Rhetorical Analysis

A rhetorical analysis is “a criticism (or close reading) that employs the principles of rhetoric to examine the interactions between a text, an author, and an audience.”¹ In this context, a text can be anything: any type of writing, an image, a space, a commercial, even a bumper sticker or a coffee mug. Any text can be rhetorically analyzed.

The most important thing to keep in mind while writing your analysis is to look at your subject, not only as an argument to serve a cause, but also as an argument structured by an author who makes particular choices. To break that down a little more, a rhetorical analysis is more interested in what a text does than what it actually is.² Similar to a research paper, using specific evidence from your text to support your claims will only help your argument.

So, your goal is not to look at the arguments that these texts make; instead, you’re looking for how the argument is created, organized, and expressed.

For example: Think about the following joke: What did the fish say when he ran into a wall? Dam.

Now that you’ve stopped chuckling, what does the joke assume you know? It assumes you know that fish swim, and dams are walls in water. It also assumes that the audience will be aware of the double innuendo presented with the word “dam.” So by understanding the way the joke works linguistically and the knowledge needed to understand it, we’ve begun to analyze the rhetorical effectiveness of this joke.

Some questions to ask yourself while writing your analysis are:³

- What is the purpose of the text?
  - To entertain, inform, shock, persuade, educate, call to action?
- Who wrote it?
  - How might their age, experiences, gender, location, political beliefs, or education affect their argument?
- Who is the intended audience?
  - What age, social class, education level, past experience, culture, or subculture is the intended audience?
- What is the topic?
  - What is your text about? Are you familiar with the topic of the text? Do you or your audiences need to do some research to understand the text?

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² Ibid.
• What is the context of the text?
  Context can be affected by the time period or timing of the text, the location it’s created in, the culture surrounding it, or current events.

• How is the text affected by the culture?
  What events in popular culture might be responded to in the text? How is the text making assumptions of cultural awareness in its audience?

• What genre is the text?
  Is it fiction, autobiographical, a news story, review, letter to the editor, criticism, persuasive essay, etc.?