Rhetorical Analysis

# First, what is it?

**Rhetoric** is the study of how writers and composers use language, images and other media to influence an audience. **Rhetorical analysis**, then, is the close analysis of an author’s work performed by looking at how language and other elements of the composition are used to create a certain effect in an audience.

Rhetoric is not limited to the authors of written works. Cartoonists, painters, advertisers, film directors, and others whose work is designed to influence, evoke, or persuade, can have their work analyzed and evaluated for rhetorical effectiveness.

We believe that two foundational concepts are essential to approaching the work of rhetorical analysis. These concepts are **the rhetorical situation** and **rhetorical appeals**. The goal of this “tip sheet” is to provide you with a better sense of these important concepts for thinking rhetorically about a variety of texts.

Note that different cultures and languages have their own rhetorical traditions and methods. This tip sheet discusses the rhetorical methods most commonly associated with North American English and taught in U.S. college composition classes. Additionally, the concepts discussed here are offered as starting points for doing rhetorical analysis; however, the rhetorical analysis assignment given by your teacher may expect different or more specific things from you as a writer.

# The rhetorical situation

A good starting point for thinking rhetorically about a text is to be aware that all rhetoric comes about within a situation or context. Manufacturers, for example, need to sell their products. This situation, or context, motivates them to hire advertisers who are then prompted to compose ads designed to persuade consumers to purchase these products. This is an example of a rhetorical situation.

Lloyd Bitzer, the scholar who originally developed the concept of “rhetorical situation,” asserted that there are at least three elements to any rhetorical situation: **exigency**, **audience**, and **constraints**. **Exigency** is *the problem or reality or need that motivates something to be composed*. The need for manufacturers to sell a product is an exigency. **Audience** is *the individuals or group for whom the rhetorical act is designed*. Consumers are the audience for the manufacturers and their advertisers. **Constraints** are *the things within the situation that work to limit both the composer’s and the audience’s ability to successfully alter or reshape the exigence*. The decision to create advertisements for women’s magazines represents a constraint. This choice of running ads in magazine targeted toward women limits who might ultimately see the ad and be persuaded to buy the product.

# Rhetorical appeals – pathos, ethos, logos

North American English rhetorical analysis is commonly based on the conception of rhetoric by Greek philosopher Aristotle (4th century B.C.). Aristotle discusses the use of **three** **appeals: pathos, ethos, and logos**. **Pathos** is *the ability to elicit an emotional reaction from the audience*. Composers do this with such techniques as using emotionally-charged words/phrases or particular colors in a visual design. **Ethos** uses *credibility and character* to make a case and gain approval. For example, an “expert” or a “good person” can make a claim seem important and correct. **Logos** involves *using sound reasoning to convince an audience*. Authors using logos rely on evidence and proof in the form of hard data or careful reasoning.

Composers use these appeals skillfully to persuade an audience to agree with or otherwise take some action in response to a message or claim. This is the **purpose**, what the text ultimately seeks to achieve. A single text, speech, painting, photograph, or advertisement can use all three appeals. Additionally, we can connect these appeals to the concept of rhetorical situation. Like the manufacturer’s choice to focus their advertising campaign on women’s magazines, the choice of how and when to use pathos, ethos, and logos in these ads are examples of *constraints* within the rhetorical situation.

# Elements of a rhetorical analysis essay

 When you are assigned to write a rhetorical analysis, your instructor is asking you to focus on the effectiveness of a composer and their text in getting their message across. A rhetorical analysis should explore the composer’s **purpose**, the techniques/strategies used, examples of those techniques, and the usefulness of those strategies. *The writer of the analysis is not saying whether or not they agree with the message, but rather discusses how the composer conveys the message and whether or not the approach used is likely to be successful given the composer’s purpose and audience.*

## Thesis

A thesis in a rhetorical analysis should identify the author/artist, the work in question, the message or claim they seem to be making, the rhetorical moves they use, and analyze the effectiveness/ineffectiveness of these moves.

For example, a thesis for a piece of street art might read like this:

In his piece, “May the Police Force Be with You,” street artist, Az, juxtaposes the iconography of *Star Wars* and the pervasive power of the films’ fictional Force with an image of contemporary police force. The result offers a provocative sense of police force as itself a ubiquitous, complex and ultimately dark reality within communities of color.

## Introduction

There are several pieces of information to include in the introduction of a rhetorical analysis essay. In addition to naming the author/artist and title of the work, the following should be mentioned:

1. The exigency – the circumstance/condition/problem/inspiration that prompted the work
2. The persuasive argument/claim, or message of the author
3. The audience the author is trying to persuade
4. The ways (moves/devices/modes and appeals/strategies) the author tries to convince their audience
5. The purpose – the reason the text was composed or what the author seeks to achieve

*Note:* The thesis statement is normally placed at the end of the introductory paragraph.

## Conclusion

Not only will the conclusion sum up the paper and give it a feeling of finality, but it should also tell the reader what to do with or how to apply the information in the essay. Although there should be no new main ideas introduced in the conclusion, sometimes the suggested application of the author’s/artist’s message feels like new information; it may actually just be a new way to view the authorship.

# An important caveat

While the tips provided in this tip sheet are relevant for a generic rhetorical analysis essay, what we notice at the Writing Center is that there are as many specific requirements to this kind of essay as there are instructors teaching it. As is the case with all college assignments, the instructor may have specific directions and organizational plans for developing a rhetorical analysis essay. You should pay close attention to those details and any rubrics provided by your instructor.