Rhetorical Analysis

Assignment Description

Effective rhetors understand the means that others use to persuade and to argue, and this assignment will task you with picking apart and evaluating the effectiveness of the argument made by another writer. In so doing, we hope that you’ll come to understand better the tools available to you as a writer at the same time as you gain a stronger understanding of the way we’re influenced by the rhetoric in use around us.

Your Purpose

You will exercise your critical thinking skills to analyze and evaluate the rhetoric used by another writer. When we read, we are often primarily interested in what an author is trying to say; in this analysis, though, you will mainly focus on how something is being said. You will pay special attention to how the writer attempts to achieve some sort of rhetorical effect. Although the message matters, you’ll need to look beyond the message to the strategies and tactics a writer uses as part of deciding whether the argument is successful. Ultimately, you will formulate an evaluation of the effectiveness of a writer’s argument and support your evaluation through careful examination of the rhetorical techniques he or she uses.

Your Topic

As we prepare for this assignment and hone our rhetorical analysis skills, we’ll be focusing attention on texts that explore the consequences of advancing technology and media in our lives. I would encourage you, because of your personal experience and disciplinary knowledge you’ll gain through these readings, to choose to analyze a piece of writing that deals with this topic. However, you may choose to analyze any piece of writing where the author is formulating an argument. (If you’re unsure about whether a particular piece would be appropriate, feel free to ask me.)

Your Audience

The audience for this piece is a general body of informed, intelligent citizens who are concerns about the topic you’re writing about and are engaged in discussions about the topic, including those presented in the text you choose to analyze. Essentially, your audience is your classmates, who represent this group. You have an audience who is interested in the relative value of different arguments about this topic, and you should direct your comments to them.

Format

You will present your analysis in a traditional essay format; the essay should be double-spaced, have a title, feature 1” margins, and use a 12-point serif font (like Times New Roman). The essay should be 4-5 pages long and should feature a strong evaluative stance on the text you choose (i.e., a thesis or controlling idea).

Considerations

Here are some things to keep in mind as you proceed in writing your analysis and some hints for completing the assignment.

* While I have a list of potential articles/texts you can use for this assignment, please note that there are other possibilities (even within our topic of the influence of technological advances). The opinion pages of major newspapers or news magazines are great sources of articles for this assignment.
* Read your selected article several times; at first, you want to get a general idea for *what* the writer is trying to make us feel, think, or do. Then, on subsequent readings, look carefully at *how* the writer is attempting to accomplish the goal. Remember that you want to analyze **both** the rhetorical situation **and** the rhetorical appeals or techniques being used.
* As you focus on the *how*, look for the author’s use of language (word choice, sentence lengths, the tone that’s established, use of figurative language, etc.). Note also the types of appeals (ethical, logical, emotional). You should also consider any flaws in judgement or reasoning the author might be guilty of–logical fallacies of course, but also moves as seemingly innocuous as ignoring competing voices or marginalizing competing concerns.
* Use what you understand about rhetoric, even though it’s early in the semester, to help you evaluate the strength of the argument.
  + Has the writer misjudged the exigence or the kairotic moment for this argument? Is this a timely issue, or is the writer’s response an appropriate one at this point in time?
  + What can you say about this writer’s ethos or character? Who is the writer, what qualifies him or her to write about this, and is there anything in the writer’s background (you can research these people, usually) that speaks to his or her strengths/weaknesses in approaching this topic?
  + Has the writer addressed the audience effectively, or does she/he misjudge the audience? You should consider the context in which this piece is written to help you consider some of these ideas.
* Find a few rhetorical principles to focus on in your analysis and go into depth on those few rather than trying to create a laundry list of elements. As the saying goes, “less is more” in this case because the depth you provide will better establish your own ethos as a writer and enhance the strength of your evaluation.

**Planning**

As you create a plan for tackling this project, consider how your experience with previous writing projects can inform the approach you take to this project. The prompts below will help with this, but you should also review chapter two of Mindful Writing for more discussion of how we plan to write.

* What is the rhetorical situation for this writing project? (it’s outlined for you above) So what are some thoughts you have about how you’ll choose an argument to analyze? What specific choices might you make to approach this audience?
* What stands out to you as most important as you read the assignment description? What do you want to be sure to remember as you draft and revise? How can you turn this into a goal about the product (the paper itself) or what you do while you’re writing (the process)?
* Consider the process you’ve used before as a writer. What are your strengths? What’s a specific goal you’ll make for this writing process based on your strengths? What’s one of your weaknesses as a writer? What’s a goal you can make to address that weakness?