

Rhetorical Analysis: Revision



Here are examples of and strategies for avoiding common mistakes when writing rhetorical analysis essays. While this handout offers general tips, be sure to tailor your work to your audience and specific assignment.

Summarizing Instead of Analyzing

Many writers fall into the trap of summarizing the argument rather than analyzing it. Simply listing examples of the rhetorical tool and saying “It was effective” is not analysis. Refer to the “Rhetorical Analysis: Prewriting” handout for several strategies to move from summary to deeper analysis.

Relying on the Broad Use of “Word Choice”

Word choice is the most basic and the most obvious of all rhetorical tools. Because of this, it is better to choose specific aspects of the speaker’s word choice to discuss rather than simply citing the author’s “word choice.” For instance, “Elizabeth uses words of power and monarchy to emphasize her role as Queen of England” is a more effective analysis than “Elizabeth uses word choice to emphasize her role as Queen of England.”

Using Pathos, Ethos, or Logos Incorrectly

Although rhetorical tools fall into the categories of ethos, pathos, and logos, the categories are not tools themselves. Avoid such phrases as “the author uses ethos” in favor of more concrete and specific phrases, such as “the author quotes experts in the field in order to establish ethos.” If you are going to use the terms pathos, logos, and ethos, make sure that you are referring to them as something the author is appealing to, rather than something the author is appealing with.

Spending Too Little Time on a Rhetorical Tool

Often, one rhetorical tool is used in such an interesting way that a whole paper can be devoted to its use. If the assignment allows, don’t be afraid to explore the many uses of a single rhetorical tool. Be careful, however. Sometimes it is tempting to stretch an analysis to make a tool appear to do something that the argument does not support. If the analysis seems uncertain or contrived to you, it will also likely feel like a stretch in logic for your reader.

Focusing Too Much on Circumstances

Although the circumstances of the audience and the speaker are an important part of rhetoric, the temptation is often to assume too much about the state of mind of the audience or the speaker. Rhetorical analysis is an analysis of the argument, not the audience or the speaker. For the purposes of rhetorical analysis, statements which emphasize the circumstances and not the argument itself are meaningless except where those circumstances supplement or explain the effectiveness of the argument.

Making Moral or Circumstantial Judgments

In analyzing whether an author was effective or ineffective, it is easy to assume that the argument was effective because the desired action took place. Although this is a reasonable deduction, it does little to aid the effectiveness of a rhetorical analysis. Similarly, writers may also assume that because they personally agree with the author that the argument is effective. Remember, the reader does not care if the speaker was a good person or a bad person. Rather, the emphasis should be on how effectively the author persuaded the audience through the tools used.