

Elements, Appeals, Structure, and Pitfalls of Rhetorical Analysis

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Abstract

The paper is aimed at revealing basic characteristics of rhetorical analysis – one of the most popular instruments of the modern discourse linguistics. The research is based on the materials in English, however, the generalization and universalization of the rhetoric rules makes it possible to use them towards other languages too. The research covers such aspects of rhetorical analysis as its elements, appeals, structure and pitfalls.

Keywords: rhetorical analysis, elements, speaker, audience, purpose, message, genre, context, appeals, ethos, logos, pathos, structure, introduction, explanatory paragraph, evaluative paragraph, conclusion, pitfalls.

1.0. Introduction

Unlike summary, a rhetorical analysis does not only require a restatement of ideas; instead, you must recognize rhetorical moves that an author is making in an attempt to persuade his or her audience to do or to think something. In the 21st century's abundance of information, it can sometimes be difficult to discern what is a rhetorical strategy and what is simple manipulation (Babcock, 2015); however, an understanding of rhetoric and rhetorical moves will help you become more savvy with the information surrounding you on a day-to-day basis. In other words, rhetorical moves can be a form of manipulation, but if one can recognize those moves, then one can be a more critical consumer of information rather than blindly accepting whatever one reads, sees, hears, etc.

The goal of a rhetorical analysis is to explain what is happening in the text, why the author might have chosen to use a particular move or set of rhetorical moves, and how those choices might affect the audience. The text you analyze might be explanatory, although there will be aspects of argument because you must negotiate with what the author is trying to do and what you think the author is doing.

2.0. Literature Review

Rhetorical devices, being the main focus of analysis in the study, refer to artful mechanisms which are commonly used in different types of the text mostly with the intention to persuade the target audience (Harris, 2016; Bradshwa, 2020). These devices are commonly found in media (Andrus, 2012). Hou et al. (2020) state that by using rhetorical tones with appropriate channel and method, the speaker or informer can directly gain the trust of his/her audience to agree with their points and arguments which will affect their decision-making. Coulthard (1985) emphasizes that advertising is not only about designing a good case for the target audience but also conveying information in a way that conforms to the emotions of every human being.

Moreover, Genung (2010) explains that rhetorical devices are linguistic features that can be used to create the type of text a creator needs. Besides that, Bizzell and Herzberg (2010) emphasize the importance for advertorials to possess emotional appeal which would touch the audience's emotion, regardless negative or positive emotions. Rhetorical devices could also be working devices to add special effects on the advertisements which will appeal to the potential audience.

3.0. Elements of Rhetoric 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.

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? (Diedwardo, 2014)

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. (Finnegan & Murphy, 2010)

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.

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 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 Paragraph(s). 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. (Longaker & Walker, 2010)

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.

6.0. Conclusion

Rhetorical analysis is a form of criticism or close reading that employs the principles of rhetoric to examine the interactions between a text, an author, and an audience. It's also called rhetorical criticism or pragmatic criticism. Rhetorical analysis may be applied to virtually any text or image — a speech, an essay, an advertisement, a poem, a photograph, a web page, even a bumper sticker. When applied to a literary work, rhetorical analysis regards the work not as an aesthetic object but as an artistically structured instrument for communication. A rhetorical analysis should explore the rhetorician's goals, the techniques (or tools) used, examples of those techniques, and the effectiveness of those techniques. When writing a rhetorical analysis, you are not saying whether or not you agree with the argument. Instead, you're discussing how the rhetorician makes that argument and whether or not the approach used is successful.

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