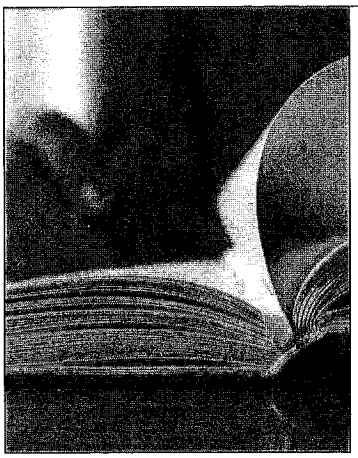

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

Among the most valuable skills you can take with you from college is the ability to think critically. Thinking critically requires careful attention to the way something works—how all its various parts add up to something meaningful, something important. Critical thinking goes beyond the obvious surface level of things to get a deeper, more nuanced perspective. In addition, critical thinking *assesses.* In the words of John Dewey, the American philosopher, it is the "active, persistent, and careful consideration" that leads us to make judgments about the value or consequence of things—like restaurants, music, teachers, relationships, processes, cars, gadgets, texts, or whatever (Dewey 118). Critical thinking isn't easy, mostly because we like to take "cognitive shortcuts" that give us quick results without much effort. That's why prejudice is so common: Often instead of observing carefully and making intelligent assessments, we make quick judgments that are not accurate, helpful, or kind. Or smart. Critical thinking, then, requires our best mental effort, and when we practice critical thinking we become better, more wise judges.

In this course you've learned quite a bit about *rhetoric* as a process of inventing and composing arguments for audiences in specific situations. For the rhetorical analysis assignment, you will learn to exercise your critical thinking skills by analyzing *someone else's* rhetoric to gain greater insight into what makes rhetorical strategies effective or ineffective. As we mentioned in chapter two of *Writing and Rhetoric,* rhetorical analysis is not just a school exercise; it is the way that we share judgments about important public messages that are seeking to change what we feel, think, or do.

Your success as a rhetorical critic will depend on how carefully you have studied a persuasive text and how artfully you analyze that text for a wider audience's benefit.

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

To write a successful rhetorical analysis you will need to:

1. Understand the rhetorical situation (your audience, purpose, and issue),
2. Use an effective writing process (including self-regulating strategies, peer review, and reflection),
3. Observe, analyze, and evaluate the rhetorical strategies of another writer (claims, reasons, assumptions, appeals, organization, style, etc.), and
4. Use your own effective rhetorical strategies when writing your analysis.

An opinion editorial is an obvious genre—you can read one in any major newspaper. A *rhetorical analysis,* however, is more elusive, since people who perform rhetorical analyses often don't call it by that name. So what kind of situation calls for a rhetorical analysis? What is its purpose?

Your instructor may assign you to do some critical reading on a controversial public topic (like globalization). Each of the readings represents a writer at work on a particular issue for a particular purpose writing to a particular audience. Their goals vary, but one overarching goal is to convince an audience to feel, think, or do certain things related to a public issue in which we all have a stake (like, again, globalization). These messages usually just float by on the Great River of Media without much fanfare. They are written, read, and forgotten. But now you have the opportunity to select one of these texts and tell the rest of us why it deserves our attention. Ultimately rhetorical analysis is an act of public judgment that serves the greater good. Keep this point in mind as you consider your audience.

Most of the time when we read we are primarily interested in *what* an author is trying to say; we try to understand the point he or she is putting across. When doing rhetorical analysis, however, we are more interested in *how* something is being said. That is, we pay special attention to *how* a writer attempts to achieve some sort of rhetorical effect. We look beyond the message to the strategies and tactics a writer uses in making an argument. In short, "rhetorical analysis" involves breaking an argument into its parts to understand how those parts contribute to the argument as a whole and determining whether the argument is successful.

For example, take a look at the beginning of Martin Luther King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech:

> Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity. But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free.

What can we notice right away? First, his opening phrase utilizes an allusion, echoing Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" with its dignified archaism of saying "Four score and seven years ago" instead of the more prosaic "eighty-seven years ago." As a result, King associates his language with one of our most respected national voices. Why is that significant? By this approach he makes an ethical appeal, attempting to establish himself as a trusted and authoritative orator, like Abraham Lincoln. He makes this appeal all the stronger by showing humility and respect in the following direct reference to Lincoln—"in whose symbolic shadow we stand." Thus, he uses Lincoln's language to establish an elevated rhetorical stance, as well as lending his speech

an air of historical significance, and then adds to our sense of his moral character through his humility—another valued trait of Lincoln's.

Notice that such an analysis can find significance in the slightest turn of phrase. In these few words King strives to win his audience's respect and sympathy. But who is his audience and how will that knowledge condition our rhetorical analysis? Answering these questions brings up an important part of your prewriting. That is, to effectively analyze King's speech requires some research into the social, cultural, and historical moment in which he delivered it, when issues of civil rights and racial equality were in the forefront. But you will want to be much more specific than that, learning what circumstances led up to the March on Washington and why King's timing was so crucial in making his speech so historically significant. This information will enable you to evaluate the likely effectiveness of his rhetorical strategies and appeals.

Among the possible conclusions from contextualizing the speech, you might conclude that as a black man addressing both black and white audiences, King needed to take an approach that would enable him to both elevate his message and humble himself for his primarily white audience. Historically speaking, by placing the issue of civil rights in the shadow of the Emancipation Proclamation (King's speech was delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial), King identifies his time as a similar crossroads in history as the Civil War, wherein a new kind of freedom could be declared. The apt timing and style of King's speech about a great dream of racial equality is further emphasized by the fact that President Kennedy had given his visionary plan to get us to the moon within a decade just eleven months before, establishing his era to be one of new visions and dreams wherein all things might be possible.

This example of rhetorical analysis is meant to demonstrate some of the ways a writer or speaker can create ethical appeals by connecting with an audience in several ways. This example is also meant to show how your own analysis should be limited in its scope, not trying to point out every evident rhetorical device or linguistic turn used in the text you analyze. The idea is to go into convincing depth about a few rhetorical techniques that together demonstrate an explicit or implicit purpose of the writer.

One other thing. In the process of analyzing someone's rhetoric, including perhaps his ethical standards, it is important that your own ethical standards are high. Be careful, in other words, not to manipulate your analysis so as to suggest motives and meanings that aren't really there. While such twisting of others' words may be acceptable in political debates, a higher standard suggests that our writing be done with a sense of goodwill, cooperation, and compassion. Besides, your purpose in this assignment is not to debate with the text, but to do an objective rhetorical analysis of it.

PREPARING TO WRITE

Before writing, it will be necessary to read the article under consideration several times, noting its use of rhetoric in relation to its messages, stated and unstated. The idea here is to tune your mind to how the author uses language, and to note the types of appeals he/she favors—ethical, emotional, or logical. Take note of how language is used, including length and style of sentences, diction, tone of voice, figurative language, etc. Turning back to King's speech, for example, he uses a very elevated, emotionally charged style, full of biblical allusions to light and freedom. His speech is virtually a political sermon, appealing to the nation's faith in basic human rights as a context in which to consider current political injustices. Finally, in your several readings of the text, note where historical and social context may be significant and what areas may require a bit of background research. For example, the optimism of President Kennedy's inaugural address can best be understood by knowing of the general pessimism of the times, the financial instability of the day, and the tensions surrounding the Cold War.

Once you have gathered this data about your article, locate its most important means of persuasion. When you have identified a few areas that seem most significant, consider what it is that together they accomplish. The answer to this question will move you close to establishing a thesis. If you were analyzing King's "I Have a Dream" speech, for example, you might conclude that he uses language to stir a response in white audiences (since the black audience is already sold on civil rights). Thus, your thesis may look something like the following: "Martin Luther King uses a blend of religious and figurative language to build a bridge to his white audience and emotionally sway them to take a more active role in the civil rights movement." When you have a clearly defined and narrowed focus for your analysis, you are ready to begin organizing your first draft.

ORGANIZATION

A rhetorical analysis has no special or unique form, though you will want to organize it in the most effective way possible to achieve your purpose in writing. As a guideline the following outline is only general. The rhetorical analysis includes a title, an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

TITLE

The title includes information on the author and work to be analyzed, his subject/purpose, and the focus of your paper. For example, "Converting the White Audience: Biblical Figures in King's 'I Have a Dream.'"

INTRODUCTION

The introduction contextualizes the article being analyzed—who is the audience, what is the purpose, etc. This part of the introduction will be used to set up your thesis statement, which includes 1) the author's persuasive purpose, 2) the author's linguistic and rhetorical means of accomplishing that purpose, and 3) perhaps something that suggests how you will organize your essay. For example, the sample thesis above indicates that the author will organize his/her paper by examining "religious and figurative language" in King's speech, first as a means of connecting with the white community and then for its emotional appeal.

BODY

The body of your essay will include an orderly use of evidence from the article to substantiate your thesis. This evidence will mostly be short, direct quotations from the text that you analyze. It is important that you first "show" the writer's words before attempting to "tell" how they function in appealing to a specific audience for a specific purpose. The body of the paper will not follow the chronological, linear organization of the text you are analyzing. If analyzing the King speech, one of your paragraphs or sections may draw on biblical allusions from throughout the text, another paragraph or section may focus on metaphors, again drawn from throughout the text.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion should briefly summarize your findings and their significance. As with the introduction, it is important to end on a strong note—a new perspective or insight on your text, a particularly good quotation, etc.