals for how well the author uses the elements of logos, ethos, pathos, and kairos to make the piece of writing persuasive to the reader.

SOURCES

Click, James. “Lecture Notes February 23.” English 1301, Blinn College-Bryan. 23 Feb. 2007.

Lunsford, Andrea A., and John J. Ruszkiewicz. *Everything’s an Argument*. Bedford/St. Martin, 2016.

For more information about rhetorical analysis, refer to Chapter 6 in *Everything’s an Argument*.