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RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF ARGUMENTS

In neo-rhetoric, the notion of argument in its widest sense means an expression of a personal viewpoint in a public controversy over an issue publicized in a variety of written formats (articles, editorials, reviews, posts, commentaries) or delivered orally (speeches, interviews, debates). Rhetorical analysis of an argument presupposes a careful study of its composition and choice of strategies of persuasion making it an effective or ineffective means of reaching the goal of communication. Rhetorical analysis identifies the studied text as to its genre, summarizes its main ideas, presents some key points of the rhetorical strategies of the text to convince its audience and criticizes these strategies.

In conducting a rhetorical analysis, students are encouraged to analyze the writer's motivation, purpose and rhetorical choices to persuade the target audience, using their inventory of rhetorical reading strategies.

The questions below may be helpful in exploring the rhetorical argument deeper. While the analysis of each certain case may not always include responses to all of these questions, answering them can give students a thorough understanding of reasoning and structures as well as help to generate ideas for their own arguments, essays and speeches. The questions have been grouped as to the focal aspects of rhetorical analysis that are also major notions and objects of the course.

I. Rhetorical Context: Kairos and Motivating Occasion

What encouraged or provoked the argument? To what political, legal, economic, social, cultural, etc. controversy does this argument contribute? Is the writer responding to a pending legislation act, a speech by a political leader, a newspaper editorial, or a contentious local event? To what political, legal, economic, social, cultural, etc. trends does the author refer or adhere?

II. Rhetorical Context: Purpose and Target Audience

What is the writer's purpose? Is the writer trying to change the readers' outlook by offering a new vision of the phenomenon under discussion, encouraging them to take action, trying to gather voices, or inspiring further research? Who is the target audience? Does the potential audience share the writer's political, religious, ethical, etc. views? What values, assumptions and beliefs should readers hold to find this argument convincing? How well is the argument's structure and strategies of persuasion suited for the intended audience and purpose?

III. Rhetorical Context: Writer's Personality and Angle of View

Who is the writer? What is their profession, credentials, experience and knowledge? Is the writer a researcher, politician, citizen activist, professional journalist or blogger? Does the writer stick to conservative or liberal, religious or secular views? How does the writer's origin, class, political views, education, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation and personal history influence their position in the debate? To what extent does the writer's angle of view prevail over

the text? Is the writer upholding their position or pursuing a more exploratory mode? What is emphasized in this argument? What aspects of the issue, opinions and evidence are overlooked by the writer?

IV. Rhetorical Context: Genre

What is the original genre of the argument (personal correspondence, letter to the editor, editorial in a newspaper, blog or chat message, article in scientific journals, legal brief, advocacy website, speech, visual argument)? What is the original medium of the publication? How does the genre and the source of the argument affect its content, structure, and style? How popular or academic, informal or formal is this genre? Does the genre allow for a detailed or a rough coverage of the problem?

V. Logos of the Argument

What is the claim of the argument? Is it stated directly or indirectly? Where in the text is the place of the claim? How is this argument supported and developed? Is it one-sided, Toulmin or Rogerian? Is the structure chosen effective for the audience it addresses? What are the main reasons in support of the claim? Are the reasons audience-based? How effectively does the author use factual evidence? Is the argumentation clear and well-grounded, or should readers elicit and analyze implications of the argument? Does the argument depend on assumptions that the public may not share? How well does the writer recognize and respond to alternative views? What evidence does the writer use? Does this evidence meet the STAR criteria (sufficiency, typicality, accuracy, and relevance of content)?

VI. Ethos of the Argument

What ethos does the argument rest on? How does the writer try to appear reliable and trustworthy to the target audience? How knowledgeable is the writer in the topic chosen? Does the writer recognize opposing or alternative views? Does he respond to them impartially? If you are impressed or fascinated by this writer, what has earned your interest? If you are doubtful or skeptical, what made you question the value of the argument? How important is the writer's character (experience, expertise, qualifications, etc.) in this debate?

VII. Pathos of the Argument

How does the writer use specific language, word choice, narrative, example, and analogies to appeal to the readers' emotions, values, and imagination? How effectively does the writer imagine their potential audience? What examples, connotative language, or analogy caught your eye in this argument? Is this argument based on an appeal to feelings, or is it more matter-of-fact and logical?

VIII. Style of writing

How does the length and complexity of the sentences affect the argumentation? To what extent does the writer's tone (attitude towards the subject matter) suit the argument? How clear is this argument? Is it formal, scientific, journalistic, informal, or casual? Is the tone serious, derisive, humorous, edifying, confessional, insistent, etc.? What makes you think so?

IX. Overall Strength of the Argument

What features of the argument under analysis are most beneficial in making it persuasive for the target audience and for yourself? If you are different from the target audience, what is the difference? What makes it unconvincing for the target

audience and for yourself? How would diverse audiences react to this argument? What does this argument mean to contribute to the controversy of which it is a part? How effective is its kairos? What features contribute to the rhetorical complexity of this argument? What is particularly memorable, disturbing, or problematic about this controversy (for example, are the calls for pathos legitimate and appropriate)? Does the quality and quantity of evidence help to build a convincing case or fall short of expectations? Are there any logical gaps, fallacies, contradictions? Do any questions remain unanswered?

A more specific analysis depending on the presumable functional type of the argument under study may involve identification and consideration of the following rhetorical features:

The Definition Argument

1. What occasion motivated the argument (a resent event, a crisis, a law, an alternative view or some other current problem)?

2. Does the writer demonstrate that a problem exists? What strategies does the writer use to demonstrate the problem?

3. Identify the following parts of the argument: a) criteria part of the definition, b) application of each criterion to the phenomenon under study, c) summary of opposing views, and d) refutation of the opposing views.

4. How many criteria does the writer use to define the phenomenon under study? Is the definition formal or operational?

5. To what extent do you agree with the given definition? Point out possible positive or negative consequences of accepting this definition.

6. How does the writer's angle of vision influences the selection and framing of evidence?

7. How does the author appeal to logos? What facts, data, and other evidence does this author use and what are the sources of these data? How does the given evidence expand your understanding of the argument?

8. How would you characterize the author's ethos? Does he/she seem fair to stakeholders in this controversy? What are author's values and warrant(s)?

9. How does the writer use appeals to pathos? How persuasive do you find these appeals?

10. Which of the three appeals seem to you most effective in the given rhetorical context?

11. What audience is the writer targeting? How large is it? What quick background does you sketch to help them understand his issue? What change does he/she want to bring about in their view?

12. How does the author anticipate objections? Do you find the rebuttal persuasive? Which of the refutations is weakest?

13. How would *you* try to refute each of the writer's arguments?

14. What is the contributor's goal in writing the argument (it could range from strong advocacy to exploratory questioning)? What is the writer's dimension of vision, i.e. the filter, lens, or selective seeing through which the writer is approaching the issue? What is left out from this argument? What does this author not see?

15. If you find the argument persuasive, which parts were particularly influential or effective? If you are not persuaded, which parts of the argument do you find weak or ineffective?

The Causal Argument

1. Briefly summarize the problem that the writer dwells on and its presumable reasons. What motivating occasion prompted the writing? How crucial is the issue under discussion? What is at stake?

2. Is it a causal chain argument? An argument with a focus on cause? An argument with a focus on effect?

3. What does the writer hold as immediate and remote causes for the tendency under analysis? And as precipitating and contributing causes?

4. Does the argument depend on a causation or correlation between the phenomena indicated? Are the links in a causal chain carefully explained, or can a skeptic point out weaknesses in any of the links? Could a skeptic claim that the data aren't relevant or that the argument depends on inferences from data?

5. Does the writer show convincingly that the tendency under analysis is alarming, inspiring, etc.? How would you characterize the writer's position in the controversy? What are the criteria the writer uses to argue that consequences would be negative/positive? What are author's values and warrant(s)?

6. How many reasons for the phenomenon under discussion does the writer point out?

7. How many possible consequences has the writer considered? Have the consequences been presented impressively? Does the writer offer evidence that the predicted consequences will in fact come?

8. Does the writer mention any constraints (negative causes that limit choices and possibilities)?

9. How does the author appeal to *logos*? What does he/she use for evidence? What appeals to *pathos* does the author make in this argument? How would you characterize the author's *ethos*? Is the *kairos* of this argument effective and timely?

10. Does the writer address any possible objections? How well are the opposing views refuted?

11. Suppose you wanted to join this conversation by offering a counterview. What would you emphasize as the reasons for your position on the issue? How would you make your case?

12. What audience is the writer targeting? How much must they care about the issue? What stance on the issue does he/she imagine them holding? What change does he/she want to bring about in their view? Who might be threatened or made uncomfortable by the author's views?

13. What is the proposed solution? Is there a justification of the solution?

14. What is the author's purpose in writing the argument? Do you regard the argument as a valuable contribution to the public controversy over the topic? Why or why not?

15. Is there anything else in the argument that you may note as striking, effective, or attention-grabbing?

The Resemblance Argument

1. Briefly sum up the problem that the writer addresses, the solution proposed and the justifying reasons.

2. What motivating occasion prompted the writing?

3. Is the argument based on an analogy or a precedent?

4. What is the analogy this argument rests on? Is this piece based on an undeveloped or an extended analogy?

5. Do you find the analogy effective? Does it have a suitable depth and comprehensiveness for its purpose? Explain why you think so.

6. What dis-analogies might a skeptic point out between the phenomena compared?

7. What is the main point the writer wishes to drive home by arguing from precedent? Are you familiar with the precedent or do you have to be explained or do research about it?

8. What is the author's purpose in writing the argument? How does the writer's angle of vision operates in the choice and presentation of evidence? What are the writer's underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs? What is the writer's bias?

9. How persuasive do you find the writer's stance? Analyze the rhetorical appeals. Which strategy of persuasion is the leading one?

10. What appeals to pathos does the author make in this argument? Go back to the text and support your opinion with examples.

11. What is the argument's intended audience? How effective is the argument for its intended audience? Would it be effective for readers outside the intended audience? Why or why not? Who might be threatened or made uncomfortable by the author's views?

12. What is left out from this argument? Is there anything the author does not see?

13. Does the writer anticipate alternative views? Why, or why not?

14. How effective do you find the argument? Why? What do you see as the major strengths of the argument? How about weaknesses?

15. What is thought provoking about this argument? How does it cause you to view the issue differently?

The Evaluation Argument

1. What is the genre of the argument? How do the genre conventions shape the length and complexity of the argument?

2. What is the reputation and bias of the source (magazine, newspaper, website) this piece appeared in? Does information about the source help to understand the writer's perspective or choice of arguments?

3. Who is this author? What are his/her credentials, qualifications and affiliations? Is it essential? What may be the contributor's purpose in writing the argument?

4. What reasoning from principles and consequences does the writer offer to support their view? Is it an ethical or a categorical argument? Or both? What makes you think so?

5. Point out the criteria part and the match part of the argument. What criteria are used to evaluate the case under analysis? Do you accept these criteria? What other criteria of evaluation might an arguer offer?

6. How effectively does the case match each of the established criteria?

7. How does this argument state the writer's values? What are they? Identify the warrant of the claim.

8. How persuasive do you find the writer's evaluations? How would you analyze this argument from the perspectives of *logos, ethos, pathos,* and *kairos?* Which is the leading one?

9. Does the author appeal to *logos*? What is the main claim and what are the reasons? What facts, data, and other evidence does this author use and what are the sources of these data?

10. What appeals to *pathos* does the author make in this argument? How well are these suited to the potential reader?

11. How would you characterize the author's *ethos*? Does he/she seem knowledgeable and credible?

12. Who is the audience that the writer addresses in this argument? To what extent does the writer develop audience-based reasons for the intended audience? Whose views do you think the writer wants to change?

13. To what extent did the writer respond persuasively to objections? Which of the refutations is weakest? What are the chief objections that might be made to this proposal? What is this writer's bias?

14. Do you find the argument effective? Why? How does it expand your understanding of the issue? How has this piece influenced or complicated your own thinking?

15. Is there anything to strike you as particularly problematic, memorable, or disturbing in this argument?

The Proposal Argument

1. Briefly summarize the problem that the writer addresses, the solution(s) he/she proposes and the justifying reasons. How does the writer justify the proposal, that is, what reasons does he/she provide to persuade the authorities responsible to act on the suggested proposal?

2. Does the author use arguments from definition? from consequence? from resemblance?

3. What are the criteria the contributor uses to argue that the suggested improvements would be good?

4. What strategies does the writer use to try to persuade you that the solution will work? How would you analyze this argument from the perspective of kairos? Is the information current, or at least still relevant, for the writer's purpose?

5. How does the author appeal to logos? What facts, data, and other evidence does this author use for support? What are the sources of these data? How does the evidence expand your understanding of the argument?

6. Who is the audience that the writer addresses in this argument? How large is it? How persuasive do you find the writer's proposal?

7. How effective is the writers' use of audience-based reasons?

8. How does the writer give presence to the problem?

9. How does the writer establish a positive *ethos* in this argument and a meaningful picture of the problem? What are the writer's underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs?

10. How would you evaluate the overall appeal to logos, ethos and pathos? What is the leading driver of persuasion?

11. Does the author anticipate alternative views? If so, what alternative views does he/she address?

12. Why should anyone have objections to the given point of view? Are there any objections that the writer failed to summarize?

13. What are the chief objections that you might make to this proposal?

14. Has the writer calculated all of the possible consequences, particularly unintended ones? Does the writer offer evidence that the predicted consequences will in fact come? Does the writer show convincingly that the consequences are good or evil?

15. What do you find especially persuasive about this argument? What do you see as the major strengths of the argument? How about weaknesses?

Rhetorical analysis of the arguments is extremely beneficial in developing student's skills of critical reading of complex texts. Analyzing argumentative discourse, they learn to apply rhetorical knowledge effectively in their own argumentation, generalizing and responding to opposing views and determining most persuasive strategies of support and composition. Furthermore, thinking rhetorically about texts is crucial to writing the Literature Review section of research assignments across a range of disciplines.

A common assignment in critical thinking and argumentation courses, rhetorical analysis prepares the student as a citizen to distinguish between sound ethical arguments and manipulative and ones within a variety of political, social and cultural contexts outside classroom.