

## THINKING CRITICALLY, READING RHETORICALLY

A major focus of studying texts in contemporary times is upon encouraging students to develop critical thinking, a skill which is essential for understanding the scientific method and for making effective judgments in the workplace and in civil life. This student-centered emphasis would have seemed strange to ancient Greek and Roman rhetoricians and their students. They believed that a rhetor's skill was best developed by honoring the skills of those who have excelled in the past. Therefore, a large part of the educational process involved having students study texts of well-regarded speeches, memorizing and reciting them, and modeling new compositions on their approaches to topics and language style. Isocrates explained:

Since language is of such a nature that it is possible to discourse on the same subject matter in many different ways—to represent the great as lowly or invest the little with grandeur, to recount the things of old in a new manner or set forth events of recent date in an old fashion—it follows that one must not shun the subjects upon which others have composed before, but must try to compose better than they... (Panegyricus).

Thus, students in ancient Greece or Rome would have been presented with a text, often read aloud by a teacher, and they would be asked to transcribe or copy it down with the idea that they would internalize the skills of the master rhetor who had originally given the speech. Then, they would be asked to write about the same subject in a way that built upon what they had learned from the master text but incorporated their own personal attitudes or perspectives.

Today, rather than being asked to model new compositions upon the techniques of classic texts, students are asked to read texts carefully and then to engage in critical thinking and discussion about those texts.

To think critically is to think both reflectively and independently. Critical thinkers do not believe facts or opinions just because they are published—whether it is in newspapers, textbooks, on television, or on the Internet. Nor do they focus upon just understanding or memorizing information, as in facts and figures. Critical thinkers examine the reasoning of the information in front of them, looking for premises, and considering the inferences drawn from those premises. They are able to think for themselves, making logical connections between ideas, seeing cause and

effect relationships, and using information to solve problems. **Reading rhetorically**, whether you call it that or not, is an important component of critical thinking because it involves evaluating texts for validity of arguments, adequacy of evidence, and presence of bias.

## **APPLY CRITICAL READING TO A SPEECH**

On November 4, 2008, in Grant Park, Chicago, Illinois, President-Elect Barack Obama presented his victory speech after winning the presidency in a contest against Republican John McCain. President-Elect Obama never mentions in his speech that he is the nation's first African-American president. He does not have to. He begins by saying, "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer." Simply standing before the crowd, he visually illustrates his own point—an African-American can become president in America.

To begin an analysis of the victory speech, you might want to watch the speech, even if you have seen it before. One place you can find it on the Internet is at the American Rhetoric site, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com>. As you listen to the speech, think about how Obama has crafted his text to respond to his audience of thousands in Chicago and millions around the world. For example, he begins by saying, "Hello, Chicago," acknowledging those immediately before him. Then later, he addresses his larger audience, "And to all those watching tonight from beyond our shores, from parliaments and palaces, to those who are huddled around radios in the forgotten corners of the world, our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared, and a new dawn of American leadership is at hand." As you read (or listen), be aware of what the president-elect has to say to his different audiences. What are his premises, and what inferences does he make from those premises?

## WAYS OF READING RHETORICALLY

According to reading theorist Louise Rosenblatt, when we read a text, we take the pattern of verbal signs left by the author and use them to recreate the text, not in the exact way the author perceived the text, but guided by it. So, as we read, there is a constant stream of response to the text. However, Rosenblatt says that even as the reader is recreating the text, he or she is also reacting to it. Thus, there are two interacting streams of response involved as the person moves through the text. The reader, rather than being a passive receptor for the author's text, actually participates in the creative process during reading.

However, we read differently depending on the text and the occasion. For example, if you take a paperback novel on an airplane trip, you probably read simply for entertainment and to pass the time in the air. If you read *King Lear* for a literature class, you read for the plot, characterization, and other elements that you know will be discussed in class. If you read a chapter in your chemistry textbook before an exam, you are focusing on remembering concepts and details that might be on the test. Reading as a writer is another type of reading. You examine the text with an eye for the choices the writer made when crafting the text, such as whether the writer begins with a narrative introduction, a quote from a noted authority, or a startling statement. You notice, for example, what people are mentioned in the text, either as authorities or participants in activities.

Rosenblatt also makes a useful distinction between two main kinds of reading—aesthetic reading and efferent reading. In **aesthetic reading**, the reader is most interested in what happens “during the reading event, as he fixes his attention on the actual experience he is living through,” according to Rosenblatt. Readers focus upon the ideas, images, and story of the text that evoke an aesthetic experience in the moment of reading. **Efferent readers**, in contrast, read to learn from the text, and, thus, according to Rosenblatt, “concentrate on the information, the concepts, the guides to action, that will be left with him when the reading is over.”

Reading rhetorically is efferent reading, focusing not on the experience of reading but on the information the text conveys and upon the way an argument is established and supported in a text. Sometimes arguments are written in an engaging style that is a pleasure to read or sometimes in a highly emotional tone that arouses a visceral response in the reader. A text that inspires aesthetic reading must sometimes be read several times in order

for the reader to focus on the structure of the argument beneath the creative language.

Some theorists say that critical thinking is “thinking about thinking” or “reasoning about reasoning,” and that is exactly what reading rhetorically involves—reasoning about whether or not a text presents a reasoned argument. A good way to begin reading rhetorically is be aware of the essential elements of an argument and identify these elements in the text you are evaluating. These elements are as follows:

- A debatable issue. By definition, for a text to be an argument, there must be at least two sides that can be asserted and supported.
- A clearly stated position, claim statement, or **thesis**. Arguments assert different kinds of claims, such as taking a position on an issue of fact, asserting a cause and effect relationship, declaring the value of some entity, or advocating a solution to a problem; but, in each case, after you read the argument, you should be able to restate or summarize the position, claim, or thesis in one or two sentences.
- An audience. To evaluate an argument, you need to know the original intended audience or place of publication, so that you can decide if the argument takes into account the audience’s attitudes, background, and other factors. Ask yourself, for example, if the writer is assuming too much or too little background knowledge on the part of the audience or if the writer is using language that assumes the reader’s agreement on the issue when that assumption is not warranted.
- Evidence from reliable sources. Quotes, statistics, and other evidence should be credited to reputable sources, even if your text is not a document that offers academic-style citations. The evidence should be sufficient to support the author’s position or thesis.
- Acknowledgment of the opposing argument. A good rhetorician does not ignore any potential weaknesses in the argument. It is better to acknowledge points in favor of the opposing argument and then, if possible, refute the opposition’s strong points than it is to allow an audience to poke holes in an argument.
- A conclusion and/or call to action. An argument can be concluded in a variety of effective ways, but it is important to note that it does, indeed, conclude. The conclusion can be a call to action on the part of the audience, but it should not be the beginning of an additional argument that is not supported by the evidence presented.

## RESPONDING TO ORAL AND VISUAL MEDIA

Increasingly, young “politically-minded viewers” are plugging into YouTube, Facebook and comedy shows like “The Daily Show,” and other alternative media instead of traditional news outlets. According to a *New York Times* article, surveys and interviews indicated that during the 2008 presidential election “younger voters tend to be not just consumers of news and current events but conduits as well—sending out e-mailed links and videos to friends and their social networks. And in turn, they rely on friends and online connections for news to come to them.” **Word of mouth** (via email) is replacing traditional media as the major news filter, at least for young viewers. In this new process, moreover, “viewers” or “writers of email” move seamlessly back and forth between email, text-messaging, television viewing, and Internet surfing, appreciating and sharing the choicest rhetorical pieces with others. “We’re talking about a generation that doesn’t just like seeing the video in addition to the story—they expect it,” said Danny Shea, 23, the associate media editor for *The Huffington Post* ([huffingtonpost.com](http://huffingtonpost.com)). “And they’ll find it elsewhere if you don’t give it to them, and then that’s the link that’s going to be passed around over e-mail and instant message.” This multi-stream, cross-platform method of communication among younger viewers/readers is a fertile forum for rhetorical analysis.

Actually, the lines between oral, written, and visual “texts” have always been somewhat blurred. Speeches delivered orally in person or on television have a visual component, as the audience sees the speaker present the text. A written text is also, in a sense, visual because the audience’s mind must process the little squiggles of ink on paper or the computer screen into words. A visual text such as an advertisement or cartoon often includes written text, and, even if it does not, the image will inspire thoughts that are often distilled into language for expression. Reasonably, many of the same techniques used to analyze written and oral texts can also be applied to visual media (cartoons, advertisements, television, etc.).

## RESPONDING TO VISUAL RHETORIC

Methods of analyzing visual rhetoric draw upon several theoretical traditions. In art criticism, viewers may look for symbolism in an image or consider what meaning the artist was trying to convey. Semiotics views im-

ages as having intertextuality, as similar images come to have similar meanings, and those meanings may create similar emotions in the viewer. Rhetoricians, as you might expect, consider the argument that an image may present to a viewer. They think about how the subject of the image is presented in relation to other elements in the visual, how the image is cropped, and what lighting and colors are present. Rhetoricians also pay particular attention to the interplay between the visual image and any text that may appear with the image and how the two together construct an argument.

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