



How to Read Critically: A Student Resource for Rhetorical Analysis

When you are asked to do a "rhetorical analysis" of a text, you are being asked to apply your critical reading skills to break down the "whole" of the text into the sum of its "parts." You try to determine what the writer is trying to achieve, and what writing strategies he/she is using to try to achieve it. Reading critically means more than just being moved, affected, informed, influenced, and persuaded by a piece of writing.

Reading critically also means analyzing and understanding how the work has achieved its effect. Below is a list of questions to ask yourself when you begin to analyze a piece of prose. These questions can be used even if you are being asked only to read the text rather than write a formal analysis (a sample of detailed formal analysis follows later in this section). Keep in mind that you don't need to apply all of these questions to every text. This rather exhaustive list is simply one method for getting you started on reading (and then writing) more critically.

Questions to ask for a Critical Reading:

1. What is the general subject? Does the subject mean anything to you? Does it bring up any personal associations? Is the subject a controversial one?
2. What is the thesis (the overall main point)? How does the thesis interpret/comment on the subject?
3. What is the tone of the text? Do you react at an emotional level to the text? Does this reaction change at all throughout the text?
4. What is the writers' purpose? To explain? To inform? To anger? Persuade is there more than one purpose? Does the purpose shift at all throughout the text?
5. How does the writer develop his/her ideas? Narration? Description? Definition? Comparison? Analogy? Cause and Effect? Example? Why does the writer use these methods of development?
6. How does the writer arrange his/her ideas? What are the patterns of arrangement? Particular to general? Broad to specific? Spatial? Chronological? Alternating? Block?
7. Is the text unified and coherent? Are there adequate transitions? How do the transitions work?
8. What is the sentence structure like in the text? Does the writer use fragments or run-ons? Declarative? Imperative? Are they simple? Compound? Complex? Compound-complex? Short? Long? Loose? Periodic? Balanced? Parallel?
9. Does the writer use dialogue? Quotations? To what effect?
10. How does the writer use diction? Is it formal? Informal? Technical? Jargon? Slang? Is the language connotative? Denotative? Is the language emotionally evocative? Does the language change throughout the piece? How does the language contribute to the writers' aim?
11. Is there anything unusual in the writers' use of punctuation? What punctuation or other techniques of emphasis (italics, capitals, underlining, ellipses, and parentheses) does the writer use? Is punctuation over- or under used?



12. Are important terms repeated throughout the text? Why?
13. Are there any particularly vivid images that stand out? What effect do these images have on the writers' purpose?
14. Are devices of comparison used to convey or enhance meaning? Which tropes--similes, metaphors, personification, hyperbole, etc. does the writer use? When does he/she use them? Why?
15. Does the writer use devices of humor? Puns? Irony? Sarcasm? Understatement? Parody? Is the effect comic relief? Pleasure? Hysteria? Ridicule?

Essay Guidelines for Rhetorical Analysis

Your Title: The title of your essay is the first point of contact you have with your reader. What sort of title would describe your paper and distinguish it from other papers written on the same essay?

Example: "Political Spin" (from sample) A Rhetorical Analysis of the Letter from George Bush to Saddam"

Your Introduction: DETAILING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

How would you describe the *rhetorical situation*? What will you say about the *writer*, the *subject*, the *context*, the *audience*, and the *principle aim/purpose* of the text? Are there any aims subordinate to the principal aim?

How would you *summarize the essay* in one or two sentences? (Try not to digress into a lengthy paraphrase of the piece.) What is the *writers' thesis*?

What features of *substance* and *style* will you focus on in the body of your essay, and why do you consider them so important to the discourse? (This is *your thesis*.)

Your Essay's Body: DISCUSSING THE CONTENT OF THE TEXT

How does the writer *develop* the discourse, and why has she/he chosen these *methods of development*?

How has the writer *arranged* the discourse, and why has he/she chosen this *pattern of arrangement* over others? (Make specific reference to the introduction, the thesis, the body, and the conclusion if you think it is important.)

If the essay is persuasive, which of the *persuasive appeals* (logos, ethos, or pathos) predominates, and how do these appeals *strengthen* or *weaken* the argument?



Are there any *fallacies* or other weaknesses in the argument? How do they affect the *reader's response* to the work? What kinds of *assumptions* are at work here? Are they fair assumptions?

What are the particular *strengths of the argument*? How does the writer establish *common ground*?

Does the writer make effective use of *concession, refutation, and/or counter-argument*?

Your Essay's Body: DISCUSSING THE STYLE OF THE TEXT

Which of the following features of style do you consider most important to the discourse and why?

- Language (including level of diction and tone of voice)
- Figurative language, symbolism, allusion (biblical, historical etc.), irony
- Humor
- Number and length of paragraphs
- Length and style of sentences
- Rhythm and repetition

How do these particular features of style enable the writer to achieve her/his purpose?

Your Conclusion:

Use your conclusion to comment on the effect and effectiveness of the essay as a whole. How well does the writer achieve the purpose, appeal to the audience, and demonstrate the effect of style on content?

Note the following conventions of analysis:

Analyze a text in the simple present tense

- Enclose essay titles inside quotation marks
- Refer to yourself as "the reader" or "the audience"
- Support your claims with textual evidence (direct quotations and paraphrases)