

## The Practice of Reading Rhetorically

The kind of reading we'll be doing in this course is often called "**rhetorical reading**" and is closely tied to understanding how texts (print & visual) are structured to make meaning – how all the little pieces add up to the larger whole.

When you engage in this kind of reading, you look for the **rhetorical strategies** of the writer -- the **patterns, structures, figures, & methods** that a writer uses in order to make her/his point. This kind of reading can, in turn, help you to strategize your own approach to creating effective texts for particular audiences and purposes.

***In order to learn to identify and analyze patterns, structures, figures & methods, try this approach to reading:***

1. Start with the understanding that rhetorical reading requires and active reading practice – it's not a passive absorption of information but an active intellectual engagement with the text. Read with a pen/pencil in hand in order to **annotate** the text – underline/circle important passages, mark words to look up, ask questions in the margins, follow and mark the structure of the text, the writer's use of certain conventions, etc. If you're reading/viewing a text online, these notes become even more important!
2. Pause from time to time to **reflect** on what you're reading. Take time to think holistically about what you've read so far and jot down questions/assumptions that result from your reflections.
3. Interrogate the text – test the writer's claims against your own experiences and knowledge, then think about what the world looks like from the writer's perspective (what would make s/he write, think, believe, hope for these things?).
4. Consider the **audience** of the text. Who is this text made for? How can you tell? How does the writer address the needs of this audience? Are these needs the same or different from your own? How? Why?
5. When you are finished, write a very brief **summary** of the text.

***Further strategies for reading rhetorically and identifying structures of the text --***

- Pay attention to the title (and the subtitle) – it can tell you what the text is about, or even state the central claim explicitly; it can make reference to other writings, subjects, or events that you will recognize; and, it can express the writer's attitude about the subject.
- As you read/view the text for the first time, look for the main idea and pay attention to the structure of the text as a whole. Make a skeleton outline of the structure of the text. Focus first on larger structures, then, when you read/view the text again, you can fill in the details and evaluate how well they serve the larger structure.
- Keep your mind open for textual claims that aren't stated but are inferred. Pay attention to how that inference happens.
- In an alphabetic print text, pay attention to topic sentences – they are a crucial marker of structure and movement throughout a text. In online texts, look for major textual or visual structures (headings, whitespace, etc.)
- Don't overlook language signposts, especially transitional words ("next," "finally," "however," "at first glance," "for example," etc.) that signal structure and logic within the text.

- Figure out a system for dealing with unfamiliar words – either looking them up in a dictionary or guessing what they mean from context. Particular words are often crucial to meaning in an essay.
- If you use a highlighter (or if you underline) as you read to mark main points, use it sparingly. Marking passages is meant to direct you to major ideas. It can sometimes be more helpful to write “claim” and “support” next to passages in the text so that you can readily identify these components of the argument.
- Try mapping the text -- make a map of relationships in the text (between people and between other things as well); make a map of the movement of the text (what happens when, what’s the pattern); make a map of significant objects/animals/ideas in the text (what’s important to notice, why?)
- Ask questions of the text. How does the writer see/imagine the world? Is the writer telling a story in the text? if so, what’s the function of the story? how does the story work? what gets shown in the story?
- Talk about the reading with other people – your group and your classmates.

***Some strategies specific to visual texts:***

Pay attention to your own initial responses to the text. What do you notice first? What else? Map the order of thing that you notice. Then, try to describe the text in a way that someone who wasn’t looking at it could “see” it in their head – sometimes it helps to start in the upper left-hand corner and work across the page and down to the lower right-hand corner. No matter how you do it, make sure to note major components of the image, text inserts, color changes or contrasts. etc.

Then, answer the following questions:

- What does the maker/writer want me to do or believe? How important are the visual aspects of this image in persuading me to comply?
- Has the image been accompanied by sufficient text to answer questions I may have about the claim?
- Are the visual elements more prominent than the text? Why or why not?
- Is the visual image representative of a larger group, or it is an exception that can’t support the claim the arguer is trying to make?
- Does the arrangement of the components of the visual tell me what the maker/writer considers most important?
- Can the validity of any charts, statistics or data be verified?
- Does the image lead me to have unrealistic expectations?
- What other components of rhetorical reading would be helpful here?