#35) Tips for Writing a Rhetorical Analysis

Writing a rhetorical analysis can be more challenging than it seems. The assignment does not simply ask you to synthesize or critique the arguments of one or several articles, as you might have done in Comp I or Comp II. **Instead, a rhetorical analysis assignment generally asks you to do two things: 1) figure out what each writer is trying to accomplish, and 2) identify what *writing tactics* he or she is utilizing to accomplish it.**

The assignment is based on the premise that all writing is aimed at a specific audience for a specific purpose. Your task with this assignment is to determine the exact goal of each piece of writing and to explore, on paper, the strategies and devices used by the writer to achieve this goal. Following are some suggestions that should help make the process easier.

Find the Right Articles

Students doing this assignment are typically asked to find, for the purpose of comparison, two articles that address the same issue. Example: You find two articles arguing that human cloning will lead to dire consequences. One article comes from *Time*, a mainstream magazine with a broad readership, the other from the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, a publication aimed at physicians and others in the medical field.

- Take a subject you care about and brainstorm controversial issues within it. Often, your assignment will call for you to pick an issue within your field. If this is the case, you might first try brainstorming a list of the big areas of concern in your profession (e.g., if you're in finance, you might come up with a list that includes *trade, federal regulations, accounting*, etc.). Next, try generating ideas for specific topics – emotionally charged issues that you've heard debated in the media – next to each of the larger issues (e.g., next to *trade*, you might cluster terms like *NAFTA, Cuba embargo, exporting domestic jobs*, etc.). Do this until you've got a handful of specific issues you can research.
- Do some library research and zero in on the issue that seems to yield the most potentially useful material; then pick your articles. (**Don't waste time!** Make sure to get help if your time using the databases to no avail exceeds half an hour – the librarians are eager to assist you in your search.)
- It will be to your advantage if the articles you select come from sources with distinctly different readerships (e.g., *Business Week* and *People*; *The Nation* and *The Washington Post*).
- Whether they agree or disagree in their perspectives on the issue, both articles should make clear, strong arguments. Research reports, clinical studies, or other "neutral" sounding articles will likely be less useful to you than other pieces of writing, since they tend to utilize fewer obvious rhetorical devices than do articles with clearly persuasive agendas.
- Another tip: avoid really short articles, as they tend to offer too little to draw from.

Decide What Each Article Is Aiming to Achieve

Audience analysis: Sometimes, this assignment is called "Audience Analysis," because reading an article with its audience in mind is central to evaluating rhetoric. Make sure to look through the entire publication (be it a print magazine or journal or an online resource) in which the article has been published. By scanning the other articles, editor's page, graphics, and ads (sometimes a vital clue), you will be able to make an informed judgment regarding the likely demographics, values, and personal and political interests of the audience for the article. Determining the overall aim of the publication should help you consider what the article itself may be intended to accomplish.

Read with Rhetorical Questions in Mind: As you read each article, ask yourself what the writer is doing and how the writer's choices affect you as a reader. Often you can figure out the rhetorical aims of an article simply by noticing their emotional impact on you. If you are angry or upset by a piece of writing, the writer has achieved something and has done so using certain specific devices.

Decide What Rhetorical Tactics Each Article Is Utilizing

Read the texts closely, read them more than once, and annotate them (make notes in the margins) with the aim of highlighting examples of the authors' rhetorical strategies. **The University of British Columbia's website** has a great list of critical reading questions for students working on a rhetorical analysis paper. Those questions and a variety of

suggestions about how to develop a rhetorical analysis can be accessed at http://www.writingcentre.ubc.ca/workshop/tools/rhet1.htm

Organize your observations: Sometimes it's difficult to identify and organize the devices you wish to explore in the articles you've chosen. It can be hard to select the rhetorical strategies in the articles on which you wish to focus, and even harder to determine how to contrast the articles' strategies. Don't attempt to be completely comprehensive in your analysis; instead, try to figure out **what rhetorical devices are being used most** in each article. (One article may rely heavily on emotional appeals via case studies, while the other may utilize attention-grabbing slang to communicate ideas to the reader.) One way to clarify your thinking and make your paper easier to write is to put together a traditional outline. If you're a more visual learner, it may be helpful to make a chart. This can help you break down the differences between the articles. List the articles vertically along the left side of the chart, list the types of rhetorical strategies employed horizontally along the top of the chart, and fill in the blanks with observations in note form. Here's an example of this sort of chart:

Article Title, Author	**Apparent Aim of Article**	**Publication/Audience Analysis**	**Rhetorical Strategy #1 (e.g., tone)**	**Rhetorical Strategy #2 (e.g., language)**	**Rhetorical Strategy #3 (e.g., evidence)**
Article I					
Article 2					

Drafting Your Paper

If your instructor does not provide specific instructions regarding how you should organize your paper, you may wish to use some of the following suggestions.

Your introduction (which you might want to draft *after* you write your paper) should

- include a description of the topic being addressed in the articles you're analyzing,
- list the titles, authors, and source publications of both articles,
- give an overview of the apparent aims of the articles, and
- tell your reader what to expect in your paper by way of an essay map.

As far as the body goes, you may wish to do one of the following:
1) **Form subtopic sections out of the rhetorical strategies** you've identified. If you go with this approach, in each of these sections you can contrast the ways in which the articles make use of the devices. For instance, a section on language might be made up of a paragraph or two revealing how, say, one article makes heavy use of the slang and diction of young adults, while the other uses more formal language and academic jargon.
2) **Organize the body of your paper in two halves**, providing a full analysis of one article in the first half and the other article in the second. If you structure it this way, make sure that each of the sections makes reference to the other, to show contrast.

Other things to keep in mind: As with any other paper, of course, be sure to **use examples** to illustrate your points, and continuously **link the ideas in your body paragraphs to your thesis** by reminding your reader how the rhetorical strategies you're describing serve the articles in which they're employed.

Remember that you don't *know* what the writer's aims are; you are only in a position to speculate, based on the product in front of you (and the apparent perspective of the publication in which it appears). Make sure to use language that communicates that understanding, such as "it seems that" or "the article appears intent on convincing us that" or "one can only imagine that . . ."

A note on conclusions: All papers need conclusions, yet it can be difficult to know how to write a conclusion. Often, conclusions are viewed as a place to restate the introduction. That approach is rather limited, though, since it allows for no real development in the paper, no growth of ideas. Try to look at a conclusion as the last word you'll have on a subject. In ending this paper, think about what you can say to make the reader feel that the subject and your discussion of it matter. Remind your reader about the importance of the issue, perhaps, or about the persuasive power of rhetorical devices in the media. Talk about how the parts of a piece of writing assemble to form the whole, and the whole can change the mind of the reader. However you approach it, remember that your conclusion is your last word on the subject, the commentary that will, with luck, linger.