

Rhetorical Analyses

an overview

What is a rhetorical analysis?

According to Aristotle, rhetoric is “the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion.” Hence, a rhetorical analysis evaluates how well a spoken or written work accomplishes its purpose by examining the techniques the creator uses to persuade. Any act of communication that is intended to alter someone’s perspective can be rhetorically analyzed, including speeches, advertisements, news articles, opinion pieces, social media posts, works of art, songs and music videos, films, informational pamphlets, and academic texts. Also, know that there are many different approaches to rhetorical analysis, so follow the guidelines of your assignment, and when in doubt, talk to your instructor.

Elements of rhetoric:

A good way to generate ideas for a rhetorical analysis is by considering “the rhetorical situation”—in other words, the variables involved in acts of communication:

- **Speaker:** the person, group of people, or organization that created the spoken or written work. It may be helpful to research the background, qualifications, and reputation of the speaker.
- **Audience:** the specific person or group of people with whom the speaker communicated. If the audience isn’t clear, ask: Who was most likely to read, see, hear, or view the message, given where it appeared?
- **Purpose:** the effect that the speaker intended to have on the audience (e.g., changing beliefs or behaviors, evoking an emotion, informing, provoking, offering a new perspective, or influencing a decision).
- **Message:** the main idea the speaker communicated to the audience in order to achieve the purpose. Messages can be overt or subtle, and they go beyond mere description of content. It may be helpful to ask: What was the key takeaway for the audience?
- **Genre:** the category or type of communication (e.g., op-ed, advertisement, or protest art). Works within a genre share features (or “follow conventions”) in form, style, organization, and/or subject matter. Ask: Did the message follow genre conventions or defy them, and how might the audience have reacted to that? Also, did the speaker choose the best genre to accomplish the purpose?
- **Context:** the circumstances surrounding the act of communication—ranging from the specific event(s) that inspired the communication to the broader historical, socio-economic, and political variables. Ask: How might context have shaped (1) the speaker’s purpose and (2) how the audience received the message?

Rhetorical analyses also often examine the ways that speakers sway their audiences and accomplish their purposes using the following three “appeals”:

- **Ethos:** An *ethical* appeal emphasizes the trustworthiness or credibility of the speaker. Speakers may enhance their ethos by presenting credentials or training, relevant experiences, social status, fame, and identity markers (such as ethnicity, gender, or group membership).
- **Logos:** A *logical* appeal demonstrates that the message is well-reasoned or well-supported. Facts, research, evidence, and explanation boost the logos of a message, while faulty logic or unsupported claims diminish it.
- **Pathos:** A *pathetic* appeal sways the audience’s emotions. Speakers who effectively deploy pathos generate hope, fear, anger, excitement, sadness, and other emotions in their audiences in order to accomplish their purposes.

Depending on the rhetorical analysis prompt, you may be asked to examine all three types of appeal, to focus on one or two of them, or to explore alternative types of evidence used to persuade the audience. Some prompts may ask for you to explicitly use the terms *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*, while others may ask for a subtler approach that avoids those terms.

Typical structure of a rhetorical analysis:

Rhetorical analyses can have different structures and be different lengths, depending on the work the writer chooses to analyze, the context for the assignment, and the specific prompt. If you are writing a rhetorical analysis, make sure to carefully review any instructions you receive. That said, most rhetorical analyses loosely follow this organization and include some or all of these elements:

Introduction

The introduction may...

- briefly describe the spoken, written, or creative work that you will analyze;
- provide necessary context or background information;
- and offer a thesis statement that (1) makes a claim about how well (or poorly) the speaker fulfilled the purpose and (2) identifies the key techniques the speaker used to influence the audience.

Explanatory body paragraph(s)

In one or more body paragraphs at the beginning of the paper, describe the rhetorical situation in greater detail than the introduction, the speaker, the intended audience, and the intended purpose of the message.

Evaluative body paragraphs

The bulk of the body paragraphs will evaluate the effectiveness of the piece of communication. Each paragraph or section should examine an aspect, element, or appeal that contributed to the work's success or failure in achieving its purpose. In these paragraphs, you might...

- explain why the speaker was (or was not) qualified to communicate the message and whether or not the speaker came across as credible;
- describe why particular pieces of evidence, examples, or reasoning were (or were not) effective; carefully consider how these examples affect the overall impact of the piece on the intended audience.
- critique logical fallacies, gaps in the speaker's argument, or the speaker's failure to consider important information or perspectives;
- explain why the tone, language, examples, or artistic choices were likely (or unlikely) to resonate with the audience;
- and/or describe the emotional effect the work was likely to have on the audience and whether or not it aligned with the speaker's purpose.

Conclusion

The conclusion should reiterate whether or not the piece of communication accomplished its intended purpose. You might also...

- Answer "So what?" Why does this piece of communication warrant a rhetorical analysis? What did it ultimately accomplish? And what does your analysis reveal about society, human nature, or this point in history?
- Answer "What next?" What should your readers do in response to the analysis you've just provided? How should your analysis shape their interpretation and evaluation of similar types of communication?

Pitfalls to avoid: A rhetorical analysis is not a review. In other words, a rhetorical analysis is not about how much you like (or dislike) the work you are analyzing, and it's not merely about which points you agree or disagree with. While a rhetorical analysis is a type of argument, it is not an argument about your opinion on the topic (an endorsement or rebuttal). Rather, your argument should be about how effectively (or ineffectively) the work accomplished its intended purpose for its audience. You will do this by identifying and evaluating the strategies the speaker used to serve this purpose.