

WHAT IS RHETORICAL ANALYSIS?

Rhetorical analysis is the study of persuasion in order to understand how people have been and can be persuasive. We analyze rhetorically for two reasons: (1) so that we can become better judges, and (2) so that we can become better advocates. The first step toward rhetorical analysis is perhaps the hardest. We have to put off agreement or disagreement. Rhetorically analyzing something requires that we judge its effectiveness. Whether you agree or not, can you see why the argument might or might not appeal to some people? After answering this question, we can use rhetorical analysis to say many other things. We might rhetorically analyze to judge artfulness: Even if an argument failed to convince, was it admirable or useful? We might rhetorically analyze to judge quality: What kind of argument is this? Or decorum and timeliness: Was the argument well suited to the circumstances of its delivery, or would this same argument fare better at another time and in another set of circumstances? Or an argument's effects: Even if the argument was timely, artful, decorous, factually accurate, widely persuasive, and perfectly in line with standards to which all agree, will it encourage people to engage one another in a destructive manner?

Regardless of what you decide to say, rhetorical analysis will not immediately answer the questions that most people would like to ask: Do you agree with the argument? Do you like the film? Are you moved by this piece of music? These will need to be put on hold, though rhetorical analysis can prepare us to answer such questions thoughtfully. After analysis, we're more able to say why we agree (or not), and why others should do likewise. Rhetorical analysis therefore prepares us to