



## A Brief Guide to Rhetorical Analysis

When conducting rhetorical analysis, you're attempting to answer: **How and why a *composer/speaker* uses the *medium* in an attempt to appeal to an *audience* in order to convey a *purpose*?**

By explaining those ideas through your rhetorical analysis, you'll

- Ensure your analysis remains focused on the rhetoric;
- Learn to identify and analyze rhetorical strategies and devices that people use every day and that can help you communicate more effectively.

For this resource, we reference a Nike commercial<sup>1</sup> as an example for analysis. In general, advertisements are a great way to practice rhetorical analysis since marketers focus on appealing to consumers in many different ways.

### The Rhetorical Situation: 4 Elements

The first step to conducting rhetorical analysis is identifying the four main rhetorical elements:

**1. The Composer:** Who composed/developed the piece?

The composer/writer/author/speaker is the person – or group – who developed the text. For the Nike commercial, the composer is Nike (or Nike's advertisers).

**2. The Audience:** Who is the speaker addressing? What are their expectations?

Always analyze the appeals the composer makes in the context of **the intended audience and their expectations**. You yourself may or may not be a member of the intended audience, or the intended audience may be from a different time period. Those details are important to take into account (e.g., Shakespeare's intended audience was people in the 1600s). For our example, the intended audience of the commercial is **female athletes**, so an analysis of the commercial should focus on how effective the commercial is at appealing to that group.

**3. The Medium:** What is the delivery method of the piece?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWfX5jeF6k4>

The medium can vary depending on a given piece. It's good to consider since the medium can aid or limit how effective a text is. For instance, you can consider the place where a text is seen or heard by the intended audience as this can further add – or take away from – a text's success. Types of mediums are

- **Alphabetic:** Texts such as books, essays, written speech and poetry. A writer appeals to the audience through words on a page.
- **Images:** Texts such as print advertisements in magazines or on websites. A composer appeals to the audience through the connotation of the image with things like color and composition.
- **Sound:** Texts such as podcasts, speeches and radio advertisements. A speaker will appeal to the audience through the words, tone and emphasis. Additionally, the speaker can appeal to the audience through background music or sound effects.
- **Multimodal:** Texts that use multiple mediums at once. For example, image and sound are commonly used together. The Nike commercial is a multimodal text. In multimodal works, the speaker can appeal to the audience through all of the mediums being used.

#### **4. The Purpose:** Why did the composer make this? What are they trying to achieve?

When considering purpose, you're also considering the composer's intentions.

Understanding the ultimate purpose allows you to analyze whether or not the piece was successful in fulfilling that intended purpose. For example, with the Nike commercial, the intended purpose was to help Nike brand itself as supportive of female athletes and to help Nike distance itself from previous scandals revolving around their corporate culture and gender discrimination.

## **Identifying Rhetorical Appeals**

A composer might use one or all three of the rhetorical appeals to various degrees in order to reach an audience. Once you identify any appeals, you can pick examples from a text that demonstrate how the composer attempts to use appeals in order to convince the intended audience of the purpose. Three main appeals are:

**Pathos:** An appeal to the audience's emotions and capacity for empathy (e.g., fear, hope, anger, etc.). A composer might use words with strong emotional connotations (ex: *horrendous, disgusting, spectacular*). The speaker/composer can also appeal to pathos through the manner in which they interact with the audience and/or through creating a mood in the piece. To detect pathos, ask questions like:

- Is the text personable, serious, playful, etc.?

- Is the composer attempting to convince the audience by playing into the audience's fears or desires? Ex: The Nike commercial plays on the audience's hopes by taking on an inspirational tone.
- Is there music, color, or imagery that creates a mood for the audience?

**Ethos:** An appeal that emphasizes the composer's credibility and trustworthiness. This is often established immediately by the reputation of the composer/writer/speaker. To identify ethos, ask questions like:

- Is the composer/writer/speaker highlighting their own experience to establish credibility? Ex: Nobel prize winning scientists explaining some of their scientific expertise have strong credibility.
- Is the speaker/composer citing reputable sources? This is also something you can do in your own writing by citing experts and peer-reviewed sources.

**Logos:** An appeal to logic. Composers who use this appeal often present a logical progression within their argument. Logic might be presented when a composer:

- Provides specific details that then lead to clear conclusions;
- Starts with a statement and then provides details (ex: thesis followed by evidence and reasoning)
- Avoids logical fallacies<sup>2</sup> – since logical fallacies mislead audiences

## Additional Key Terms

**Kairos:** The timing or timeliness of a piece or argument (i.e., Did the piece come at a pivotal moment or critical time?). Kairos is about the time frame when the piece will be most impactful and effective – if a piece is produced at the right moment in time, it will be much more effective. If the timing is off (too early or too late) it can impact the audience's reception to it. Considering this allows you to analyze how effective the appeals in a piece would be in the context of the works' original timing and purpose and whether those hold up as time passes.

**Stasis:** A standstill within an argument. This is where two speakers disagree. This is visible in debates when multiple sides are being represented at once. An example of this occurs in political debates where the two participants disagree about a fundamental aspect of a topic and are, therefore, not able to progress against each other with their arguments. Stasis often presents an opportunity for one of the speakers to implement another rhetorical device/appeal. Oftentimes, when there is stasis in political debates, a speaker may implement or debunk a logical fallacy in an attempt to discredit the other's argument.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CtofTCXcYI>

**Exigence:** The moment that sparked the beginning of a discussion about an issue. Think of it as a cause-and-effect relationship: When something happens to cause a writer to see a need for their piece, that need reflects exigence. Exigence provides us with context about how a given piece may relate to a broader discussion or issue. By understanding the exigence of a piece, you can better identify how effective it was at meeting the intended purpose.

## **Conducting Analysis**

With these key terms in mind, you will be able to conduct more effective rhetorical analyses. Your analysis will consist of answering that earlier question: **How and why a *composer/speaker* uses the *medium* in an attempt to appeal to an *audience* in order to convey a *purpose*?**