**Week 5: Lecture 1 - Rhetorical Analysis**

Last week, you explored various elements of reasoning, including faulty reasoning, and tumbled down the rabbit hole of logical fallacies. You also considered how those logical fallacies impact the soundness and validity of our arguments, and how they can be used intentionally to persuade. Lastly, you reflected on the role critical inquiry can play in both identifying and avoiding those fallacies and other forms of faulty reasoning. This week builds on all of that, beginning first with a description of *rhetorical analysis*.

First, as you might have already suspected, you’ve been doing rhetorical analysis for most of this course. You’ve also been doing it for much of your life, at least as a critically thinking adult, so what we are covering here won’t feel totally new. However, as with any technical field or activity, rhetorical analysis uses a specific set of skills, tools, and terminology, and is bound by a set of rules and guidelines.

Let’s begin with a basic definition. Rhetorical analysis (or rhetorical criticism) can be understood as:

*Quote: A form of close reading that employs the principles of rhetoric to examine the interactions between a text, an author, and an audience.Richard Nordquist, 2019*

That needs some unpacking.

First, rhetoric can be understood in general terms as the art of using ‘language’ for the purpose of persuasion. Aristotle’s definition is, ‘The ability to perceive, in any given circumstance, the available means of persuasion.’ Rhetorical *analysis*, then, is analysis of a persuasive *text*or message. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a persuasive speech or technical argument; it can be any message that conveys meaning and it can take various forms. Persuasive *texts* are everywhere: speeches, advertisements, sales pitches, bumper stickers…

Rhetorical analysis is also a form of close reading. Close reading is careful, slow, thoughtful, and critical reading. This includes interpreting what is happening between the text and the reader. It’s helpful to view this as a phased process, which can be represented in many ways, as in the image below, for example.

3 Phases of Close Reading - Read for 3 Purposes

Phase 1: Determine what the text says. You can do this by reading for general understanding, summary, central idea, theme, key details, and text organization.

Phase 2: Determine how the text says it. You can do this by zooming in and thinking about: vocabulary, words, genre, text structure, syntax, point of view, the author's purpose, and perspective.

Phase 3: Determine what the text means. You can do this by zooming out and considering: the visual features of the text, text quality, author, credibility, and text-to-text connections.

Note that the first phase is dedicated mostly to gaining an understanding of the text. We need to know what the text means and understand its message. Phase two is a deeper level of critical engagement, focusing on analysis of the form, writing style, and other key features of how the content is presented. It also analyzes the author’s reason for writing the piece and the author’s perspective. Phase three analyzes the physical elements and aspects of the text, as well as elements about the author, and an analysis of how the text fits within a broader context.

**Week 5: Lecture 2 - Validity, Credibility and Sufficiency**

It’s not a difficult logical leap to realize that rhetorical analysis – implemented upon a foundation of critical inquiry – will analyze arguments. So, rhetorical criticism helps us determine the validity and sufficiency of arguments, and the credibility of their authors and the sources they use.

British philosopher Stephen Toulmin developed a now-widely used form of argument analysis that is context-dependent. Concerned with moral reasoning (applying critical analysis to events or actions to determine right and wrong), Toulmin suggests that, rather than beginning with the application of external principles or absolutes, the analysis of events and actions must begin with an analysis of their context.

His way of analyzing (and of constructing) arguments – known as the Toulmin Method – breaks down an argument into its various parts and then analyzes the effectiveness of those parts. On one level, this method of analysis identifies the **general claim**(think ‘conclusion’), the **data** (think ‘facts’) that support that claim, and the **warrant** (think ‘inference’ - facts + prior knowledge), which is the reason the author believes the data justify the claim.

Recall that, with inductive reasoning, even the most probable conclusion of a valid inductive argument is not certain. Toulmin recognizes this of course, and so his method incorporates another layer of analysis when needed. The **backing** is the additional support for the warrant. It is evidence gathered to support the argument. The **qualifier** is essentially a recognition of uncertainty, and reflects the author’s degree of certainty. Let’s face it: if we can’t be absolutely certain of our claims, then we need to use words like ‘most likely’, ‘probably’, ‘it appears’, ‘it seems’, and so on. Sounds like inductive reasoning, right? Lastly, the **reservation** is the author’s way of saying, “I am correct, unless this or that specific fact or criterion are present”. This essentially creates space for the author to demonstrate the strength of the argument by claiming that some less likely conclusion is possible, but…not likely.

Here’s a helpful diagram demonstrating the analysis process and the relationship between the parts of the argument. Use the information buttons to see an example that flows through each part.

*Unable to view this interactive? Check out our*[*Interactive Troubleshooting Tips*Links to an external site.](https://elearning.champlain.edu/kb/interactive-troubleshooting-tips/)*or open the file in a new tab. Reference: Example Resource:*[*Analyzing Arguments: The Toulmin ModelLinks to an external site.*](https://wps.ablongman.com/ab_mcl_activities_1/71/18324/4691112.cw/index.html)

Here’s another example; note the process is the same, but the ‘claim’ is called the ‘conclusion’, and there is no ‘qualifier’. That’s OK; it’s just another form of argument construction **or** analysis based upon the situation (that is, there was no qualifier in the argument, so there is no qualifier to analyze. One could be there, but it just isn’t in this example.

Fact: Rick has fair skin, red hair and freckles, and he sunbathed all day yesterday.

Probably Conclusion: Rick will probably get seriously sunburnt.

Warrant: People with fair skin, red hair and freckles, usually get sunburnt easily.

Backing: Those people have little melanin in their skin. Melanin protects against sunburn.

Rebuttal: Rick's parents both have fair skin, red hair and freckles, and they never seem to get sunburnt, however much they sit outside.

As previously mentioned, context matters and will influence how we analyze arguments. Rather than applying an external absolute form, Toulmin applies a general approach that needs to be adapted according to the context of the argument, the purpose of the person presenting, and the intended audience.

As a final example, the following video applies the Toulmin Model to a real-world situation regarding public transportation.

<https://youtu.be/aFRIiWpBNJY>