
Learning Commons: Writing Centre/Assignments

Rhetorical Analysis: Critical Reading

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 work to determine what the writer is trying to achieve, and what writing strategies he/she is using to try to achieve it. A rhetorical analysis is all about asking “why” and “how” when looking at the specific ideas, information, and strategies used by a writer to convey his or her point. 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're 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. It is a good idea to combine these questions and the critical reading focus with active reading techniques, such as note taking, underlining, and questioning. This will help you stay focused and retain more of the information that is being presented in the passages you are reading. Developing a habit of reading critically will help strengthen your writing skills, as well. The more carefully you look at how writers successfully (and unsuccessfully) share ideas and persuade readers, the easier it will be for you to diagnose your own writing in terms of what needs revision and what is working well. Questions to ask for a Critical Reading:

- What is the general subject? Does the subject mean anything to you? Does it bring up any personal associations? If so, how are your feelings about and associations with the subject affecting how you respond to the piece of writing?
 - Is the subject a controversial one? Is the writing biased?
 - What is the thesis (the overall main point)? How does the thesis interpret/comment on the subject?
 - What is the tone of the text? Is the author sad, angry, indifferent, formal, etc.? Do you react at an emotional level to the “voice” of the text? Does this reaction change at all throughout the text? If so, note when and find out why your reaction changes.
 - What is the writer's purpose? To explain? Inform? Anger? Persuade? Amuse? Motivate? Sadden? Ridicule? Entertain? Is there more than one purpose? Does the purpose shift at all throughout the text? If so, note where the shifts occur and think about why.
 - 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? How do these modes of development work together to create a strong piece of writing?
 - How does the writer arrange his/her ideas? What are the patterns of arrangement? Particular to general? Broad to specific? Spatial? Chronological? Alternating? Block?
 - Is the text unified and coherent? Are there adequate transitions? How do the transitions move the reader through the writing and tie together ideas?
 - What is the sentence structure like in the text? Does the writer use fragments or run-ons? Declarative? Imperative? Interrogative? Exclamatory? Are they simple? Compound? Complex? Compound-complex? Short? Long? Loose? Periodic? Balanced? Parallel? Are there any patterns in the sentence structure? Can you make any connections between the patterns and the writers' purpose?
 - Does the writer use dialogue? Quotations? To what effect? Who are the people being quoted, and why might the writer use quotes as opposed to paraphrases?
 - How does the writer use language? 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 writer's aim?
-

- Is there anything unusual in the writer's use of punctuation? What punctuation or other techniques of emphasis (italics, capitals, underlining, ellipses, parentheses) does the writer use? Is punctuation over- or under used? Which marks does the writer use when, and for what effects? Dashes to create a hasty breathlessness? Semi-colons for balance or contrast?
- Are important terms repeated throughout the text? What are they and why are they used?
- Are there any particularly vivid images that stand out? What effect do these images have on the piece of writing overall?
- 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?
- Does the writer use devices of humour? Puns? Irony? Sarcasm? Understatement? Parody? What is the effect? Why is humour used here?

Rhetorical Analysis: Writing

When you write a rhetorical analysis, you're recording and organizing the observations you made when reading the text critically. Below is a set of guidelines devised to help you organize the thoughts from your critical reading process. The guidelines detail the aspects of the text you might consider discussing, and they offer you some direction in terms of organizing your paper. Remember that you do not have to cover all of these aspects when writing a formal rhetorical analysis. Most importantly, remember that your instructor may have specific guidelines that she or he needs you to follow that may differ from the suggestions here. As you create your analysis, remember that there are certain writing conventions to follow, no matter what guidelines you are given for the content of the analysis. Those conventions include:

- Analyze a text in the simple present tense
- Enclose essay titles inside quotation marks
- Refer to yourself as "the reader" or "the audience" – first person point of view should not be used
- Support your claims with textual evidence (direct quotations and paraphrases)

Your instructor may have more specific conventions for you to follow in a specific project, so always double-check your assignment sheet.

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? Please see the section "Effective Titles" for a detailed discussion on creating titles. **Your Introduction:** Detailing the Rhetorical Situation In your introduction, you will need to do three main things: capture readers' attention, give readers any background information they will need in order to understand your thesis and the body of your paper, and present your thesis. Remember that your thesis statement needs to clearly communicate the main idea of your piece of writing, and it needs to let readers know what to expect in terms of mode – the thesis should let readers know if the paper will be persuasive, informative, or analytical, for example.

- How would you describe the rhetorical situation – in other words, what will you say about the writer, the subject, the context, the audience, and the principal 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? (Do not digress into a lengthy paraphrase of the piece. That is distracting to readers and will not serve your aim.) What is the writer's 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 In this portion of the body of the essay, remember to use specific examples from the original source to back up the observations you present. You may not need to quote these

examples directly, but you will need to point readers to portions of the text or assertions made by the author in order to support your ideas and show that your analysis is strong.

- 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?
- 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?

The Body of the Essay

In this portion of the body, you will need to use some direct quotes from the text to support your analysis of the style. When choosing your quotes, be sure that you have chosen them based on how well they illustrate the points you are making, as opposed to basing your choice on whether you like the content of the quote or its length. 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
- humour
- 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?

The Conclusion of the Essay

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?

Article Sources and Contributors

Learning Commons:Writing Centre/Assignments *Source:* <http://wiki.ubc.ca/index.php?oldid=191820> *Contributors:* MeghanAube