

Rhetorical Analysis

Rhetoric is the study of how writers and speakers use words to influence an audience. A rhetorical analysis is an essay that breaks a work of non-fiction into parts and then explains how the parts work together to create a certain effect—whether to persuade, entertain or inform. You can also conduct a rhetorical analysis of a primarily visual argument such as a cartoon or advertisement, or an oral performance such as a speech. In this handout we will use the word *rhetorician* to refer to the author of a speech or document or to the creator of an advertisement, cartoon, or other visual work.

A rhetorical analysis should explore the rhetorician's goals, the techniques (or tools) used, examples of those techniques, and the effectiveness of those techniques. When writing a rhetorical analysis, you are NOT saying whether or not you agree with the argument. Instead, you're discussing *how* the rhetorician makes that argument and whether or not the approach used is successful.

Artistic and Inartistic Proofs

An artistic proof is *created* by the rhetorician and encompasses the appeals, canons, and most of the techniques given below. An inartistic proof is a proof that *exists outside the rhetorician* such as surveys, polls, testimonies, statistics, facts, and data. Either type of proof can help make a case.

Appeals

An appeal is an attempt to earn audience approval or agreement by playing to natural human tendencies or common experience. There are three kinds of appeals: the pathetic, the ethical, and the logical.

The *pathetic* appeal invokes the audience's emotion to gain acceptance and approval for the ideas expressed. (Note that in this context, the word "pathetic" has none of the negative connotations associated with it in other contexts but refers only to the ability to stir emotions.) In a pathetic appeal, rhetoricians tap a reader's sympathy and compassion, anger and disappointment, desire for love, or sadness to convince the audience of their argument. Effective rhetoricians can create these feelings in an audience even if the feeling wasn't there before.

Ex. TV commercials asking viewers to sponsor a third world child appeal to the viewer's compassion and instinct to protect the innocent.

The *ethical* appeal uses the writer's own credibility and character to make a case and gain approval. Rhetoricians use themselves and their position as an "expert" or as a "good person" to give their argument presence and importance. An everyday example of this is a minister, rabbi, priest, or shaman—individuals who are followed because they have established themselves as

moral authorities. Writers using ethos may offer a definition for an obscure term or detailed statistics to establish their authority and knowledge.

Ex. A speaker from the American Heart Association visiting a kinesiology class to talk about healthy lifestyle choices is a practical example of ethos.

The **logical** appeal uses reason to make a case. Academic discourse is mostly logos-driven because academic audiences respect scholarship and evidence. Rhetoricians using logos rely on evidence and proof, whether the proof is hard data or careful reasoning.

Ex.1 In his Divine Watchmaker argument, William Paley employs logical comparison to prove that something as complex as life and our world could not have occurred by chance.

Ex.2 Toothpaste commercials like to appeal to logos by citing statistics and using scientific language to describe the process of preventing cavities.

Remember that a single document, speech, or advertisement can make all three appeals. Rhetoricians will often combine techniques in order to create a persuasive argument.

Building Analysis by Prewriting

In writing an effective rhetorical analysis, you should discuss the goal or purpose of the piece; the appeals, evidence, and techniques used and why; examples of those appeals, evidence, and techniques; and your explanation of why they did or didn't work. A good place to start is to answer each of these considerations in a sentence or two on a scratch piece of paper. Don't worry about how it sounds—just answer the questions.

Example preliminary notes for a rhetorical analysis of Horace Miner's article "Body Rituals Among the Nacirema"

Ex. The goal – to get readers to see the ridiculousness of Americans' obsession with physical appearance and our weird ideas about "hygiene."

Ex. Rhetorical techniques used and why – didactic tone makes the author sounds like a high scholar to give credibility and create a sense of superiority for himself and the reader. Uses detached, academic diction to put distance between the reader and the "tribe" being studied. Uses common ground to place himself and the reader on the level of superior, civilized beings studying this tribe, only to turn it when the reader realizes the "tribe" is America. Uses amplification to describe and display the idiocy of practices like teeth whitening. Does all of this to appeal to logic and readers' sense of pride and superiority (pathetic appeal). Uses irony by including a quote from another author at the end that pokes fun at us for our feeling superior.

The next step is to identify examples of these uncovered techniques in the text. For example, in discussing the use of a didactic tone, you might point to the following sentence as an example: "the anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which

different people behave in similar situations that he is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs.” You should have multiple examples for each technique used.

Next, address the effectiveness of each technique. For example, in Miner’s article, the didactic tone draws us in, but about halfway through the article we realize that Miner is talking about current American society and that “Nacirema” is “American” spelled backwards. We realize that the tone is ironic and that Miner is making a point about how Americans believe in magic and superstitions rather than being the enlightened, rational, and scientific creatures we imagine ourselves to be.

Thesis, Body, and Conclusion

After brainstorming and doing the actual analysis, you are ready to write a thesis. Remember to choose the three (or four) techniques for which you can make the strongest case. Rhetoricians employ many techniques; focus on the ones that are the most prevalent or interesting and that you can describe persuasively.

Ex. Thesis In his article “Body Rituals Among the Nacirema,” Miner effectively convinces his reader of the ridiculous nature of America’s obsession with the body’s health and visual appeal by allowing his readers to form a third party opinion of themselves before realizing they are their own subject. Miner achieves this by employing an academic tone, detached diction, and superior common ground to place his reader on the level of a scholar observing a native “tribe.”

Finally, write your introduction, paragraphs, and conclusion. Following is a few tips for each.

An *introduction* should lead cleanly into your argument. If your argument involves an author’s stance on the death penalty, you might begin by giving factual data and/or the history of the death penalty. Remember that your argument begins with the first words of your paper. Your introduction should provide background that will make the reader see your argument’s relevance.

Each *body paragraph* should have its own topic sentence. Make sure every idea or sentence in a paragraph relates to its topic sentence; you don’t want to jump between topics. It gives your paper a sense of cohesion to place your body paragraphs in the same order in which they’re presented in your introduction. Consider how you will organize the paragraphs. Will you discuss each technique—every instance of ethos, then every instance of pathos, and finally every instance of logos—then end with a discussion of the overall effectiveness? Or will you review the essay in terms of the least effective technique to the most effective? Or will you use a chronological order, discussing each technique as it occurs sequentially? For the Nacirema paper, for example, the first paragraph could focus on the academic tone, the second on diction, and the third on *common ground*.

For each paragraph, give several examples and explain how those examples illustrate the technique being discussed. At the end of each body paragraph, make sure you connect your topic sentence back to your thesis. This creates cohesion, solidifies your argument, and provides a transition to your next topic.