Rhetorical Analysis

Researchers not only need to know how to locate sources, they need to know how to read them. Most of us don’t naturally read texts rhetorically—that is for how they are written, not for primarily for what they say. When you read and analyze a text rhetorically, you look carefully at the features of the text and ask a specific set of questions of how the text is written.

A helpful short phrase encompasses the overall strategy: Ask, “WHO IS WRITING WHAT TO WHOM AND FOR WHAT PURPOSE?” Use the following short list of questions to rhetorically read and evaluate a piece of writing:

WHO (consideration and critique of the writer)

What are the writer’s credentials? How do you think the writer wants to be perceived? What may be the author’s bias (positive and/or negative)?

WHAT (consideration of the author’s writing, sources, evidence and appeal)

What is the genre or format of the text (memo, journal, essay, etc.)? Given that genre, what might be some of its possibilities and constraints? How does it compare with other works in its genre?

What do you notice about sentence style and length, repetition, tropes (figures of speech like metaphor, analogy, and so on), transitions, word choice and tone?

What are the writer’s sources? In what ways does the writer use those sources? Is the source primary, secondary or a personal reflection?

Is evidence bypassed or left out? Does the writer consider opposing or complicating evidence?

Where does the author make an appeal based on ethos? Logos? Pathos? Does the author do so effectively?

WHOM (consideration of the most likely audience for the text)

Who is the audience for this piece? To whom is the writer responding?

FOR WHAT PURPOSE (consideration of the main point of the text)

What does the author want us to walk away thinking? What is the main argument/point of the writing (possibly a problem and solution proposed)? What issue does the author bring up that is genuinely at stake? How does the writer organize or sequence their ideas/argument?