

The Columnist Rhetorical Précis/Response Project

The Assignment: As a means of keeping abreast of public discourse issues, you are required to follow a national columnist in a newspaper or online. You must collect five current, preferably consecutive columns by your author. On my website, you will find links to columnists and journalistic websites where you will find the name of a specific columnist and a link to her/his work. Archives can be searched on some of the columnists' sites, but many publications require payment for articles older than one or two weeks. Therefore, check your columnist's web site weekly. Due dates TBA. The assignment has three parts:

I. Each article must be annotated for the following:

- Speaker's tone and possible tone shifts
- Rhetorical strategies
- Organization and arrangement
- Aristotelian appeals

Mark places in the text that evoke a reaction from you, be it laughter, anger, or confusion.

Some questions to ask yourself as you read:

- How does s/he open the column?
- How does s/he close the column?
- How soon does s/he announce the thesis?
- How does s/he organize? What are the parts or sections of the column?
- How much is based on observation? Personal experience? Interviews? Fact?
- What sort of diction characterizes the columnist?
- What sort of syntax characterizes the columnist?
- What audience does s/he assume? How do you know?
- What unstated assumptions (warrants – enthymemes) does the columnist make?
- What are the potential ramifications of the issues addressed in the column?

II. After annotating, write a one-page précis/response (see other side).

Your first annotated article and one-page précis/response are due next week; if you are struggling I can give you some guidance. **You must have your columnist approved by me.**

III. The final task is to compose an argumentative essay *of your own* while synthesizing material from the columns. **The due date for this final task is TBA.** Based on the columns, consider:

- the issues the columnist has addressed in his/her columns
- a tangential issue you might expect your columnist to address;
- how the columnist might address your issue;
- your expectations of the columnist's position on the issue;
- how you would respond effectively to the columnist's position on the issue.

Do not simply address one argument raised in the columns, but create your own argument based on your perception of the columnist's ideological positions as you have perceived them.

OVER PLEASE

The Columnist Project: Writing a Rhetorical Précis/Response

Rationale: In order to quickly and effectively describe the argument an author is making in a text, you will be utilizing a method of description called the rhetorical précis. This form is a highly structured four-sentence paragraph that records the essential rhetorical elements in any spoken or written discourse. The précis includes the name of the columnist, the context or situation in which the text is delivered, the major assertion, the mode of development for or support of the main idea, the stated and/or apparent purpose of the text, and the relationship between the columnist and the audience.

Directions: When writing your one-page rhetorical précis/response, *objectively* summarize the article accurately in your own words by composing a four-sentence rhetorical précis. **Below the précis, compose a single-paragraph response**, noting any questions, objections or enlightenment and the potential ramifications generated by the column.

Note: Before you begin writing your rhetorical précis, read the column a number of times to make sure you completely understand the author's rhetorical situation.

Example Rhetorical Précis

- The **first sentence** identifies the essay's author and title, provides the article's date in parentheses, uses some form of the verb "says" (claims, asserts, suggests, argues) followed by "that," and the essay's thesis (paraphrased or quoted).
Example: In his "In Defense of Prejudice" (1995), Jonathan Rauch **argues** that prejudice in society should not be eliminated.
- The **second sentence** describes the author's support for the thesis, usually in chronological order.
Example: Rauch supports his position by providing historical and anecdotal evidence, culled from segments of society and his own experience that **illustrates** the futility and harm associated with attempts to eliminate prejudice and/or noxious speech.
- The **third sentence** analyzes the author's purpose using an "in order to" statement.
Example: Rauch hopes to shift the paradigm away from absolutism, the idea of punitive action against racism and prejudice, **in order to** move society toward rejection, the idea of societal pressure when grappling with racist and prejudicial attitudes and speech.
- The **fourth sentence** describes the essay's intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.
Example: The author uses an erudite, yet defensive tone indicating that he primarily addresses an intellectually liberal audience, an audience most likely to support speech codes.

The Response

Your **subjective** single-paragraph response expresses your reaction to the column. This can include style, substance, and ramifications. Is the columnist successful in presenting the argument? Is s/he making assumptions? Why do you agree or disagree with the columnist's position? Depending on the nature of the column, speculate on what could happen if the columnist's argument is/is not embraced by society or the specific group addressed in the column, or judge the value of the column – is the topic important or frivolous? Why?