

Rhetorical Analysis

Rhetoric is the study of the effective use of language, particularly in a persuasive manner. Simply put, it is the art of persuasion. In rhetorical analysis, we break apart an author's (or speaker's) claim or message, piece by piece. This is to determine how the author is trying to persuade us, but also to avoid the pitfalls of cognitive bias. Not only does rhetoric help to locate points of weakness in an argument, but the process of rhetorical analysis helps to effectively outline and craft a solid rebuttal at the same time. Asking yourself questions about the nature of the position that you are arguing against can help lead you to deeper, more meaningful questions, and ultimately a winning strategy.

Analyzing and Determining Claims

When looking for a starting point on where to dig into someone's claim, ask yourself questions like

- What specifically are they arguing for or against?
- How realistic is their claim? Is it exaggerated? If it is, how much so?
- Is it well-rounded and fair, or is it lopsided and biased?
- If it *is* biased, why or how? In what way, specifically?
- Is there information being ignored that would negate their point(s)?
- Is there a larger argument that their claim fits into? Is there "a message within a message?"

Identifying and Applying Rhetorical Tools

The three main tools of rhetoric are *Ethos*, *Logos*, and *Pathos*. Most authors will employ several mechanisms of persuasion for supporting their claims, and the best tend to use all three, but not all are equally reliable. For example, if there is a substantial amount of *Pathos* without a comparable amount of *Logos* to support it, the claim will not be as valid or strong. Relying solely on *Pathos* can be a logical fallacy in certain circumstances.

Paying Attention to Ethos (Credibility)

- Extensive personal firsthand experience is sometimes valid but be careful. Think of a famous professional soccer player talking about the game, or a famous actress talking about filmmaking, or a pop diva talking about singing and performing—would he or she be considered an expert in their respective career fields?
- Are they sourcing their information from an expert on the topic? What are the criteria that have been used to determine their expertise?
- What is their motivation for arguing their position? Do they have something to gain personally, and especially, do they stand to benefit financially if they take a certain position?

- Are they arguing from a Socratic perspective, or a Sophistic perspective?
- *Ethos* can be observed in a few ways:
 - Accreditation
 - Peer-reviewed work

Ethos Exercise: Identify which of the following potential sources is more credible:

A) *Dr. Soandso has studied microbiology for 25 years. Soandso graduated from the School of Medicine at Johns Hopkins and has contributed to pioneering research projects and made groundbreaking discoveries in disease prevention and treatment, as well as obtaining boots-on-the-ground experience serving the impoverished populations of _____ and _____.*

B) *Jamie Onlineperson has various informational videos on YouTube that they recorded and edited themselves after conducting their own research, because they've been sick many times in their life, and they've always recovered.*

If you chose A), you are on the right track.

Paying Attention to Logos (Logic)

- Are cause-and-effect relationships within the claim realistic? How solid are the correlations? Have negating factors been considered? See: *post hoc ergo propter hoc*
- How much evidence is available for either side of the argument?
- Is there a substantial amount for one side or the other? How credible is it?
- What might be the consequences of this claim's outcome? Are they desirable?
- Is there a possibility or likelihood of unintended consequences?
- Is their logic sound?

Identifying Logos: Become familiar with basic forms of logic and reasoning

Logic is the study of sound reasoning. Reasoning is the process of explaining how evidence supports a claim. One example is the syllogism: a deductive argument consisting of a major and minor premise and a conclusion.

Major Premise: All men are mortal.

Minor Premise: Socrates is a man.

Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.

Paying Attention to Pathos (Emotion)

- Are specific, sympathetic examples and anecdotal stories being used as a persuasive tool?
- Are metaphors, analogies and personification being used as a persuasive tool?
- Is specific, detailed description being used to move an audience emotionally?
- Are rhythmic rhetorical devices, such as parallelism, being used to move an audience emotionally?
- Are images being used to convey a message or concept?

Some Questions To Ask Yourself While Analyzing an Image:

- Has the author employed any symbols meant to infer deeper meaning?
- Is there connotative meaning or is the image strictly for illustration purposes?
- Think about how color connotes to mood. Is there a strategic use of color in the image?
- What is the general purpose of this visual communication? What are they trying to say?

The way an image is styled can be just as persuasive as the content of the image itself. Ever notice that almost all fast-food chains use some sort of combination of red and yellow in their advertising or logo? That is no accident! Typography refers to the font style, size of the text, colors involved, and the spatial location of the text in question on the medium being examined. A big, bold text at the top of an ad is much more likely to grab attention than smaller text in the bottom corner. The “fine print” disclosures in a contract or advertisement are tiny and at the bottom of the page for a reason!

Some Things to Look For in Typography:

- How big or bold is the font? Are there exclamation marks to signify intensity?
- Is the text in color? If so, what are the colors? Is there a symbolic meaning in color choice?
- How formal is the tone of communication? Is it casual, professional, scholarly?