

Responding Rhetorically

Textual Analysis

You probably have already read, and written, a number of essays, and you have probably had occasion throughout your career in school to read numerous short articles in magazines and newspapers or on your computer. In its broadest sense, the word *essay* can cover everything from a short report to a lengthy, technical article. The motives behind essays are also varied. Essays are written to entertain, to explain, to persuade, to justify one's actions, to beg for support or money, to sell, to condemn some person or action, to report on what has been done in an experiment or accomplished on a job, to encourage patriotism, to inflame one group of people against another, to deceive, to express adoration and love—the possibilities are myriad. In addition to essays, authors compose literary works of all sorts—short stories, novels, poems, and plays—to accomplish all of the same ends.

Teachers of rhetoric use the more inclusive term *text* to cover such variety, and they add oral communication to the list. Modern critics engage in analyses of such divergent texts as Fourth-of-July speeches, campaign addresses, parking regulations, and recipes. They analyze novels, short stories, and poems. Modern critics also approach their texts from an astonishing variety of perspectives: there are sociological critics, feminist critics, historical critics, psychological critics, Marxist critics, cultural critics, post-modern critics. A text to contemporary critics is anything but a group of words whose meaning is carved in stone, and just as there are common elements of fiction that help us to understand and analyze short stories, so are there, though perhaps less standardized than in fiction, elements common to all prose texts.

COMMON RHETORICAL ELEMENTS

All written texts—whether they are essays or handwritten notes—contain certain common, rhetorical elements. As you read and analyze an essay, you should examine and identify each of the following:

Audience

The intended audience of an essay may be identified by looking at the author's style (his diction and sentence structure), the complexity and type of ideas discussed, the essay's length, its purpose and situation, and the persona adopted by the writer.

Where an essay is published, in *Time*, *Field and Stream*, or *Scientific American*, is also a clue to the educational level and interests of the audience. The intended audience is discovered inductively; for example, we might determine that the 5:30 evening news is aimed toward an older, conservative, affluent audience by noting the number of advertisements shown during the half-hour for such things as denture cream, investment opportunities, and luxury automobiles.

Purpose

What does the writer want the reader to understand, to feel, to do? Writers want to change their

readers' beliefs or attitudes, make them laugh, make them cry, make them understand a complex issue. A list of purposes would be very long: to entertain, to persuade, to explain, to frighten, to teach, to anger, to placate.

Situation

All discourse is constrained by the situation in which it appears. Situation, loosely defined, is the context in which a particular text appears or the occasion on which a discourse is delivered. For example, the following are different situations with different contexts: you are required to write a ten-page report on the causes of the American Civil War in history class; you volunteer to speak to your younger brother's scout troop on tae kwon do; you write a letter applying for a summer job at Yellowstone National Park. Each situation or context demands a different response. In analyzing an essay, you should try to determine the situation or context in which the essay was written and the specific constraints such a situation places on what the writer says. Keys to context or situation for published essays include when it was published, in what magazine or journal it was published, and the tone and language employed by the writer.

Voice and Tone

The writer reveals his personality, his attitudes, his prejudices and desires through what he says and the way he says it. Just as there is a narrator who tells a story from a particular point of view, just as there is a "voice" in poetry, so there is a speaker in an essay, a **persona** (in Latin, literally "actor's mask"). A writer may unconsciously reveal the kind of person he is through what he writes. We may determine that he is arrogant, friendly, aloof, narrow-minded, or flippant. More often the writer's purpose, his audience, and the writing situation cause him to assume or adopt a persona. Aristotle says, for example, that when trying to persuade an audience we should present ourselves as honest, open-minded, and knowledgeable, with the *best interests of our audience in mind*. The persona a writer adopts may also reflect his social or cultural role. For example, we expect a priest and a movie critic to write in certain ways reflecting their different roles and positions in society.

Finally, the tone of an essay is closely connected to **persona**. Writers may adopt tones that are serious, playful, ironic, antagonistic, or passionate, among others. In writing a critical analysis of an essay, you should determine the persona and tone of the writer. Whether consciously or unconsciously revealed, tone is crucial to the total effect a text has on its audience.

THE RATIONAL APPEAL

Because persuasion is an attempt to make ideas and proposals attractive to an audience, you should become familiar with the methods writers and speakers use to appeal to their audience. Aristotle identified these appeals as the rational appeal (*logos*), the ethical appeal (*ethos*), and the emotional appeal (*pathos*). These three appeals are generally interwoven throughout an essay, but you must understand how each works to analyze that essay effectively.

Aristotle believed that what separated mankind from other animals was the ability to reason. Many writers thus employ rational appeals in an attempt to convince their audiences to accept or reject particular beliefs, claims, or courses of action. When a scientist writes a paper claiming to have discovered a new sub-atomic particle, when a biotechnology lab claims to have discovered the gene that causes Huntington's disease, when an engineer claims that a system of mass-transit will solve a city's transportation problems—all support their claims with evidence and logic. If a

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writer provides little or no proof for the claims he or she makes, you should be wary of accepting those claims, even though the claims might seem to be true. Further, in writing an analysis of an essay that focuses on its rational appeal, you will first need to review the section, “Constructing an Argument,” which defines *logic* and *argument*. In addition, you should consider the following:

Burden of Proof

A basic principle of reason, as of law, is that the burden of proof rests with the person making a claim. A claim is a proposition, a statement about what is or is not true. If the state claims that Joe Smith murdered his wife, for instance, then the state must prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Joe is guilty; Joe does not have to prove that he did *not* murder his wife. Careful writers will not make claims that they cannot back up. Thus, when you read essays, always look to see what *evidence and support* the writer provides to back up her claims. Further, be wary of non-testable claims. A non-testable claim is set up in such a way that no possible evidence or change in circumstances could render it false. As Stephen Jay Gould writes in *Evolution as Fact and Theory*: “A set of ideas that cannot, in principle, be falsified is not science. [. . .] Unbeatable systems are dogma. [. . .]” For example, if someone argues that people *always* act from selfish motives, and no counter example you come up with, no action or set of circumstances you devise, is ever accepted as an example of an unselfish action, it is a non-testable claim; that is, it is an assertion of belief. Beliefs are strongly held attitudes involving judgments about the world and are often accepted as articles of faith, beyond the realm of rational inquiry.

Fallacies

Logicians have identified a number of common fallacies (faulty reasoning that may appear to be good); you need to look for them when you analyze a writer’s argument. Refer to the section, “Constructing an Argument,” for a list of the most common fallacies.

Toulmin Analysis

In an *Introduction to Reasoning* (1984), Steven Toulmin presents a simple, practical method for analyzing an argument. He divides his analysis into an attractive scheme of three primary parts—claim, data (grounds), and warrant. To begin with, one must determine the claim the author is making. There are several types of claims on which to base one’s argument.

CLAIMS. A **factual claim** is a declarative sentence that asserts something is or is not the case, was or was not the case, or will or will not be the case. “Denver is the capital of Colorado” is a claim about reality. “Dallas is the largest city in Texas” is also a claim about reality. “The Chicago Cubs will win the pennant” is a claim about the future. (One must wait until October for verification of it!) “Socrates lived in ancient Athens” is a claim about the past which can be verified by reading accounts of his contemporaries. Thus, claims of fact can be **verified or falsified**. That is, a factual claim is true if it corresponds to reality—or is a **tautology** (something true by definition, such as “A bachelor is an unmarried man.”).

A *value claim* is a declarative sentence that asserts something is good or bad, right or wrong. Some value claims are merely *expressions of personal taste*, of liking or disliking: “Broccoli tastes bad.” “I prefer living in the city to living in the country.” “I feel hot.” Such claims cannot be disputed.

Other value claims are **moral or aesthetic judgments**: “Stealing is wrong.” “A liberal education is better than a technical one.” “Andrew Wyeth is a better painter than Jackson Pollock.” Such value claims are supported by reference to a code of values, an accepted ideal, or a set of criteria

the arguer uses as the basis of his claim. The Christian *Bible* might be the basis for the first claim, the Humanist ideal for the second, and standards of realist painting for the third.

A *causal claim* is a declarative sentence that asserts something is, or was, the cause of something else. “Smoking is a major cause of cancer” is a causal claim. “Slavery was a major cause of the American Civil War” is another.

A **definitional claim** is a declarative sentence that asserts something is just like, or is exactly the same as, something else. “Keeping animals in cages is just like keeping slaves in shackles” is such a claim. “Abortion is murder” is another.

A **deliberative claim** is a declarative sentence that asserts that something should or should not be done. These are sometimes called **claims of policy**. “You should quit smoking” is a deliberative claim. “The state of Utah should adopt a law making English its official language” is another deliberative claim.

Following Toulmin’s system, first find the **claim**, the conclusion of the argument or the thesis of the essay. Make sure that the claim is a testable-claim (that it is possible to support the claim by evidence), and that it is not preposterous or whimsical. For example, the following claim was made by a student in a paper on women in the military:

Women should not be allowed in ground combat units in the army.

GROUND. Next look for the data that support that claim, that is, the evidence the writer gives in support of his proposition. For example, the student supported the above claim with the following evidence: *The fact that a woman can get pregnant may keep her from performing her task, thus rendering the squad ineffective to perform in a combat situation. An example of this situation occurred when I was stationed at Ft. Rucker, Alabama; in my squad there were four men, and each of us was assigned a different task: machine gunner, sniper, squad leader, and Dragon gunner. We went on an exercise and the machine gunner became ill. He was rushed to the hospital, and I had to take over his task. The result of his illness was a catastrophe. When we attacked the enemy we were slower because I had to perform the jobs of two men. Therefore, the squad lost the battle, which not only had an effect on the squad but produced a chain reaction and destroyed the whole company. Thus, if a woman were to be assigned to a combat unit and she became pregnant, it would have a negative influence on the whole company.*

WARRANT. Third, look for any support that the writer gives to show that the evidence is relevant to the claim. For example, if the writer cites the statement of an authority, does he or she give the credentials of the authority? Is the authority speaking in his own field of expertise? If a major scientific study is discussed as evidence, are other confirming studies also cited? For example, the student writing on women in combat added the following to the evidence given above: *More than 1,200 pregnant women were evacuated from the Gulf region during the Gulf War; that is the equivalent of two infantry battalions. If the loss of one man from a squad can cause a company’s performance to drop, how much more harm would there be with the loss of two battalions of soldiers? It would have a devastating effect.*

BACKING. Fourth, look for information that gives added support to the Warrant. For example, our student next added the following sentence to the above warrant:

The statistics on the number of women evacuated from the Gulf War were released in a report by the Pentagon.

REBUTTAL. Finally, check to see if the writer has acknowledged counter claims and arguments; that is, has he mentioned and then refuted claims that contradict his own? Also see if the writer

has explained apparent exceptions to his evidence or mitigated the force of counter claims in some way. For example, our student included the following in a refutation section: *Some women argue that many other countries use women in combat roles. This statement is not altogether true. There are very few countries that have women in combat roles. Israel was one of those countries who tried to put women in combat, but they quickly stopped the program because it was a catastrophe. Israel still uses women in its military, but does not allow them in combat.*

Using Toulmin's scheme will help you recognize the structure of the argument you are analyzing and the strengths and weaknesses of that argument; however, simply because a writer supplies a warrant and backing for a claim does not mean that his argument is sound or cogent. Be sure to apply the standards of appropriate evidence and reasoning to the argument. Finally, remember that arguments are made to be convincing and that we are daily inundated by the mass media with hundreds of claims. The only rational stance to adopt in a world such as ours is one based on a respect for truth and an attitude of skepticism. In his essay "Of Cannibals," Montaigne says, "We should be on our guard against clinging to vulgar opinions and [. . .] we should judge things by light of reason, and not from common rumor."

THE EMOTIONAL APPEAL

If all people were as dispassionate as Mr. Spock or Data on the old *Star Trek* television series, then an account of the argument of an essay, of its rational appeal, would be the only analysis we would need to make. Yet while all people may be born with the capacity to reason, reasoning well requires knowledge, training, and practice. However, to echo the French eighteenth-century writer Jean Jacques Rousseau, we *felt* before we *thought*. Feeling, Rousseau said, is primary; it, not reason, makes us human. Further, as Antonio R. Damasio, Professor of Neuroscience at the University of Southern California, has pointed out, "emotions [...] inform the deployment of logic."

Therefore, when we want to persuade an audience, we often find it necessary to appeal to the personal nature of our topic. People are generally more interested in those matters that touch their hearts than in statistics or logic. The writer of a persuasive argument cannot ignore the fact that much of our identity resides in our emotions and imaginations. If we are to convince readers, we must appeal to their emotions, attempting to ascertain which of our emotions they will accept or approve. The skillful writer can then use certain associations which will elicit the desired emotional response in his audience. For instance, if he is addressing a religious group, he might associate the idea of human leadership or fellowship with Christ. This reference links the writer's own propositions to what the audience already identifies with and respects. Sometimes a well-placed word or phrase will enhance the emotional appeal of an argument, as when a writer of an essay against pornography mentions "innocent" children. Conversely, writers know, because they know the emotional character of their audience, what not to use in their appeal.

Thus, emotions are powerful forces in humans, and while we might think of some people as "lacking feeling," most people are strongly affected by their emotions. In Part II of *The Art of Rhetoric*, on "Emotion and Character," Aristotle lists ten emotions. The first four are positive—calm, friendship, favor, and pity; the next six are negative—anger, fear, shame, indignation, envy, and jealousy. In his 1872 book, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Charles Darwin began the modern discussion of the nature and origin of emotions. More recent investigators have emphasized the neurological basis of emotions and have listed eight basic emotions—anger, fear, joy, sadness, acceptance, disgust, surprise, and interest or curiosity. Others have divided emotions into "primary" and "secondary" emotions. Robert Plutchik, late professor at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, lists the eight basic emotions as fear (terror, shock,

surprise), anger (rage), sorrow (sadness), joy (happiness, glee), disgust, acceptance, anticipation, and surprise. In an article in *American Scientist* in 2001, he gave a three-dimensional “color wheel” model of the emotions. From “outsidein” the opposed emotions on the wheel are:

Pensiveness, Sadness, Grief—Ecstasy, Joy, Serenity Boredom, Disgust, Loathing—Admiration, Trust, Acceptance Distraction, Surprise, Amazement—Vigilance, Anticipation, Interest Annoyance, Anger, Rage—Terror, Fear, Apprehension

Finally, while we consider our emotions *natural*, we know that these emotions are conditioned by our culture, our social background, and our individual upbringing. Writers appeal to their particular audience’s emotions in order to motivate them to action or to gain their commitment to a belief or a group. For example, writers are well aware that people respond emotionally to words and images that appeal to certain deep-seated human desires, such as love, sex, nourishment, and pleasure. Conversely, people respond emotionally to what they fear: rejection, privation, pain, and death. On the one hand, writers appeal to their audience’s sense of comfort which they derive from belonging to a group such as a family, city, state, or country, or their affiliation with a certain ethnic or linguistic group, economic class, or political party; on the other hand, writers play on their audience’s fear and distrust of things or people who are strange or foreign to them.

The language used in emotional appeals can be direct or subtle. Writers can use words that have an obvious and immediate emotional impact on their audience and that are calculated to provoke a strong and predictable response. For instance, how do you react to the following words: *jerk, extremist, atheist, bubba, dumb blonde*; or to *peace, patriot, Christian, Muslim, entrepreneur, mother*? For example, note Richard Nixon’s use of emotionally charged language in the following paragraph, the conclusion to a famous speech he made on television in September of 1952; at the time many people were calling for his resignation as candidate for vice-president under Dwight Eisenhower because of allegations of misappropriation of campaign funds:

But just let me say this last word. Regardless of what happens, I am going to continue this fight. I am going to campaign up and down America until we drive the crooks and the communists and those that defend them out of Washington, and remember, folks, Eisenhower is a great man, and a vote for Eisenhower is a vote for what is good for America.

The words used in this passage depict two contrasting sets of images. The first set creates the image of a man battling against the forces of evil: “I am going to continue this *fight* [. . .] until we [Note the shift in person. He is one of us.] drive the *crooks* and the *communists* and *those that defend them* out of *Washington* [. . .].” Here is the image of a man trying to drive out evil from one of our political holy places, perhaps like as Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the Temple. The second set of words—“*Eisenhower is a great man*” and “*what is good for America*”—evokes the feelings of pride we have in a renowned military leader and associates those feelings with our feelings of patriotism. These feelings of greatness, goodness, and loyalty to our homeland are linked to the lonely fight against evil conducted by this man on our behalf.

In another example, in 2008 as the war in Iraq entered its sixth year and the number of United States troop deaths rose to over 4,000, President George W. Bush continued to defend the righteousness and necessity of the war. Speaking of those who had given their lives, he said, “one day people will look back at this moment in history and say, ‘Thank God there were courageous people willing to serve, because they laid the foundation for peace for generations to come.’” Bush here uses the words “God,” “courageous,” “serve,” and “peace” to evoke religious and patriotic emotions. He further intimates that history, “one day,” will ultimately be on his side in judging the morality of the war, and that the future, “generations to come,” will praise those who, under his leadership and command, gave their lives for the benefit of their countrymen. With this statement, President Bush both aligns his policies in Iraq with God, country, and history, and

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implies that those who oppose the war and want to withdraw U. S. forces lack courage, foresight, and backbone.

The emotion of a passage may also arise naturally from the writer's subject and the intensity of the writer's engagement with that subject. For example, few would question the sincerity of the emotion expressed in the following sentences by the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy who, at the peak of his career as a writer, with fame, wealth, an interesting circle of friends, a family—all that a person might desire—suddenly experienced a terrible, gripping sense of the utter futility of life. He wrote of this life-altering experience in *Confession* (here translated by David Patterson):

If not today, then tomorrow sickness and death will come (indeed, they were already approaching) to everyone, to me, and nothing will remain except the stench and the worms. My deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more. Why, then, do anything? How can anyone fail to see this and live? That's what is amazing! It is possible to live only as long as life intoxicates us; once we are sober we cannot help seeing that it is all a delusion, a stupid delusion! Nor is there anything funny or witty about it; it is only cruel and stupid.

The intensity of feeling in this passage arises from the writer's emotional involvement with his subjects—death and the meaning of life. Tolstoy conveys his fear of death and his sense of the utter meaninglessness of life in such phrases as “sickness and death will come,” “the stench and the worms,” and “I myself will be no more.” These words are simple, direct, and unadorned. Tolstoy also employs an everyday image of a drunk versus a sober man to convey his feelings about every man's blindness to the reality of his own death. The emotions we feel when we read such a passage arise directly from the subject and the writer's engagement with it. Tolstoy's primary purpose is to convey his feelings, to make us feel what he himself feels.

In writing a critical analysis of an essay that focuses on its emotional content, therefore, you will need to look carefully for any emotionally charged words used by the writer, at any images the writer creates through description, and at any figurative language the writer uses (see the section on analysis of style later in this chapter). In addition, ask yourself the following questions:

- What emotion is the writer trying to make the reader feel?
- Is the writer's use of emotion consistent with his purpose?
- Is the writer's use of emotion appropriate to his subject, his audience, and the occasion?
- Does the writer's use of emotionally charged language dominate the essay, or is it subordinated to more rational arguments?

Answering these questions will also help you decide what the writer's attitude is toward his material and his audience. For example, is the writer asking the reader to sympathize or be outraged? Is the writer being satiric or ironic?

Finally, what can an analysis of the emotional appeals made in an essay tell us? First, it can clarify a complex argument by helping us separate the emotional appeals from the logical ones. Focusing on the language and metaphors employed by the writer in developing his emotional appeal can help us gain emotional distance, and thus objectivity. Therefore we may begin to notice that the writer gives little solid evidence to support his claims and essentially begs the question he is trying to prove. Or we may find that the emotional language drives home a point supported abundantly by evidence and reason. Second, an analysis of the emotional language and appeals in a speech or an essay can sensitize us to the sometimes subtle assault on our emotions made in newspapers and magazines, or over television and radio, by politicians, preachers, teachers, and radio talk show hosts (and overwhelmingly in advertisements). Studying the emotional appeals made even in a single essay can help us to understand and to arm ourselves against such assaults. Emotions are very powerful; be wary of allowing yours to be manipulated.

THE ETHICAL APPEAL

Besides being rational and emotional creatures, humans are also moral beings. We like to think of ourselves as “being good” and “doing what is right.” We are, therefore, more willing to believe those people who we think are honest, upright, fair, and knowledgeable. The ethical appeal is, according to Aristotle, the most potent of all the means of persuasion. For writers’ arguments to be effective, their ethos must be apparent in their work and realized by their readers. Simply because a writer presents an argument does not mean that he or she can expect the reader’s assent, or even attention; nor can the mere presence of sincerity or emotion bring about the desired assent. To determine the nature of the ethical appeal, one must understand that the writer’s words have emotional associations as well as definite meanings. Although the ethical appeal is not restricted by any given specific rules or qualities, certain components can be discussed. For example, three major qualities of the ethical appeal illustrate how writers can reveal their character, their authenticity, through the words they choose.

For a writer or speaker to be convincing, he must make apparent to the audience his **good sense**, **good will**, and **good moral character**. **Good sense** suggests that the writer is capable of making practical decisions and choosing the proper means to achieve an end. It must be apparent to the reader that the writer is confident in his argument and that it is, in fact, correct and that he views his topic in the proper perspective. Very simply, **good will**, the second component, consists in the writer’s making clear to his audience that he has nothing but good will towards them. He must demonstrate that he shares their good intentions and basic aspirations and that he shares, too, some of their biases and prejudices, if necessary. The third component, **good moral character** is successfully presented if the writer convinces his audience that he would not deceive them and that he genuinely knows right from wrong. To acquire this trust, the writer must be sincere and believable.

Good writers and speakers will attempt to present themselves as reasonable and trustworthy. They do this, first, by showing that they know a lot about the subject they are discussing. They may reveal their credentials (their college degrees, their current position in government or at a university for example), they may discuss the research they themselves have done or discuss a wide range of research conducted by others (up-to-date research, of course), or they may provide convincing examples and other support for their generalizations and conclusions. Second, they may show their thoroughness by their consideration of all relevant material and points of view that have a bearing on their subject. Finally, they may show their fairness by considering opposing points of view and differing interpretations of the facts, by discussing those other positions courteously, and by acknowledging the strengths of those positions where reason demands they should. Ultimately, they want their readers or listeners to believe that they, themselves, are upstanding and creditable people who can be believed and who have the welfare of their audience at heart.

Keep in mind that the ethical appeal emerges throughout the essay. It is not something a writer merely inserts in his introduction or between paragraphs. A writer’s ethos develops as he or she makes clear to the reader the possession of all three of the components: the heart is genuine, the intentions good, and the recommendations worthy of the reader’s attention.

Writers, like trial lawyers, must convince their audience. While it is a popular cliché that “facts speak for themselves,” we should be mature enough to realize that they don’t; they must be given a voice and a context by a speaker or a writer, and that voice shapes the way we understand the facts.

ANALYSIS OF STYLE

Jonathan Swift described style as proper words in proper places. Today the word *style* is used in a number of different ways to describe such things as fashion, written formats (as in letter style), and the way people live (as in lifestyle). Written prose style reflects the education, experience, and habits of thought of the writer as well as the basic elements of rhetoric: purpose, audience, voice, and situation. Style is also part of the argumentative and emotional design of an essay. The clarity and force of an argument depend as much on style as on logic; likewise, the emotional impact of an essay depends heavily on style.

To analyze a writer's style you must focus on the words a writer uses and the way those words are arranged in phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. The purpose of a stylistic analysis is to show how a writer's language, sentence structure, and imagery contribute to his overall purpose and design (or how they contradict it) as well as the way they reveal the writer's attitude toward his subject matter and audience. You can approach a stylistic analysis in one of two ways:

1. You can take one element of style, say the writer's use of figurative language, and analyze the entire essay in terms of this one element alone.
2. You can examine a single paragraph, or several related short paragraphs, and do a more complete analysis of several elements of style.

In general, a writer's style depends on the way he uses the following:

Diction

The kinds of words writers choose, their *diction*, depend upon their educational and linguistic background and upon the audience and purpose of their essay. We can arrange words along a scale based upon an analogy with social custom. For example, just as men wear suits and ties on solemn and formal social occasions, so writers use formal diction on solemn occasions and for serious purposes.

FORMAL DICTION. Formal diction is characterized by polysyllabic words, many with Latin and Greek roots (*transference, multidimensional, orthodox*), abstract words (*cognitive, affective, discipline*) and words specific to a particular science or profession (medical terminology or legalese, for example). Formal diction contributes to a formal style, which is also characterized by its objectivity and the writer's use of the third person, both of which distance the writer from the reader. Formal diction is often used in college textbooks, scientific journals, and philosophical essays; formal style is standard for exposition of serious subjects directed to educated audiences.

INFORMAL DICTION. At the other end of the scale, comparable to men wearing T-shirts, cut-off shorts, and flip-flops, is highly informal diction. Informal diction is characterized by monosyllabic words, many with Anglo-Saxon roots (short, familiar words, such as *man, run, fish, speak*), colloquialisms, dialect ("y'all"), slang, contractions, and non-standard usage ("ain't"). Informal diction more closely copies everyday speech and contributes to an informal style, characterized by its subjectivity and the writer's use of first person, which attempts to bring the writer and the audience closer together. Informal diction is used in texting, e-mails, personal letters, the personal essay, and all sorts of short, written communication. As always, audience and purpose are important in the degree of informality of one's diction and style. Between these two poles (say, a man wearing loafers, slacks and an untucked shirt) is a broad range of diction that incorporates words from both ends to a greater or lesser degree.

Besides the degree of formality or informality of the diction of an essay, you can also look at whether the words a writer chooses tend to be more abstract or more concrete, more general or more specific, or more dependent on denotation or connotation.

CONCRETE AND ABSTRACT WORDS. Concrete words stand for items that you can touch and see, such as *book*, *desk*, *cat*, and *fireplace*. Writers use concrete words to help us visualize what we read. Abstract words, such as *honor*, *justice*, *love*, and *peace* do not call up specific images; nevertheless, we have some way of visualizing them: we can picture a child in the arms of its mother when we read the word *love*, for example. Even more removed from our ability to visualize, however, are certain super-abstract words generally deplored by most good writers as *jargon*; *factor*, *case*, *condition*, *thing*, and *degree* are examples. It is very hard to visualize a *factor*. Concrete diction contributes to a more familiar style and brings us closer to the writer: we see what the writer has seen; we feel what the writer has felt.

SPECIFIC AND GENERAL WORDS. Likewise, specific words create specific images, while general words help us to group classes of items. Again, we can set up a scale with very general words on one end and very specific ones on the other: *creature*, *animal*, *human*, *male*, *boy*, *son*, *Daniel*. Good writers are always moving between the general and the specific, going from one end of the scale to the other as they move between broad statements of ideas and issues and specific, detailed examples. Specific language helps us see how large philosophical, moral, or political issues affect us on a personal level. We want a wide-angle lens to show us the big picture; we need a telephoto lens to show us the details.

DENOTATIONS AND CONNOTATIONS. Finally, writers use words for their limited, denotative meaning or for their emotional associations, their connotations. Think of another scale with scientists on one end using words for their specific meanings and poets on the other end using words that have multiple meanings and wide associations. A writer's purpose and audience are again extremely important. A politician at a political rally, for example, may use such evocative words as *freedom*, *democracy*, *free enterprise*, *village*, and *family*. A scientist at the other extreme may use words like *dorsal*, *ventral*, and *suture* that have precise meanings. Scientists want to communicate their ideas directly and clearly; they want neither the confusion that might arise from using words that have multiple meanings nor the emotional reactions that highly connotative words might create.

Syntax

Syntax designates the way words are arranged to form phrases, clauses, and sentences. One way to analyze a writer's prose style is to look at the sentences he habitually uses. For example, some writers use longer sentences than others, piling up phrases and clauses within a single sentence. Others prefer short, more direct sentences. The sentences of the American authors William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway provide a classic example of this contrast:

The boy, crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more: from where he sat he could see the ranked shelves close-packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans whose labels his stomach read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish—this, the cheese which he knew he smelled and the hermetic meat which his intestines believed he smelled coming in intermittent gusts momentary and brief between the other constant one, the smell and sense just a little of fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood (“Barn Burning”).

The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees (“Hills Like White Elephants”).

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The first passage from Faulkner shows his preference for complex sentences with clauses embedded within clauses. The sentence is evocative and rich with emotional overtones. The second passage from Hemingway, however, shows his preference for short, simple sentences. The prose is direct and disarmingly simple.

What can we learn from an analysis of the sentence structure of such writers? First, we can gain insight into what might be called the “world view” or the psychological perspective of the writer. Faulkner’s complex sentences reflect the complex world portrayed in his novels—a world where narrators try to recapture the past in recursive attempts to understand and reinterpret the present. Hemingway’s habitual use of short, simple, subject-verb-object sentences reflects his belief, also portrayed in his fiction, that life is lonely and harsh and must be confronted directly with simple dignity. Second, a study of sentence structure can help us understand the power, effectiveness, and emotional impact of writing as well as learn, through an understanding of such techniques as repetition and parallelism, how to replicate such effects in our own sentences.

In your own analysis, to determine sentence length, for example, count the number of words in each sentence in several paragraphs and divide by the number of sentences to get an average word length per sentence. (Count all the words, including function words, such as articles and prepositions.) You might also count the number of very short sentences, say those under eight words, and the number of very long sentences, say those over thirty words. Again, to determine the frequency of the different types of sentences, count the number of sentences by type in several paragraphs. Determining sentence length and type, for example, tells us how well writers develop their topics, how detailed their explanations are, and how much they qualify their generalizations. Some writers hammer home their points with short, direct blows; others allow us to follow the chain of reasoning that leads them to subtle and complex truths. One benefit of an analysis of this sort is that you can compare the length and type of your author’s sentences to your own; you may find that clarity is not necessarily the result of short, simple sentences, nor is brevity always the soul of wit. To convey the richness and complexity of an imagined world, or the intricacies of a subtle argument, a writer may need the flexibility of a wide range of syntactic structures.

Sentences are defined as being **loose**—where the main clause or idea comes first and qualifying statements and dependent clauses are tacked on, or **periodic**—where the dependent clauses and qualifying statements come first and the main clause comes at the end. For example, consider the following two sentences:

I waited three long days in your outer office, continually embarrassed by the number of people who came, waited a short while, and went in, smirked at by secretaries traipsing in and out, and feeling degraded by the position of beggar I had to assume.

Continually embarrassed by the number of people who came, waited a short while, and went in, smirked at by secretaries traipsing in and out, and feeling degraded by the position of beggar I had to assume, I waited three long days in your outer office.

The first sentence trails off after the main clause about waiting for three days in an outer office by simply adding details, one after the other. The reader focuses on each added detail but in the process relegates the earlier ones to the back of the mind. By the end of the sentence, the importance of the three-day wait has waned. In the second sentence, however, tension and suspense are built up as we add one detail to the next because we don’t know what they refer to. The answer explodes at the end, and we feel the frustration and sense of indignity the writer has had to endure for three long days. We usually write words one after the other, adding details, descriptions, and explanations as we think of them, following the normal subject-verb-object pattern of English. Loose sentences are thus the workhorses of prose; periodic sentences add drama, suspense, and intensity.

There are other qualities of syntax that are important in analyzing prose style. Books on rhetoric devote much time to such qualities, including the methods writers use to expand and collapse sentences, the way they use particular punctuation marks to achieve certain effects, and their methods of opening and closing sentences. Prominent among these other qualities are the ways writers employ **parallel sentence structure, antithesis, and repetition**:

PARALLEL SENTENCE STRUCTURE. English demands that parallel or equal grammatical structures be used on either side of a coordinating conjunction: “*cat and dog*,” “*running and playing*,” “*jump and shoot*,” but not “*running and jump*.” English also demands parallel grammatical structures in series: “*books, magazines, newspapers, and television*,” but not “*books, magazines, and decided to leave*.” Writers employ more elaborate schemes of parallelism to develop parallel ideas and to give force to them. Consider the emotional impact of the following two sentences:

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. (Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*). In this justly famous sentence, Lincoln emphasizes his inability to say anything that could remotely capture the sacrifice and heroism of the men who fought at Gettysburg. By repeating the same phrase, “we cannot,” three times, and by raising the importance and force of the verb each time—going from the rather mundane “dedicate” to the more spiritual “consecrate,” and finally to the holy and sanctified “hallow”—Lincoln’s sentence does what he says he cannot do.

Now consider this sentence: *In such condition, there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts, no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.* (Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*). In this loose sentence, Hobbes describes man in a state of nature, before the advent of civilization. The sentence builds on a series of parallel “no” clauses indicating the bareness and harshness of man’s condition without the rules and laws of society. It ends in a climax of short, parallel adjectives that have the rapid-fire force of machine gun bullets.

Sentences employing **antithesis** balance contrasting ideas in parallel structures. We use *but* or *instead of* and many times to signal a contrasting idea. In the following opening lines (the sentence continues), from *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens expresses the glaring contradictions in French society on the eve of the French Revolution: *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair [. . .].*

REPETITION. Repetition of words, phrases, and sometimes whole sentences is used to drive home a point or build suspense or tension within a paragraph or essay. A famous example is the speech of Marc Antony in Act III, scene ii, of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, where Antony repeats the ironic phrase “Brutus is an honourable man” four times in a short speech to the Roman mob. Look at the repetition in the following lines by Martin Luther King:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

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I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!

The repetition of the phrase “I have a dream” emphasizes the fact that freedom, equality, and justice for African-Americans are still *only* dreams. Yet the repetition also affirms Dr. King’s belief in change and the ultimate goodness and brotherhood of all men. The phrase, repeated a number of times in the entire speech, rings in the ear like the repetitions in a prayer.

FIGURES OF SPEECH. Finally, writers many times use figures of speech to shock or surprise their readers, to emphasize a point, or to clarify their ideas. For example, Jane Goodall, in “The Exploitation of Non-Human Animals,” uses simile and metaphor when she speaks of laboratories that are “not unlike concentration camps,” and when she says that many people remain “largely ignorant” of what goes on in laboratories “rather as the German people were mostly uninformed about the Nazi concentration camps.” She further says that chimpanzees “live out their lives as prisoners, in bondage to man.” These two comparisons equate animals first with the victims of Nazi genocide and second with slaves. The figures of speech are used to transfer our emotional revulsion against these historical atrocities to the current treatment of lab animals.

In analyzing the style of an essay, you should not simply *point out* parallel sentence structures or figures of speech; you should explain how such elements of style contribute to the clarity, purpose, or force of the essay as a whole. For example: Does the writer use specific and concrete diction to help us visualize his ideas? Parallel sentence structure to help us grasp equal points? Repetition to help us keep complicated discussions in order? Further, does the style of the essay fit the purpose, voice, and situation of the essay? Does the writer use a formal style for a serious subject or formal occasion, or a formal, perhaps inflated style, for a trivial subject? (Sometimes a contrast between style and subject is a deliberate attempt to create humor or satire.) Finally, do the stylistic features of the essay contribute to or detract from the force or emotional impact of the essay? Is the writer deliberately trying to arouse our emotions with the choice of diction and sentence structure, or simply trying to convey his or her own feelings? Is the writer teaching us or preaching to us? As you can see, style is a complicated, integral part of all writing that directly creates meaning in an essay, not just a flourish added by a writer to make his prose “pretty” or “important.”

Organization

Writing a rhetorical analysis of an essay is not an easy task, but it can be made easier if you follow a plan and avoid some common mistakes. Keep in mind that your general purpose in writing a critical analysis is to explain and evaluate what the author has written.

First, follow a logical plan in preparing and writing your essay:

1. Read the essay to gain a general understanding of its purpose and meaning, underlining and writing notes in the margin to mark important passages.
2. Outline the essay, focusing on the thesis and the major supports of that thesis (evidence, examples, explanations, extended arguments, causes, effects, and so on). If the writer fails to support his or her claims, or if he or she uses colorful, emotional language, be sure to note these facts. Making this outline will give you a much clearer idea of the structure and scope of the essay.
3. Make a decision about what critical approach to take in analyzing your chosen essay. You might want to focus on the writer’s use of the rational, emotional, or ethical appeals, or perhaps you might do an analysis of the author’s style as it is exhibited in a single paragraph or several related paragraphs.

4. Now that you have chosen an approach, read the essay again, listing or otherwise noting examples of the types of support, instances of sound or cogent (or of specious) reasoning, or emotive language you want to emphasize in your essay.
5. Organize the material you have isolated, draw your conclusions, set up a thesis, and write your paper, providing copious examples from the essay to support general observations.
6. Be sure to mention the author's full name and the complete title of the essay in your introduction.
7. Finally, be sure you give your essay a precise, descriptive title such as "Audience Appeal In 'Letter from Birmingham Jail.'"

Second, avoid the following mistakes in writing your rhetorical analysis:

1. Be sure that you have a **critical** thesis and not a **descriptive** one. A critical thesis is one that states an evaluation or judgment of an essay based on your analysis of it. For example: *In "Some Thoughts on the Exploitation of Non-Human Animals," Jane Goodall mounts a strong emotional appeal by using highly connotative language, vivid figures of speech, and an effective moral analogy.* A descriptive thesis, however, merely summarizes what the author says in the essay: *In "Some Thoughts on the Exploitation of Non-Human Animals," Jane Goodall says that experimenting on animals, even if it benefits humans, is morally wrong.* This thesis will lead the writer merely to summarize what Goodall says in her essay; it provides no *analysis* of what she says or direction the critical analysis will take.
2. Keep in mind that assertions are not arguments but judgments; they must be supported with details and examples drawn from the essay. For example, if you say that Goodall engages in fallacious reasoning, you must name the fallacies she uses and give examples of them drawn from the text. You must also tie in what the author says to the point you are making. Don't say merely that "Goodall uses emotionally charged words, such as 'concentration camps,' 'suffering,' and 'heartless monsters.'" Instead, for example, say that "Goodall's use of words and phrases such as 'concentration camps,' 'suffering,' and 'heartless monsters' helps to develop her emotional appeal by causing the reader to think of scientists as cruel and inhuman."
3. Never use such phrases as "It is my opinion that [. . .]" or "I believe that [. . .]." A critical analysis is written from a third-person, objective point of view.
4. Do not write about your chosen essay in the past tense; use the historical present: not "Goodall *said* [. . .]" but "Goodall *says* [...]."

CHECKLIST

1. Have you read the essay you are analyzing a second time, looking up all the words and allusions you are unfamiliar with?
2. Have you annotated the essay, underlining important points and making marginal notations?
3. Have you established the author's intended audience, her purpose, the situation, if possible, and the tone of the essay?
4. Have you decided on a focus, either the rational, emotional, or ethical appeal?
5. If you are focusing on the rational appeal, have you employed Toulmin analysis to find the claim, listed the amount and types of evidence, looked for warrants and backing,

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- and found refutation of counter claims? Has the author employed any fallacious types of reasoning?
6. If you are focusing on the emotional appeal, have you determined which emotion(s) the author is trying to arouse? Have you looked for examples of loaded language, striking images, and rhetorical figures of speech?
 7. If you are focusing on the ethical appeal, have you determined how the author presents himself or herself? For example, has he given his credentials, taken an objective tone, used neutral and non-biased language, appealed strictly to evidence, avoided colorful figures, and admitted counter claims?
 8. Have you stated a clear, defensible thesis that can be supported by your analysis?
 9. Have you started with an interesting lead-in and mentioned the author, title, and date of the essay you are analyzing?
 10. Did you edit your paper carefully, checking for major grammatical and spelling errors?