Rhetoric

WHAT IS RHETORIC?

Rhetoric is the study of how writers use language to influence an audience. When we do a rhetorical analysis, we analyze how the writer communicates an argument (instead of what the writer argues). We ask ourselves questions such as, “What strategies is the writer using to influence the reader?” “Why is the writer using those strategies?” “How are those strategies affecting the reader?”

To get started answering such questions, you should thoughtfully consider both the rhetorical situation and the three rhetorical appeals, which are described below. Each of these fundamental rhetorical concepts should guide and inform any rhetorical analysis, in addition to shaping your own writing.

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

The rhetorical situation is the set of circumstances, or context, that surrounds a piece of writing. The rhetorical situation informs, affects, and guides the writing strategies we choose to use. Considering the rhetorical situation can also give us insight into why the writer chose certain strategies and help us analyze how effective those strategies were.

Many factors shape the rhetorical situation, including timing, current events, and cultural significance. In general, however, the three most prominent factors are the audience, the purpose, and the writer.

Audience. Whenever we write, we are writing to someone, an audience. An audience can consist of a single person or a group of people. While some writing may also have secondary audiences, all writing has a primary audience (the main person or group of people the information is intended for). To be effective, our writing should be tailored to the intended audience. When we tailor our writing to the audience, consider the following characteristics:

- Experience with the subject
- Relationship to the writer
- Cultural, personal, and professional values
- Expectations
- Purpose for reading
- Age

Each of these characteristics should affect decisions you make about content, organization, appeals, word choice, style, and genre. For example, your word choice should be different when you write to a general audience vs. an expert in the topic you are discussing.

Purpose. All writing has a particular purpose. The purpose of any piece of writing falls into the following three broad categories:

- Entertain
- Inform
- Persuade

If a document’s purpose seems to overlap these categories, analyze why that might be. Understanding the purpose of a document can help you assess how appropriate or effective certain strategies are.

Writer. Just as the characteristics of an audience should influence the way something should be written, the characteristics of the writer also affect how something was written and how the audience will receive the writing. When you analyze a document, consider the following characteristics of the writer:
• Experience with the subject
• Relationship to the audience
• Cultural, personal, and professional values
• Expectations
• Purpose for writing
• Age

Understanding the writer’s characteristics and background can give you insight into the writer’s motivations and strategizing.

RHETORICAL APPEALS

The Greek philosopher Aristotle teaches that writers can use three appeals to influence or persuade their audience: logos, pathos, and ethos.

Logos (Logic): Writers can persuade their audience by using logical argument. Writers appeal to readers’ sense of logic by making claims and using factual evidence to support those claims. Writers also appeal to logic through reasoning, such as if/then statements (also called enthymemes or syllogisms).

Pathos (Emotion): Writers can persuade their audience by invoking emotion or relating to readers’ emotions. Writers can appeal to readers’ sense of emotion through emotionally charged stories, word choice, and imagery.

Ethos (Credibility): Writers can persuade their audience by demonstrating trustworthiness, good will towards the audience, and morality. Writers appeal to readers’ sense of trust by citing credible sources, asserting personal authority or subject matter expertise, or demonstrating good intent and morality.

TIPS FOR DOING A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

Questions to Consider

When conducting a rhetorical analysis, consider the following questions:

• Who is the intended audience, and how does the writer tailor the writing to that audience?
• What is the purpose, and how does the writer tailor the writing to that purpose?
• What appeals does the writer make and how? Are those appeals an appropriate choice for the intended audience and purpose?
• What kind of style and tone is used, and how are they suitable for the intended audience and purpose?
• What do the chosen writing strategies in the writing reveal about the writer or culture that made it?

This set of questions was adapted from “Basic Questions for Rhetorical Analysis,” a resource from Brigham Young University’s Silvae Rhetoricae: http://rhetoric.byu.edu/Pedagogy/Rhetorical%20Analysis%20heuristic.htm

Elements to Consider

When answering those questions, look at and consider the following elements of the writing:

• Word Choice/Diction
• Structure
• Tone
• Use of sources
• Evidence
• Genre