The Rhetorical Web:
A Toolkit for Strong Literary Analysis

Rhetorical Terms

Exigence: The real-life, dramatic situation that signals individuals that something controversial has occurred and that they should try to make some sense of it. *Exigence* is a problem to be solved, a situation that requires some modifying response from an audience. *Exigence* invites analysis and discussion, and sometimes also a written response to encourage both individual and public awareness, as well as discourse about problematic situations.

Purpose: A writer's reason for trying to convey a particular idea (Thesis) about a particular subject to a particular audience of readers. Though it may emerge gradually during the writing process, in the end purpose should govern every element of a piece of writing.

In trying to define the purpose of an essay you read, ask yourself "Why did the writer write this?" or "What was this writer trying to achieve?" Even though you cannot know the writer's intentions with absolute certainty, an effective essay will make some purpose clear.

Audience:
The audience or reader is the second element in the rhetorical situation. For argument to work, a potential audience must care enough to listen, read, and pay attention, to change its perceptions as a result of the argument, and hopefully, even have the ability to mediate change or act in a new way.

Most authors have a targeted or intended audience in mind, and, as you read a text, you may discover that your analysis and response vary considerably from the targeted audience's probable response, particularly if different cultures or periods of time are involved.

When you read, compare your perceptions of the argument with the perceptions you imagine the targeted or intended reading audience might have had.

Understanding the Appeals to Audience
A **text** becomes rhetorical only when an audience reads or hears it and responds to it. A key to developing skill with rhetoric, therefore, is understanding *how* a text appeals to an audience.

Aristotle's ideas are influential in considering audience. In ancient Athens, he developed a system that explained to his students how to locate the "available means of persuasion" as they developed their **Personae** (the plural of *persona*), understood the needs and the knowledge and experience of their hearers, and developed their topics. Rhetoric, he argued could help students accomplish their aims as they spoke, primarily to persuade hearers to a course of action based on a common search for truth.

The Three Appeals:
This persuasion happens, Aristotle taught, because a **rhetor** makes three kinds of closely related appeals to her or his audience through a spoken or written text.

> ➤ A rhetor appeals to *logos* by offering a clear, reasonable central idea (or set of ideas) and developing it with appropriate reasoning, examples or details.

> ➤ A rhetor appeals to *ethos* by offering evidence that she or he is credible—that she or he knows important and relevant information about the topic at hand and that she or he is a good, believable person who has the readers' best interests in mind.

> ➤ A rhetor appeals to *pathos* by drawing on the emotions and interests of the audience so that they will be sympathetically inclined to accept and buy into her or his central ideas and arguments.

The rhetor does not necessarily make these appeals in separate sections of a text. A single sentence can appeal to *logos*, the audience's interest in a clear, cogent idea; ethos, the audience's belief in the credibility and good character

of the writer; and *pathos* the audience's emotions or interests in regard to the topic at hand. And a rhetor seldom uses one of the appeals to the exclusion of all the others.

Organization: The pattern or order that the writer imposes on his or her material. Some often-used patterns of organization include time order, space order, and order of importance. **Structure:** The internal organization of writing. **Form:** The external pattern or shape of writing, describable without reference to its content.

Syntax: Refers to the way in which words are arranged to form phrases, clauses, and sentences, as well as to the grammatical relationship among the words themselves.

Imagery: The use of language to evoke a picture or a concrete sensation of a person, a thing, a place, or an experience. Although most images appeal to the sense of sight, they also sometimes appeal to the sense of taste, smell, hearing, and touch as well.

Figurative Language: Expressions that depart from the literal meanings of words for the sake of emphasis or vividness. To say, "She's a jewel" does not mean that the subject of praise is literally a kind of shining stone; the statement make sense because its connotations come to mind: rare, priceless, worth cherishing. Some figures of speech involve comparisons of two objects apparently unlike:

➤ A **simile** (from the Latin "likeness") states the comparison directly, usually connecting the two things using *like, as,* or *than.*

➤ A **metaphor** (from the Greek "transfer") declares one thing to *be* another.

➤ **Personification** is a simile or metaphor that assigns human traits to inanimate objects or abstractions.

➤ **Hyperbole** (from the Greek "throwing beyond" is a conscious exaggeration.

➤ The opposite of hyperbole, **understatement**, creates an ironic or humorous effect.

➤ A **paradox** (from the Greek, "conflicting with expectation) is a seemingly self-contradictory statement that, on reflection, makes sense

Diction: The choice of words. Every written or spoken statement contains diction of some kind. To describe aspects of diction, the following terms may be useful:

➤ *Standard English:* the common American language, words and grammatical forms that are used and expected in school, business, and other sites.

➤ *Nonstandard English:* words and grammatical forms such as *theirselves* and *ain't* that are used mainly by people who speak a dialect other than Standard English.

➤ *Dialect:* a variety of English based on differences in geography, education, or social background. Dialect is usually spoken, but may be written.

➤ *Slang:* certain words in highly informal speech or writing, or in the speech of a particular group.

➤ *Colloquial expressions:* words and phrase s occurring primarily in speech and in informal writing that seeks a relaxed conversations ton. Such choice of writing may be acceptable in talking to a roommate, in corresponding with a friend, or in writing a humorous essay for general readers. However, it would be out of place in formal writing. Contractions (let's, don't, we'll) and abbreviated words (photo, sales rep, ad) are the shorthand of spoken language. Good writers use such expressions with an awareness that they produce an effect of casualness.

➤ *Regional terms:* words hear in a certain locality, such as *spritzing* for "raining" in Pennsylvania Dutch county.

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