

How to Approach a Rhetorical Analysis

Most of the time, essays are about an opinion. Rhetorical analysis is different because it is an analysis of what the author is saying or trying to get you to think. This requires a shift in thinking that is often challenging for many students. Let's look at what rhetorical analysis is and an easy way to approach these assignments.

What is Rhetorical Analysis?

Rhetoric is the study of how an author or speaker uses words to influence an audience; in other words, *rhetorical analysis looks at how an individual presents information to fulfil a specific purpose*. Often, authors or speakers will want to entertain, inform, or persuade an audience, and sometimes, the author wants to push the audience toward taking a certain action.

In rhetorical analysis, you'll often make an argument about what you think the author's purpose was, analyze the decisions the author made to make their point, and explain how effective you think those decisions were.

Rhetorical Appeals: Pathos, Logos, and Ethos

There are many ways to approach this kind of assignment, but the easiest—and most commonly taught—is the three **rhetorical appeals**. The idea is to look at how the author appeals to certain things that might be attractive or convincing to an audience.

- **Pathos** appeals to *emotion or personal values*. Common techniques are anecdotes/stories, inspirational quotes, vivid language, or imagery. With pathos, the author's goal is to get the reader to *feel* something.
- **Logos** is the appeal to *logic or reason*. Common techniques include evidence, such as research, data, or statistics, or anything that is intended to get the reader to *think*, such as metaphors, analogies, and comparisons.
- **Ethos** is about demonstrating reliability and ensuring that the reader *trusts the message being delivered*. To demonstrate ethos, authors often use a confident tone, include testimonials or references from sources the audience would already trust, or demonstrate their qualifications and expertise to get the reader to *trust* the author and their claims.

There are three rhetorical appeals, and they fit very nicely into the three body paragraphs of a five-paragraph essay.

5 Steps for Writing Rhetorical Analysis

As with any other type of essay writing, an organized approach will help you write this kind of essay more easily.

1. As you're reading, highlight places where the author indicates the main purpose of the piece. Normally, an author will state the **purpose** at the end of the first paragraph and towards the beginning of the conclusion. It might also be helpful to ask yourself if the author is trying to provide information, persuade you to do something, or entertain you. Once you find the main purpose, highlight the main arguments that the author makes so you can refer back to them easily.

2. Draft a **thesis statement** to outline the argument you're going to make. This is the most important step, but it doesn't have to be the most difficult. Your thesis statement should include the author's name, the title of the work, the author's purpose, and the main techniques or appeals the author uses. One easy formula is this one: "In [Title of Work], [Author's last name]'s purpose is to _____ as shown through the use of _____, _____, and _____. You can put the purpose from step one in the first blank and each of the three appeals in the last three blanks.
3. Look for proof from the original piece for each of the three appeals we talked about above. For **pathos**, you'll want to look for places where the author wants you to *feel* something; for **logos**, find places where the author wants you to *think about something*; and for **ethos**, identify moments where the author is proving that they are *trustworthy*. It might be helpful to write these down in an outline.
4. Once you have your thesis statement and main proof, then you can write the essay. It is often easiest to start with the body of the paper. For each paragraph, write a topic sentence, introduce the evidence that you found in step three, and explain how that evidence is an example of the appeal. Then, explain why that piece of evidence does or does not get the reader to feel or react the way that the author wants.
5. Lastly, write the introduction and conclusion. For the introduction, start with an interesting hook, then provide the reader with some background information on the piece that you're analyzing. End the introduction with the thesis statement you created in step two. For the conclusion, start by rephrasing your thesis statement, then summarize the main points made in the body, and end by explaining why all of this matters—in other words, why should someone read your paper?

Once you've finished these steps, you should have a rough draft of your essay completed. You'll find that if you use the three rhetorical appeals and the steps above, writing a rhetorical analysis essay doesn't have to be difficult!