

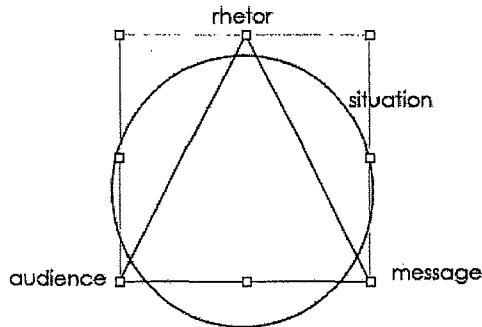
Writing a Rhetorical Analysis Paper

First things first: What's Rhetoric?

Aristotle says rhetoric is "the art of discovering, in any given case, the available means of persuasion."

As Aristotle's time-tested definition of rhetoric implies, rhetoric is first of all concerned with what will work—what will persuade an audience—in a particular situation. What might work for one speaker in one time and place may not work for another.

The Rhetorical Triangle tells us the key parts of rhetoric to keep in mind: Rhetor (or writer), Audience, Message. It's a triangle because all three elements are interdependent. Change the audience and you will likely need to adjust the message. As the writer changes, so may the message. Change the message, and we may need to adjust the way the writer delivers that message.



Rhetorical Analysis tells us how a writer sent his message, to whom the writer is speaking, and possibly what that writer is like as a person.

Questions you might be asking when doing a Rhetorical Analysis paper:

Who is saying what to whom, and why?

How is the message getting delivered?

What context is this act of persuasion occurring?

Is this piece of writing persuasive? Is it effective?

Here's a more specific way to look rhetorically at a text (article, picture, advertisement):

Writer/speaker:

Who's talking?

What makes them credible or believable?

What's their intention for this text?

What do they hope to accomplish?

Audience:

Who is the writer writing to?

Who does the writer think will read this piece?

How does the writer's intended audience affect our understanding of the message?

Message:

What did the writer say?

What might have been communicated beyond the explicit message?

Situation/Context

What context is the writer writing in?

What form does the text take? Is it an advertisement? An image? An essay? A journal article?

What social or cultural situations might the writer be taking into consideration?

The Rhetorical Appeals – Logos, Pathos, Ethos

How does the writer persuade the audience?

What kind of things contribute to successful persuasion?

In what ways does the writer use one, two, or all of the appeals, to help persuade?

To understand better how logos, pathos and ethos are employed by writers, let's look at some examples from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Dr. King was arrested in Birmingham, Alabama after a series of sit-ins at lunch counters in 1963, and wrote this letter from jail in response to a group of clergymen who publicly criticized his position.

Logos

Logos is a rhetor's appeal to reason, including facts and statistics. The logos appeal is, as one might expect, logical. One conclusion follows from the previous one. Evidence supports claims. Arguments are clear and easy to follow.

How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a manmade code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality.

In the example above, we see that the reasoning flows naturally from an accepted premise: here, the definitions of just and unjust laws that Dr. King presents and supports with the definitions of St. Thomas Aquinas. To boil it down, the logic of the passage above is as follows: Just laws are those that support humanity and unjust laws are those that do not. Therefore, if segregation "distorts the soul and damages the personality," it is necessarily unjust.

Pathos

An appeal to pathos is an argument from the heart. This argument appeals to the audience's emotions and inclinations. Pathos might include stories that move people or word choice that catches people's attention and persuades them to act as the rhetor wishes.

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; . . . when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

In this example, Dr. King appeals to the reader's emotions by putting name to some of the trauma and violence perpetrated against African Americans. He appeals to our emotions both by naming the crimes themselves and by using the second person "you" so that the reader is forced to consider the feelings arising if these crimes were perpetrated against him or her.

Ethos

Ethos is an appeal to the audience based on the character of the speaker. Audience members tend to be more willing to listen to a speaker they know and respect. They want a speaker to share their values, earn their trust, and be credible and knowledgeable about their subject matter.

I think I should indicate why I'm here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. [...] Several months ago the affiliate [of the SCLC] here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolence direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. [...] So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here. But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B. C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my home town.

In this example, Dr. King establishes his credibility to his audience through specific connections to the Birmingham community and through drawing on stories from Christian scripture, two official bodies that add credence to his authority.