

Writing a Rhetorical Analysis Essay

These are the things you must know in order to accurately analyze a text. Note: Your first seven and says/does analyses can help you with this.

1. What rhetorical strategies does the author use? Consider, among other things:
 - a. Appeals (ethos, logos, pathos)
 - b. Style (diction, syntax, details, imagery, tone, etc.)
2. Why did the author choose these strategies for the particular audience, occasion, and/or purpose?
 - a. This is the analysis part! Without this, you are merely summarizing the text.
 - b. Think about these questions:
 - i. HOW do the rhetorical strategies help the author achieve his/her purpose?
 - ii. WHY does the author choose those strategies for that particular audience and for that particular occasion?

What follows is one way to approach an analytical essay, **but it isn't the only one**. In fact, while each of the concepts here is important, you should avoid an approach that's too formulaic.

Opening

I don't want you to think of the introductory paragraph as a separate part of the essay; it must function as an integral part of the whole piece. Forget the inverted triangle or the hamburger bun. Remember, whatever you write at the beginning of a piece is, by virtue of its placement, an introduction and serves to establish your purpose and authority. This paragraph is generally brief, but there are important elements that should come at the beginning of your essay.

1. Speaker, Occasion, and Subject

You should include the writer's credentials, his or her first and last name, the type and title of the text, and the writer's subject.

Well-known essayist and writer, Joan Didion, in her essay, "The Santa Ana," uses sensory imagery to describe the dramatic mood-altering effects of the Santa Ana winds on human behavior.

2. Purpose

Address what the writer does in the text.

Didion's purpose is to impress upon readers the idea that the winds themselves change the way people act and react.

3. Audience

The opening is an appropriate place to note the attitude or feeling the author conveys as well as what the writer wants readers to do or think.

She creates a dramatic tone in order to convey to her readers the idea that the winds are sinister and their effects inescapable.

EXAMPLES:

1. *Well-known essayist and writer, Joan Didion, in her essay, "The Santa Ana," uses sensory imagery to describe the dramatic mood altering effects of the Santa Ana winds on human behavior. Didion's purpose is to impress upon readers the idea that the winds themselves change the way people act and react. She creates a dramatic tone in order to convey to her readers the idea that the winds are sinister and their effects inescapable.*
2. *In her essay, "Fish Cheeks," novelist Amy Tan employs pathos as she recounts an embarrassing Christmas Eve dinner when she was fourteen years old. Tan's purpose is to convey the idea that, at fourteen, she wasn't able to recognize the love her mother had for her or the sacrifices she made. She adopts a sentimental tone in order to appeal to similar feelings and experiences in her adult readers.*

Body

It's natural in your analysis to move chronologically through the text you're analyzing. In fact, this may be the simplest and most obvious method. In doing so, the most logical way to organize your analysis is to move paragraph-by-paragraph or section-by-section, identifying the strongest rhetorical strategies from that particular part of the text. Remember to stick with the strategies about which you feel the most confident.

Another, perhaps less obvious way to organize your analysis, is to identify specific rhetorical strategies and address them one-by-one. This method would only be effective or useful if you noticed that the author used these same strategies throughout his or her text.

Regardless of your method of organization, be sure to **understand what the prompt is asking for** and deliver your findings and speculations within the confines of the assignment.

A few important points to keep in mind:

- Include specific examples from the text, incorporating quotations in such a way that maintains logical and grammatical integrity.
- Do NOT try to discuss every strategy the writer uses; pick the strongest.
- Clearly and specifically explain how the writer uses rhetorical strategies to achieve his or her purpose and reach his or her audience.

FORMAT and EXAMPLE [from Ronald Reagan's speech after the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion in 1986]:

1. The first sentence identifies which section of the text you are discussing and the main idea of that section. It's a good idea to include the writer's last name, the type of text, and the main idea of this section of the text.

Reagan begins his tribute to the Challenger astronauts by acknowledging that the shuttle accident has appropriately postponed his planned State of the Union address and by expressing the depth of his and his wife's personal grief.

2. The second sentence conveys the writer's support for the main idea by identifying and providing a specific example for one rhetorical strategy used by the writer.

He appeals to the mournful emotions of the audience by admitting that he and Nancy are "pained to the core" (3), that today is rightfully a "day for mourning and remembering" (2-3), and that the accident is "truly a national loss" (4).

3. The third sentence explains how the rhetorical strategies you discussed in the previous sentences help the writer achieve his purpose by using an *in order to* statement.

He joins in this time of mourning in order to unify the nation and humbly admit that he and his family "share this pain with all of the people of our country" (4).

4. The fourth sentence identifies the effect of the writer's use of these rhetorical strategies on the audience.

This outpouring of emotion from the president conveys a calming tone in order to reassure the people of the nation that their grief is both understandable and proper.

When we put it all together, this is what one paragraph of the body of a rhetorical analysis essay might look like:

Reagan begins his tribute to the Challenger astronauts by acknowledging that the shuttle accident has appropriately postponed his planned State of the Union address and by expressing the depth of his and his wife's personal grief. He appeals to the mournful emotions of the audience by admitting that he and Nancy are "pained to the core" (3), that today is rightfully a "day for mourning and remembering" (2-3), and that the accident is "truly a national loss" (4). He joins in this time of mourning in order to unify the nation and humbly admit that he and his family "share this pain with all of the people of our country" (4). This outpouring of emotion from the president conveys a calming tone in order to reassure the people of the nation that their grief is both understandable and proper.

Closing

As with the introduction, whatever you write at the end of your essay is, by virtue of its placement, a conclusion and should leave your reader with a sense that your essay, while supporting an initial premise, has been building toward an important idea. That idea should have a sense of discovery that logically follows all that you've written in the body of the essay. To simply summarize what you've already said or make a series of overly obvious statements is not only anti-climatic, it is counterproductive in getting your reader to understand your perspective. The reader should sense the importance and clarity of your position after finishing the conclusion. There's no simple formula for an effective conclusion, but a revelation that comes as the natural result of information and evidence you've provided is the key function of the concluding paragraph. Regardless of what you do, you must put genuine thought into it. Anything less is going to be obvious to the reader. If it's boring to write, it's even more boring to read.

Strong vs. Weak Verbs

To help you move away from summary and toward **ANALYSIS**, you need to begin to incorporate strong verbs into your writing when discussing the writer's rhetorical choices. Below is a list of verbs that are considered weak because they imply summary and a list of verbs that are considered strong because they imply analysis. Strive to use the stronger verbs in your essays to help push yourself away from summary and toward analysis: "The writer *suggests*..." NOT "The writer *says*..."

WEAK VERBS (Summary)

says, relates, tells, explains, states, shows

STRONG VERBS (Analysis)

implies, trivializes, flatters, qualifies, processes, describes, suggests, denigrates, lionizes, dismisses, analyzes, questions, compares, vilifies, praises, supports, enumerates, contrasts, emphasizes, demonizes, establishes, admonishes, expounds, argues, defines, ridicules, minimizes, narrates, lists, warns

Powerful and meaningful verbs to use in your analyses: Alternatives to "show"

Acknowledge	Discover	Illustrate	Obtain	Rely
Address	Discuss	Impair	Offer	Remove
Analyze	Dismiss	Implement	Omit	Repair
Apply	Distinguish	Implicate	Optimize	Report
Argue	Duplicate	Imply	Organize	Represent
Assert	Elaborate	Improve	Outline	Resolve
Augment	Emphasize	Include	Overstate	Retrieve
Broaden	Employ	Incorporate	Persist	Reveal
Calculate	Enable	Indicate	Point out	Revise
Capitalize	Engage	Induce	Possess	Separate
Characterize	Enhance	Initiate	Predict	Shape
Claim	Establish	Inquire	Present	Signify
Clarify	Evaluate	Instigate	Probe	Simulate
Compare	Exacerbate	Integrate	Produce	Solve
Complicate	Examine	Interpret	Promote	Specify
Confine	Exclude	Intervene	Propose	Structure
Connect	Exhibit	Invert	Prove	Suggest
Consider	Expand	Isolate	Provide	Summarize
Construct	Explain	Justify	Qualify	Support
Contradict	Exploit	Locate	Quantify	Suspend
Correct	Express	Loosen	Question	Sustain
Create	Extend	Maintain	Realize	Tailor
Convince	Facilitate	Manifest	Recommend	Terminate
Critique	Feature	Manipulate	Reconstruct	Testify
Declare	Forecast	Measure	Redefine	Theorize
Deduce	Formulate	Merge	Reduce	Translate
Defend	Fracture	Minimize	Refer	Undermine
Demonstrate	Generalize	Modify	Reference	Understand
Deny	Group	Monitor	Refine	Unify
Describe	Guide	Necessitate	Reflect	Utilize
Determine	Hamper	Negate	Refute	Validate
Differentiate	Hypothesize	Nullify	Regard	Vary
Disagree	Identify	Obscure	Reject	View
Discard	Illuminate	Observe	Relate	Vindicate
				Yield

Analyzing DICTION

Diction is simply the **words** the writer chooses to convey a particular meaning. When analyzing diction, look for **specific words** or short phrases that seem stronger than the others (ex. Bragg's use of *slingshot* instead of *travel*). Diction is NEVER the entire sentence! Also, look for a **pattern** (or similarity) in the words the writer chooses (ex. Do the words imply sadness, happiness, etc?). This pattern helps to create a particular kind of diction. This pattern can also include **repetition** of the same words or phrases. Repeating the same word or phrase helps the reader emphasize a point, feeling, etc. Effective diction is shaped by words that are clear, concrete, and exact. Good writers avoid words like *pretty*, *nice*, and *bad* because they are not specific enough. Instead, they rely on words that invoke a specific effect in order to bring the reader into the event being described.

Examples:

A coat isn't *torn*; it is *tattered*.

The US Army does not *want* revenge; it is *thirsting* for revenge.

A door does not *shut*; it *thuds*.

Diction depends on **subject**, **purpose**, **occasion**, and **audience**. The **subject** often determines how specific or sophisticated the diction needs to be. For example, articles on computers are filled with a specialized language (jargon): *e-mail*, *e-shopping*, *web*, *interface*. Many topics generate special vocabularies to convey meaning.

The writer's **purpose**—whether to persuade, entertain, inform—partly determines diction. Words chosen to impart a particular effect on the reader reflect the writer's purpose. For example, if an author's purpose is to inform, the reader should expect straightforward diction. On the other hand, if the author's purpose is to entertain, the readers will likely encounter words used in ironic, playful, or unexpected ways.

Diction also depends on **occasion**. Formal diction is reserved for scholarly writing and serious texts. Writers often use Informal diction in narrative essays and newspaper editorials. Colloquial diction and slang are typically used to capture the language of a particular time frame or culture.

Finally, the type of diction a writer uses depends on the **audience** (readers, listeners). An author who uses sophisticated diction knows he or she is writing for an intelligent audience. An author who uses more informal diction knows he or she is writing for an audience of varied intelligence.

When you are **writing an essay** in which you are analyzing the diction of the writer: Avoid saying: "The writer uses diction..." —since this is obvious (diction IS the words on the page; without them, the page would be blank). Instead, say: "*The writer creates a _____ diction through the use of...*" OR "*The language of the text is _____.*"

Below are just a few words that you may use to **describe the type of diction** used by the writer. You may want to add words to this list or circle the ones you use frequently.

abstract
academic
ambiguous
biting
bombastic
brusque
cacophonous
casual
caustic
colloquial
colorful
common
concrete
connotative
conversational
crisp
cultured
curt
denotative
detached
divisive
emotional
esoteric
euphemistic
euphonious
everyday
exact
fanciful

figurative
flowery
folksy
formal
grandiose
idiomatic
inflammatory
inflated
informal
insincere
jargon
learned
literal
loaded
lyrical
melodious
monosyllabic
nostalgic
obscene
obscure
offensive
ordinary
ornate
passionate
patriotic
pedantic
picturesque
plain

poetic
political
polysyllabic
precise
pretentious
provincial
romantic
scholarly
sentimental
shocking
sincere
slang
subdued
symbolic
tame
technical
trite
unifying
uppity
vague
vulgar

OTHERS:

abstract diction
concrete diction
elevated/formal
low/informal

Analyzing SYNTAX

Syntax refers to the way words are arranged within sentences.

Scheme

One aspect of syntax is **scheme**. Most English sentences follow a subject-verb-object pattern (ex. *I went to the store.*) Deviating from this pattern can serve to add emphasis to the author's ideas.

Sentence Length

Another aspect of syntax is **sentence length**. Good writers will use a variety for emphasis.

Short sentences – straightforward

Long sentences – descriptive, detailed

Sentence Type

A third aspect of syntax is sentence type. Again, good writers use a variety.

Simple: subject-verb (*I went to the store.*)

Compound: 2 independent clauses joined by a conjunction (*I went to the store, and I bought candy.*)

Complex: independent clause and dependent clause (*While traveling to the store, I saw my friend.*)

Compound-complex: Two independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses (*While traveling to the store, I saw my friend, and she gave me money for candy.*)

Declarative/Indicative: statement (*I went to the store.*)

Exclamatory: strong feeling (*What a wonderful candy store!*)

Interrogative: question (*Is this a store?*)

Imperative: command (*Go to the store.*)

Cumulative: A sentence where the subject-verb construction (SVC) comes at the beginning of the sentence (*Steve looked at Denali with fear and dread in his eyes.*)

Periodic: A sentence where the SVC comes closer to the period (*With fear and dread in his eyes, Steve looked at Denali.*)

By necessity, most of our sentences are indicative and cumulative. This is because they are naturally the most straightforward. However, good writers will find ways to work in these other types.

Punctuation

A final aspect of syntax is punctuation. Good writers use a variety here as well.

Semicolon(;) gives equal weight to two or more independent clauses in a sentence.

Writers use this to reinforce parallel ideas and show how both ideas are equally important

Colon(:) directs the reader's attention to the words that follow. Writers use this to show the reader that the information after the colon is important.

Dash (—) marks a sudden change in thought or tone or sets off a brief summary

SYNTAX WORDS

balanced sentence	interrogative
complex sentence	interruption
compound sentence	inversion
compound-complex sentence	juxtaposition
cumulative sentence	parallel structure
declarative	periodic sentence
exclamatory	repetition
imperative	rhetorical question

Analyzing TONE

Tone is the writer's attitude or feeling about the subject of his text. It is a special kind of rhetorical strategy because **tone is created by the writer's use of all of the other rhetorical strategies**.

When discussing an author's tone, you must be careful to choose the right word. Below is a list of tone words. Use them in your essays to describe the tone of the piece but only if you are sure you know the word's meaning (not sure? look it up).

When writing your essay, avoid saying: "*The writer uses tone*" since ALL writers use a tone of some kind. Instead, say: "*The writer creates a _____ tone...*"

abhorrence	abrasive	abrupt	abstract	accusatory
admiring	admonitory	affected	afraid	ambivalent
amused	amusing	analytical	angry	annoyed
anxious	apathetic	apologetic	apprehensive	approving
argumentative	artful	audacious	austere	authentic
authoritative	awe	awkward	baffled	bantering
bemused	benevolent	bitter	blunt	bold
bookish	boring	bucolic	callous	calm
candid	candid	cautious	cautious	cerebral
ceremonial	cheery	childish	childish	cliché
clinical	cold	comic	compassionate	compelling
complementary	complicated	complimentary	concerned	conciliatory
concise	condemning	condescending	confident	confiding
confused	contemptuous	contented	contrived	corny
critical	critical	curious	cynical	dark
delightful	dense	derisive	despairing	desperate
detached	detached	didactic	disappointed	disbelieving
disdainful	disgusted	dismayed	disparaging	distinctive
disturbed	down-to-earth	dramatic	dreamy	dreary
dull	earnest	economical	edgy	effective
effusive	elated	elated	elegant	elegiac
elitist	eloquent	embittered	endearing	energetic
enlightening	entertaining	enthusiastic	erudite	exaggerating
exuberant	facetious	factual	factual	fanciful
fascinated	fearful	flippant	fluent	focused
forced	forceful	foreboding	forgettable	forgiving

formal	formulaic	forthright	fresh	frivolous
funny	furious	giddy	gimmicky	glib
gloomy	graceful	grandiose	grim	gritty
grudging	gutsy	hackneyed	happy	harsh
haughty	haunting	hollow	hollow	honest
hopeful	hopeless	horrific	humorous	hyperbolic
idealistic	idiosyncratic	imaginative	impartial	impassioned
impulsive	incisive	incredulous	indifferent	indignant
indulgent	inflammatory	informal	informative	insightful
insisting	insolent	instructive	instructive	insubstantial
intellectual	interesting	intimate	inviting	irate
ironic	irrelevant	irreverent	irritated	joking
jovial	joyful	judgmental	labored	lackadaisical
lackluster	laudatory	learned	light	lighthearted
lofty	loving	lucid	lush	lyrical
matter of fact	maudlin	meditative	melancholic	melancholy
melodramatic	memorable	mock-heroic	mocking	mock-serious
moralizing	morbid	mordant	mournful	narrow
nostalgic	objective	obvious	offbeat	offensive
opinionated	optimistic	ordinary	ostentatious	outraged
outrageous	overdone	paradoxical	passionate	patronizing
peaceful	pedantic	pedestrian	pejorative	pensive
persuasive	pessimistic	pessimistic	piquant	pitiful
pitiful	plaintive	plaintive	playful	poetic
pompous	preachy	predictable	pretentious	profound
prosaic	proud	provocative	provocative	purple
puzzled	querulous	questioning	rambling	reader-friendly
realistic	reflective	refreshing	regretful	reminiscent
repetitive	repressed	reproachful	resigned	resigned
respectful	restrained	revealing	reverent	rhapsodic
sad	sanctimonious	sarcastic	sardonic	satiric
satisfied	scornful	seductive	self-indulgent	sensuous
sentimental	sentimental	serene	serious	severe
shallow	sharp	shocked	silly	simple
simplistic	sincere	sober	solemn	somber
sophomoric	spicy	spiteful	stiff	strident
striking	strong	substantive	subtle	superficial
surprise	surprising	suspicious	sweet	sweet
sympathetic	talky	taunting	thorough	thoughtful
thought-provoking	threatening	tired	tiresome	tolerant
trite	troubled	unconvincing	underdone	uneven
unsympathetic	upset	urbane	urgent	vexed
vibrant	wary	whimsical	wise	wistful
witty	wordy	wry	zealous	

MOOD WORDS: Sometimes the TONE will set a MOOD.

bleak, dark, delirious, dismal, eerie, elegiac, haunting, lonely, ominous, peaceful, playful, quizzical, reproachful, satiric, serene, soothing, suspenseful, tense, threatening, uplifting, whimsical

CHARACTER WORDS: Sometimes you need to describe the SPEAKER.

absorbed, aggressive, aloof, ambitious, amorous, anxious, apathetic, argumentative, arrogant, bitter, bored, carefree, careless, cautious, churlish, compassionate, conceited, conniving, curious, deceitful, demure, detached, devious, devoted, dishonest, easygoing, envious, exacting, frantic, fretful, gregarious, intelligent, irritable, loquacious, manipulative, mendacious, naïve, nervous, noble, outgoing, patient, picky, scrupulous, self-involved, sincere, sloppy, spontaneous, suspicious, talkative, testy, uninvolved, unpredictable, vindictive, welcoming, wise, worried