

Rhetorical Analysis Brainstorm Questions

Rhetoric is the study of the effective use of language. In rhetorical analysis we deconstruct an author's argument to discover the strategies used to make it so we won't be lured into false conclusions by authors taking advantage of our gullibility. We also learn to learn how to construct our own arguments. Brainstorm questions can help you discover the elements that contribute to the strength or weakness of an argument.

Notice claims

The author's argument is his/her claim. Ask yourself questions like these:

- Are the author's claims absolute, extreme, or exaggerated? Is it reasonable? Is it oversimplified?
- Does the author acknowledge that other, differing claims may also have merit?
- Is the author's solution feasible? Does the author examine results realistically, including unintended results?

Example of noticing a claim:

The claim that the political free speech of some people somehow "silences" the political free speech of others is doubtful at best.

Notice evidence

Most authors use a mixture of evidence, but notice if there is a lot more of one or the other. (Depending on the type of claim, for example, pathos can be weak if it is not balanced with logos.) (Click here for [more on logos, ethos, and pathos.](#))

Notice logic (logos)

- Does the author connect the parts of argument together in a logical way? Are cause-and-effect relationships plausible? Are comparisons fair and apt?
- Are there recent statistics, research, or studies cited?
- Is there evidence for one side of an argument, but little or none for the other side?
- Are the likely consequences of the author's claim desirable? Are there likely to be unintended consequences?

Example of noticing logic:

The author seems to equate approval for the bond measure with a desire to cure childhood illnesses, and disapproval with callousness and indifference to suffering; this is insulting and oversimplified.

Notice authority (ethos)

- Does the author identify his/her qualifications on this topic? Is spelling, punctuation, and word choice correct?
- Are there footnotes or other outside references? Do the authorities, experts, or organizations seem qualified? Might they have a financial or power-related interest in the subject?

Example of noticing authority:

The small print at the bottom of the flyer identifies the sponsors as labor unions; since the measure discussed would have a detrimental effect on the ability to unions to spend members' dues on political campaigns, it may explain why there is no acknowledgment of an opposing viewpoint or counterargument. The unions may feel they have too much to lose in a transparent discussion of the measure on its merits.

Notice emotion (pathos)

- Does the author seem to choose many words or anecdotes likely to incite strong feelings, such as fear, disdain, anger, indignation, sympathy?
- Are there many emotionally loaded words that are not defined—*wealthy, working class, fascist, democratic, global, green, etc.*?

Example of noticing emotion:

The author chooses to describe this a cowardly “surrender” of liberty, rather than as a reasoned concession to realistic security concerns.

Notice fallacies & bias

An author may mix up logical evidence with a few fallacies or choose experts and authorities that have something to gain from taking a certain position. An author might not spell out his own assumptions about human nature and society. (Click here for more on [fallacies](#) and [bias](#)).

- Are proponents of an opposing claim made to appear bad or stupid or otherwise demonized (ad hominem)?
- Is the opposing evidence oversimplified, omitted, mocked, or otherwise dismissed (suppressed evidence)?
- Do you sense that the author is setting up an “us versus them” (false dilemma) scenario?
- Does the argument seem to fall into any other logical fallacies?
- Does the author identify his/her own prejudices or biases? Are the authorities cited likely to have a bias?
- Can you make an informed guess about the author’s worldview and assumptions?
- Has the author exaggerated or minimized a problem, making it seem more or less significant than it might be?

Example of noticing author’s bias:

The author seems to believe that class warfare is the defining struggle of middle class America.

Notice typography (especially in ads, infographics, and cartoons)

Ads, infographics, political flyers and cartoon use fonts and fonts styles creatively to strengthen their message.

- Is the font big, small, colorful? Is it businesslike or playful? Does the author use all caps? Italics? Bold?
- Is the text broken up into chunks? Are the chunks small, or longer, with more fully developed ideas? Is there a lot of white space on the page, or very little?
- What is the level of diction—formal and academic, or informal and casual? Does diction “match” the font?

Example of noticing typography:

The poster starts out shouting in all caps—an unfortunate tone to begin with. Once the shouting stops, the next lines use title-style capitalization, which seems amateurish and hurts the authors’ credibility—do they imagine that their readers will pay more attention to words that start with capital letters?

Notice images (especially in ads, infographics, and cartoons)

Images can make their own visual arguments. (Click here for more on [analyzing ads](#).)

- Are the images strictly utilitarian (such as showing a product) or are they there for connotative value?
- What kinds of colors are used? Warm? Bright? Muted? Cool?
- Which images are prominent and which in the background? What is the focal point? What is the point of view?
- What connotations/values might the images be intended to convey—tradition, modernity, nostalgia, realism, escapism, inclusion, exclusion?
- What images might be cultural references (Uncle Sam, animals, memorials, family groups, iconic scenery)?
- What images might be stereotypes or archetypes (for example, fat men in business suits or David & Goliath)?
- What images might refer to current events or trends (such as melting glaciers or emaciated people)?

Example of noticing images:

In Ramirez’s editorial cartoon, the serpent that, on the flag of Mexico, is clutched in the grasp of an eagle is now instead encircling and immobilizing the eagle, which is helpless to effect its own escape. In this inversion of Mexico’s national symbols, Ramirez enlarges the serpent disproportionately to represent the disproportionate and intractable problem of the drug cartels’ power to incapacitate the nation and government of Mexico.

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