

Writing rhetorical analysis essays

Rhetorical analysis essays are notoriously hard to write because, quite frankly, there are countless ways to screw them up. Crafting an engaging rhetorical analysis essay requires deep thought and careful planning. Let's walk through the steps of what—and what *not*—to do.

First, think harder.

The main problem students encounter with rhetorical analysis is not thinking hard enough. For instance, when students learn terms like *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* and discover they must write a rhetorical analysis essay, some think, “Hey, three terms. Three body paragraphs. I've got this!” Then, they write a thesis that goes something like this:

“[\[Insert rhetorical piece title here\]](#) uses *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* to persuade its audience.”

Unfortunately, it's not this easy. The above thesis is way too broad and circular. It's claiming that the piece appeals rhetorically by using rhetorical appeals. As the kids say, *no duh*. Plus, it's unlikely that the piece uses all three appeals in an equally interesting way. The thesis doesn't reveal *what* the piece of rhetoric is persuading its audience to think or do. It's also so generic that it could apply to almost any work, and that's not a sign of a good thesis. Indeed, a rhetorical analysis of Michelle Obama's 2016 Democratic National Convention speech should not have the same thesis as an analysis of a Doritos commercial. Also, keep in mind that a rhetorical analysis is not a glorified worksheet in which the writer inventories examples of *ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*, or other rhetorical elements. Rather, it's an argument with a specific thesis claim.

Next, think specifically about getting specific.

Specificity is the key to a successful rhetorical analysis. We will need to conjure all our powers of description and interpretation to reveal the inner workings of the piece.

Let's get specific about the essay's introduction.

Usually, when we write introductions, we consider starting with a broad statement and getting more narrow and specific, like a funnel, as we move toward our thesis. That strategy can work, but not if we follow a thought process like this:

Okay, this analysis is about a Doritos commercial, but I need to start broader. How about this: Rhetoric is everywhere. It's even in advertisements. It's in this Doritos commercial. This Doritos commercial uses rhetoric to persuade.

Our readers' interest in this Doritos commercial paper is hanging on for dear life. We shouldn't bludgeon them with inane statements about rhetoric and where it exists. Instead, we should think about the specific **ideologies, commonplaces, themes, or motifs** that drive the piece. How does it respond to the **rhetorical situation**? Chances are that these elements were what attracted us to this piece in the first place, so let's talk about these things in the introduction. Remember, ideas are the stuff of rhetoric. Let's watch that Doritos commercial again and rethink our introduction.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEJbT8freLM>

So, this Doritos commercial aired during the Superbowl, which is part of the rhetorical situation. Families would be watching, and this ad really works with commonplaces about family dynamics: the taunting older brother and the left-behind baby brother; the babysitting grandma who has a soft spot for the little one and a good old-fashioned disdain for the braggart. Oh, and it's also about cheering for the underdog—another American commonplace—which can also tie into the Superbowl. The wheelchair-bound granny and the baby in the bouncer are not mobile, yet they use teamwork, ingenuity, and boldness (also prized American traits) to claim those Doritos and, even better, give that bratty older brother his comeuppance.

Our thinking is better here. We're drawing out specific ideas that make this specific piece of rhetoric work. We're examining the rhetorical situation and identifying the commonplaces in play, which connects this piece of rhetoric to our shared cultural landscape and tells us a little about ourselves. Suddenly, this silly Doritos commercial is vastly more interesting. Our formal drafts of our introduction and thesis for this Doritos paper will be significantly different from a rhetorical analysis of Michelle Obama's 2016 DNC speech. Phew!

Speaking of Michelle Obama's speech, for fun, let's also consider how we would develop an introduction for its rhetorical analysis. First, let's think about the rhetorical situation and do a little research, if necessary. Here's what we come up with:

Hillary Clinton, the DNC nominee, was actually slightly behind in the polls at the time of this speech. Clinton also had high unfavorables in polls, and voters had trouble connecting with her. They found her untrustworthy. There was also a sizeable Bernie Sanders delegation at the convention, some of whom were openly protesting Hillary Clinton's nomination and chanting in the hall. Hillary Clinton had also tied her fate to the policies of Barack Obama, who is more popular than she, but this is a year where the status quo is an anathema. Michelle Obama once had a strained relationship with Hillary and Bill Clinton, generated by the hotly contested 2008 primary between her husband and Mrs. Clinton. How can Michelle Obama, who is quite popular among the people in the hall and potential voters watching at home, use her credibility—and her ethos as the First Lady—to humanize Hillary and make a case for her as president (and maybe a case against Donald Trump)?

We may not use all of this material about the rhetorical situation, but we have a good start. Now let's study the piece for commonplaces, motifs, and rhetorical strategies and devices:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZNWYqDU948>

Okay, so Michelle Obama is really highlighting her connection with and trust of Hillary Clinton as a mother, specifically, their shared experience of raising teenaged daughters in the White House. She even refers to her as her "friend." Obama casts herself and her husband as "parents in chief," suggesting that serving as an example for the nation's children and protecting their futures is the president's number one task. She is using storytelling as a device and drawing on her reputation as a good parent. She is also building a narrative of progress and American greatness that refutes Trump's vision of America. The speech depends heavily on ethos and pathos.

We have a lot to work with here and, in our introduction and thesis, we want to include those elements of the rhetorical situation that relate to our thesis about how *specifically* Michelle Obama persuades her audience to trust Hillary Clinton and disavow Donald Trump.

Let's also get specific with our descriptive writing.

Just as we need a specific way into the relevance and meaning of our piece through compelling introductory writing, we also need to make sure we are describing our rhetorical artifact faithfully and vividly. A strong rhetorical analysis marries specific description and insightful interpretation. Let's work on the description part of the marriage first, starting with these three images:



All of these women are beautiful, and they are all shilling expensive handbags. However, if we describe those women as “merely” beautiful, we will short-circuit the analysis. So much more is possible for *how* we might describe their beauty and what their beauty *means*. Let’s go ahead and try to attach more specific descriptors to their kind of beauty, their demeanor, and the scenes behind them. We should be able to say a lot more about the ideologies at work when we conjure vivid descriptors. Indeed, doing so moves us more readily into interpretation.

The same short-circuiting can happen if we describe a speech as “powerful,” an image as “eye-catching,” or an ad as “effective.” Powerful *how*? Eye-catching *why*? Effective in doing *what*? We don’t want to merely label an artifact with an evaluative phrase that could apply to any number of things and doesn’t require more specific explanation.

Let’s practice again with “Victory Garden” posters from WWII on the next page:



These representations of “victory gardening”—and the ideologies they promote—are seriously different. Whether we are writing our analysis on several of these posters or just one, it’s always useful to compare artifacts to get a sense of the **rhetorical choices** that go into each piece: what’s there, what’s not there, what else

does this piece remind us of? Indeed, being able to recognize the rhetorical choices inherent in a piece, to describe them well, and to explain how they matter and what they mean is the crux of our work in rhetorical analysis.

Let's get specific with our interpretations (and our sentences).

Now let's focus on the other partner in our description-interpretation relationship. Our interpretation of what the rhetorical elements *do* or *mean* is the whole point of the rhetorical analysis. Describing what a piece says, or looks like, or sounds like is merely summary if we don't advance claims about it. One way we can make sure of that is by paying close attention to whether or not the sentences we write are analytical. An **analytical sentence** marries a description of a rhetorical choice with an interpretation of that choice, and the verb of the sentence is like a wedding officiant, the entity that makes that relationship, well, official.

Less romantic people might also imagine an analytical sentence as an equation:

[Description of rhetorical choice] + [interpretation of that choice]=analytical claim.

You can think of the analytical verb as a plus sign, a wedding officiant, or anything else, as long as you recognize its critical importance in animating your analysis. But what is an analytical verb, and what does it do? You already have a pretty good idea. It usually answers the question *does what?* It's also the kind of verb you probably used in your literary analysis papers in high school. Let's look at a sample analytical sentence on a paper about setting for the show *Fargo*:

"Fargo's barren tundra reflects the emptiness of American morality."

The above sentence answers the *does what* question by suggesting that the setting *means* something and can be connected with larger issues and themes. The choice of setting, a choice we identified as a "barren tundra," *does what?* It *reflects*. The analytical verb clarifies the relationship between the choice and our interpretation of the choice. We know when we write a solid analytical sentence because we feel compelled to prove our interpretation with further examples in the sentences to come.

Many of us might find it helpful to keep this list of analytical verbs handy when composing. Scanning the list of verbs might reveal the connection between the rhetorical choice and what it means. While this list on the following page isn't exhaustive, it certainly represents a good start.

Analysis Verbs

Abdicates	Controls	Enhances	Interprets	Refers
Accentuates	Construes	Enlightens	Investigates	Reflects
Acclimates	Conveys	Enriches	Invigorates	Refutes
Accomplishes	Convinces	Entails	Invokes	Reinforces
Acknowledges	Copies	Entitles	Involves	Reinstates
Acts	Correlates	Epitomizes	Isolates	Reiterates
Addresses	Corresponds	Equates	Joins	Reiterates
Adds	Creates	Eradicates	Lacks	Relates
Adheres	Credits	Establishes	Legitimizes	Relies
Affects	Criticizes	Evolves	Magnifies	Reminds
Alleviates	Debunks	Evokes	Makes	Reminisces
Allows	Decides	Exacerbates	Manifests	Renounces
Alludes	Defies	Examines	Mends	Requires
Amplifies	Defines	Exaggerates	Mentions	Represents
Analyzes	Delineates	Excavates	Meshes	Resembles
Antagonizes	Delivers	Exemplifies	Mimics	Reveals
Anticipates	Deludes	Exhibits	Mirrors	Reviews
Applies	Demands	Exonerates	Models	Ridicules
Argues	Demolishes	Expands	Negates	Ruins
Arouses	Demonstrates	Explains	Neglects	Scrutinizes
Articulates	Denotes	Exploits	Observes	Seems
Assimulates	Depends	Explores	Obscures	Segues
Associates	Depicts	Exposes	Opens	Sells
Asserts	Depletes	Expresses	Outlines	Sensationalizes
Assists	Describes	Expunges	Overlooks	Separates
Associates	Designates	Extends	Paints	Shadows
Assumes	Details	Facilitates	Parallels	Shapes
Augments	Detains	Fixates	Paralyzes	Sheds
Authenticates	Determines	Focuses	Penetrates	Sheds light upon
Becomes	Dictates	Forces	Performs	Showcases
Believes	Differentiates	Forecasts	Personifies	Shows
Betrays	Dilutes	Foreshadows	Points out	Signifies
Braggs	Diminishes	Forges	Ponders	Simplifies
Brings forth	Disabuses	Formulates	Polarizes	Simulates
Builds	Discerns	Fulfills	Portrays	Specifies
Characterizes	Discredits	Generates	Possesses	Spins
Claims	Disillusions	Glorifies	Precedes	Spotlights
Clarifies	Disables	Gratifies	Precludes	Spurs
Clutters	Discovers	Hides	Predisposes	Standardizes
Colors	Discusses	Highlights	Prefaces	States
Combines	Disenfranchises	Hinges	Presents	Stems (from)
Commences	Dismantles	Identifies	Probes	Stimulates
Communicates	Dismisses	Illegitimizes	Produces	Stops
Compares	Dispels	Illuminates	Prohibits	Strengthens
Compels	Displays	Illustrates	Projects	Studies
Compiles	Disproves	Impels	Promotes	Suggests
Compliments	Dissents	Implies	Propels	Summarizes
Conceals	Distinguishes	Improves	Proposes	Supplements
Concludes	Draws	Includes	Protests	Supports
Concocts	Elaborates	Incorporates	Proves	Surpasses
Concurs	Flucidates	Indicates	Provides	Symbolizes
Confirms	Embellishes	Infers	Provokes	Synthesizes
Connects	Embodies	Inflicts	Punctuates	Tells
Constitutes	Emboldens	Informs	Pursues	Transforms
Constructs	Emphasizes	Initiates	Questions	Translates
Consumes	Empties	Insinuates	Qualifies	Transcribes
Contradicts	Emulates	Insists	Ratifies	Uncovers
Contemplates	Enables	Intends	Rationalizes	Underlies
Contests	Endorses	Instigates	Recalls	Underlines
Contrasts	Enflames	Integrates	Recognizes	Undermines
				Unearths
				Unveils
				Uses
				Utilizes
				Verifies
				Villifies
				Weakens

Let's get specific about organization.

The word “analysis” comes from the Ancient Greek language and roughly means “a breaking up,” “an unraveling,” or “a loosening.” Structuring (or “breaking up”) an analysis is certainly a challenge.

We can start by thinking about where analytical sentences should make an appearance in our essays. The thesis should definitely be analytical, and so should the topic sentences, which are usually the first sentences in each paragraph. The topic sentences should also relate back to the central claim of the thesis. We should also have a fair number of analytical topic sentences throughout the essay to guarantee we are avoiding summary.

What happens if we don't use analytical topic sentences? Well, let's go back to the *Fargo* example and use the following as a topic sentence:

“The setting of *Fargo* is a small frozen town in the middle of nowhere.”

This sentence *sounds* good, but it's merely describing the setting of *Fargo*. It isn't married to a claim—it's only an observation. Moreover, we should watch out for the *to be* verb in a topic sentence or thesis because it usually functions as an equal sign (oh no, not math again!) Check it out:

The setting of *Fargo*=a small frozen town in the middle of nowhere
Michelle Obama=a mother of two teenage girls whom she raised in the White House
The background of the advertisement=a European cityscape.

Not only is the *to be* verb boring, but it also tends to create a statement that's merely observational and closed off to analysis.

Also, a descriptive-only topic sentence fails to capture the eventual argument of the paragraph. What do we *really* want to say about the setting of *Fargo*? Also, how are we going to *prove* this observational fact in the body of the paragraph? There is nothing to prove.

We need to remember to execute that “breaking up” function of analysis by addressing a different analytical topic in each paragraph (all of which should relate to the thesis). If we don't write very strong analytical topic sentences, we run the risk of meandering through the paper, repeating ourselves, or never really making our points. It takes incredible discipline and creativity to think up specific paragraph topics and strong topic sentences, but it makes all the difference.

It's also hugely tempting to work through a rhetorical analysis as a “play-by-play” commentary. This chronological ordering hardly ever produces a solid analysis and usually ends up as a glorified summary. Another major temptation is to set up a good introduction and solid thesis, and, then, in the first body paragraph, summarize

the artifact. We shouldn't do that because we just promised an analysis of the piece, not a summary. It's okay if our readers don't understand the plot, or the image, or the dialog line by line, frame by frame. The analysis should make sense with a balance of description and interpretation.

Let's look at a sample rhetorical analysis essay by Jack Shean, a Penn State first-year student at the time, in which he considers Norman Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* paintings as wartime propaganda. Make sure to answer the questions at the end of the essay.

(clockwise, from top left), *Freedom of Religion*, *Freedom from Fear*, *Freedom from Want*, *Freedom of Speech*. Norman Rockwell, 1943.



Four Freedoms for Freedom

Remember Pearl Harbor posters and Uncle Sam advertisements are conventional propaganda examples that possess the qualities one usually associates with World War II. Bold graphics, intrepid claims, and patriotic symbols are laced deep into these pieces. Although such conventional pieces dominate common perceptions of American World War II propaganda, other unconventional pieces with softer strategies for delivering their messages did exist. Norman Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* paintings are examples of said unconventional works. In 1943 Norman Rockwell painted four paintings collectively known as the *Four Freedoms* based on the four freedoms outlined by President Franklin Roosevelt in his 1941 State of the Union Address. These paintings depicted scenes from everyday life that illustrated the four freedoms of speech, worship, want, and fear. The *Four Freedoms* utilize civic commonplaces, exert ethos and pathos, and capitalize on the Kairos of World War II to subtly relate the war cause to the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

Each of the paintings that comprise the *Four Freedoms* depict a commonplace from everyday American life that exemplifies the freedom respectively represented by that painting. Rockwell purposefully selected quintessential scenes of civic life that were applicable to most Americans. The painting *Freedom of Speech* depicts a town hall style gathering where a man dressed in clothes typical of the middle or working class is proudly addressing his peers. The scene illustrates the relatable experience of community engagement and demonstrates how ordinary citizens exercise freedom of speech. The painting *Freedom of Worship* depicts a religious congregation composed of simply clad

citizens intently praying together. The scene highlights the common experience of religious services and prayer and demonstrates how ordinary citizens practice freedom of worship. The painting *Freedom from Want* depicts a content multigenerational family comfortably gathered around a table adorned with copious amounts of food and drink. The scene accentuates the widely experienced tradition of family gatherings and demonstrates how ordinary citizens enjoy freedom from want. The painting *Freedom from Fear* depicts a mother and father peacefully tucking their children into bed. The scene emphasizes the shared experience of parents caring for their children and demonstrates how ordinary citizens experience freedom from fear. The use of homefront commonplaces like these separates the works from conventional propaganda examples that rely on inapplicable foreign war scenes and abstract figures to convey their messages. The *Four Freedoms* utilization of civic commonplaces allowed the works to become more relatable and subtle in a manner that was further enhanced by their exertion of ethos and pathos.

Norman Rockwell's status as a renowned artist enhances the ethos and in turn the relatability of the *Four Freedoms*. Rockwell's social position gives him a more human character than the generic and incredulous government agents who generated conventional war propaganda pieces. As result of their creator's ethos, the paintings deliver their messages in a far less suspicious manner. Likewise, the emotions of the *Four Freedoms*' commonplaces enhance the work's pathos. The painting *Freedom of Speech* draws on citizens' sense of autonomy, the painting *Freedom of Worship* plays on citizens' religious beliefs, the painting *Freedom from Want* entreats citizens' love of family, and the painting *Freedom from Fear* implores citizens' desire for safety. These

passionate appeals to the concepts dearest to ordinary citizens evoke an instinctive and fervent response. The audience of the *Four Freedoms* was motivated to support the war effort because it directly affected their everyday lives. The ethos and pathos exerted by the *Four Freedoms* places the works on a level above traditional propaganda pieces that lack a professional character and a profound emotional connection in a manner that is further heightened by the Kairos of World War II.

The Kairos of World War II heightens the appeal of the *Four Freedoms* and in turn increases the work's relatability to daily life. At the time of the works' inception, the world was fraught with turmoil. Tyranny was rapidly spreading across Europe and Asia, democracies were crumbling, and mass genocides were being committed. It was a dark moment in history when the entire American way of life was at risk of extinction.

Rockwell's painting capitalized on the Kairos of this situation by contrasting life on the warfront with life on the homefront. The painting *Freedom of Speech* contrasted the wide spread suppression of free expression in regions occupied by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The painting *Freedom of Worship* contrasted Nazi Germany's discrimination against and genocide of Jewish and other religious minorities. The painting *Freedom from Want* contrasted the wide spread shortages of basic necessities and lack of human contentment in Europe and Asia. The painting *Freedom from Fear* contrasted the cataclysmic destruction of cities and high civilian death tolls within the war zone. These contrasts highlighted the notion that if America did not win on the warfront, the war could soon envelop the homefront. Without the context of the war to give them dimension, the *Four Freedoms* would have fallen flat in terms of public reception. In less critical times, ordinary citizens would have glanced upon these pieces, briefly considered

their niceties and moved on with their lives. However, amidst the Kairotic context of World War II, ordinary citizens looked upon these images, recognized their appreciation for the works' ideals, reflected on the ways millions were denied them, and realized the war's relatability to daily life in a manner that sublimely inspired them to fight for their freedoms.

The *Four Freedoms* combine civic commonplaces, ethos, pathos, and Kairos to subtly relate the war cause to the daily lives of ordinary citizens. Each of the works unique commonplaces demonstrate the areas of life that the war was being fought to protect. Norman Rockwell's eminent artistic status strengthened the works' ethos and emotionally profound scenes enriched the work's pathos in a way that strongly elicited the audience's passions. World War II's existential threat to freedom created a Kairotic context for the works that in turn gave them greater dimension. Although unconventional in their approach, the *Four Freedoms* do a highly effective job of indirectly projecting their messages. In fact, the paintings messages became so ingrained in society that following World War II's peaceful conclusion, the original four freedoms were enshrined in the founding charter of the United Nations.

Work Cited

Rockwell, Norman. *Four Freedoms*. Digital image. *Quia.com*. N.p., Fri. 15 May 2013.

Web. 9 Sept. 2015.

Questions to consider:

1. How does the writer contextualize the *Four Freedoms*? What elements of the rhetorical situation does he raise to set the stage for and drive his analysis in the introduction? Throughout the paper?
2. Identify three analytical verbs that stood out to you in this essay. How did they marry observation with a claim?
3. Identify three well-executed descriptive phrases in the paper. How did the writer's vivid language animate the analysis?
4. Look through the body paragraphs and see if you can easily label for the topic of each. If you can, it's a sign of a well-structured analysis.