

Rhetorical Analysis of a Writing Experience

Think back: What's the most memorable piece of writing you've ever done? What was the situation? And how did that situation help shape the writing? In this four-to-five page rhetorical analysis of a memorable writing experience, your task as a writer is to reflect on how that particular writing experience was a result of the particular situation it was related to – how the situation helped determine what you wrote and why.

Writers are always responding to the situations they're writing in, from, and for, more or less consciously. But even when you're not aware of it, you're responding to rhetorical situations (even before you knew that term or concept). This assignment can show you how you've already been doing that and spur your thinking about what possibilities writing holds if you do it more consciously.

Analysis Description and Object of Study

Your rhetorical analysis will be based on some significant piece of writing or writing experience that you've had in the last several years. That writing could have been for school, work, family, or your personal life. It could have been completely private (like a journaling experience) or all-the-way public, like a blog or other online post. It could have been a single short document, like a poem or song lyrics, or it could have been an extended project or experience that involved multiple pieces of writing. The key requirement is that it has to have been a memorable or important enough experience that you can *clearly remember the circumstances surrounding the writing*.

Once you know what experience and writing you want to focus on, you need to *reflect on and analyze that experience and writing from a rhetorical perspective*. What's that mean?

Remember that your overall research question – what you’re trying to find out that you don’t already know – is *how did your rhetorical situation help shape that piece of writing?* Based on the principles Grant-Davie demonstrates as well as work you do in class, consider the following about the experience you had and the circumstances surrounding it:

- Why did you *need to write* to begin with (exigence)? Since it’s easier not to write than it is to write, there had to be some reason or purpose behind your writing, some problem to be solved or addressed. What was that?
- Where did that need *come from* (context)? What gave rise to it? This is a *historical* question: To understand the circumstances that demanded writing, you need to know what led to those circumstances.
- What constraints did you face as a writer? What were the *givens* in your situation – the aspects of it you could not change that controlled what you could do with your writing?
- Who was meant to *read and use your writing* and *what did you want them to do with it* (audience)? How was your writing supposed to do something for, to, or with the readers you imagined it for?

The answers to all of these questions, and others, will help you talk about *why* this piece of writing took the shape that it did.

Planning, Drafting, and Developing through Revision

In order to make your analysis most meaningful and clear both to you and to other readers, it will need to include at least the following features:

- An *introduction* explaining what inquiry your piece does by posing your research question.

- Some *description of the writing you're focusing on and the experience itself*. You might even include an electronic copy of the writing you're talking about, if one is still available, but in many cases that may not be possible. Whether you can do that or not, take whatever space is necessary in your analysis to describe as clearly as possible what this writing and experience were.
- An *extended discussion of the questions above* in order to describe and analyze the rhetorical situation in which the writing or experience occurred.
- A *conclusion including implications* of your reflection: What did you learn from this? What principles can you draw to help you in future writing situations?

What Makes It Good?

While your rhetorical analysis of a writing experience may take a number of different shapes, it will tend to include these traits:

- Meaningful and accurate use of rhetorical terms such as *exigence, constraints, audience (or readers), purpose, motivation, and context*.
- A focus on and clear account of how the writing you're analyzing was shaped by the situation and circumstances in which you were writing it.
- A main point about the writing, the situation, or rhetorical principles more broadly.
- Readable and usable flow through main parts of the piece (such as a description of the writing itself and the experience of writing it, to the aspects of the rhetorical situation that shaped it).
- Evidence that you understand how rhetorical situations constrain writing (in the broad sense of *constrain* that Grant-Davie offers).