A rhetorical analysis is “a criticism (or close reading) that employs the principles of rhetoric to examine the interactions between a text, an author, and an audience” (Nordquist). In this context, a text can be anything, any type of visual, audial, or written text, and any text can be rhetorically analyzed.

The most important thing to keep in mind for student is to look at the author’s argument and choices within a text. They should “analyze how well the components of an argument work together to persuade or move an audience” (Lunsford 97). Students can begin a rhetorical analysis by exploring the following issues:

- What is the purpose of this argument? What does it hope to achieve?
- Who is the audience for this argument?
- What appeals or techniques does the argument use—emotional, logical, ethical?
- What type or genre of argument is it, and how does the genre affect the argument? (You’d have every right to challenge an argument in an editorial if it lacked sufficient evidence; you’d look foolish making the same complaint about a bumper sticker.)
- Who is making the argument? What ethos does it create, and exactly how does it do so? What values are attached to the ethos? How does it try to make the writer or creator seem trustworthy?
- What authorities does the argument rely on or appeal to?
- What facts are used in the argument? What logic? What evidence? How is the evidence arranged and presented?
- What claims are advanced in the argument? What issues are raised, and which ones are ignored or, perhaps, evaded?
- What are the contexts—social, political, historical, cultural—for this argument? Whose interests does it serve? Who gains or loses by it?
- What shape does the argument take? How is the argument organized or arranged? What media does the argument use?
- How does the language or style of the argument work to persuade an audience?
  (Lunsford 98)

A student’s goal then is not to look at the arguments that these texts make, but to look for how the argument is created, organized, and expressed.

For example, think about the following joke: What did the fish say when he ran into a wall? Answer: Dam.

What does this joke assume the reader knows? It assumes that you know that fish swim, and dams are walls in water. It also assumes that the audience will be aware of the double innuendo presented with the word “dam.” So by understanding the way the joke works linguistically and the knowledge needed to understand it, we’ve begun to analyze the rhetorical effectiveness of this joke.

Works Cited:


**Please visit our “English 2001 Resources” page on our website (wac.appstate.edu) for additional resources.**

**Adapted in part from the ASU Writing Center handout on Rhetorical Analysis.**