

Rhetoric and Analysis

at You Will Learn

- ▶ To determine the main idea, purpose, tone, author's credibility, and emotional effect of a text
- ▶ To analyze how a text's arrangement, diction, syntax, imagery and allusions, and figures of rhetoric support the main idea
- ▶ To write a rhetorical analysis essay

As the first three chapters suggest, we analyze nonstop while we read and write. But clearly analysis is not just a reading and writing activity. Consider following ways you analyze in your daily lives.

If you're thinking about going to college, you need to analyze the various factors involved in making a wise choice of institutions: How do people characterize the quality and reputation of the school? How much do tuition, fees, books, and room and board cost? Does the school have a good program in your proposed major? What is the social life like? Is the school close to your home—if you want to stay close?

If you're working on a computer and you lose your connection to the Internet, you need to analyze what has gone wrong: Has the web site gone down? Has your location lost its Internet connection? Has something gone wrong with your particular computer? Did you do something to disconnect the Internet?

If you're planning a major trip in a car, you need to analyze a range of options: Do you want simply to take the shortest route? Do you want to avoid congested traffic? Do you want to enjoy beautiful scenery? Do you want to stop off someplace—a shopping mall, a historic site, somebody's house—along the way?

In other words, you analyze all the time, and you analyze in similar ways no matter what the problem or plan. Notice what these situations share:

- They all have a big central question: Is this the best college or university for me? What has gone wrong with the Internet? What is the best route for our road trip?
- They all involve a series of smaller, more detailed speculations about the “component parts” that help answer the big, central issue: What's the cost? Is the computer plugged in? Will we stop on the trip?
- They all call on you to analyze.

Analysis is a term used so often that we seldom stop to think what exactly it means. It's helpful to return to the word's *etymology*, its origin. **Analysis** comes from an ancient Greek word meaning to unravel or loosen. For thinkers in the classical world of Greece and Rome, analysis referred to a systematic process of investigation, unraveling elements to see how they worked.

That's a pretty fair characterization of how the word is used today. When you analyze anything, whether for a specific assignment or for your everyday reading and homework, you think about the big question. Then you unravel it. You untie it. You divide it into its components to investigate it systematically, to see how its parts work, and to determine how the parts speak to the whole.

Think of all the opportunities you might have in school to engage in analysis during a typical semester. In economics, you analyze how stock market prices vary with unemployment statistics. In humanities, you analyze how Picasso's *Guernica* conveys an attitude about war. In health, you analyze the effects of diet on athletic performance. To begin the analysis in any of these classes, you confront the big, central question: In general, how does the stock market respond to unemployment rates? What is the central idea about war in *Guernica*? How important are proteins and carbohydrates in an athlete's diet? Then you unravel and loosen the object of analysis—the stock market, the painting, the diet—in order to formulate the “component parts” probes that collectively lead to an answer to the big central question.

In short, the keys to analysis—to the type of reading, thinking, and writing you must do in your everyday life, in many of your classes, and certainly on the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition examination—are two:

1. Determining and addressing the big central question of whatever you're being asked to analyze.
2. Probing how the component parts of the object at hand collectively answer the big central question.

There's an important idea related to this last point. Once you determine the components, the elements that make up the whole, you make decisions about which might be most important, which are less relevant, and you structure your analysis to reflect your evaluation of the elements you've examined.

In the rest of this chapter, we'll concentrate on how to do both these operations—find big ideas, examine and evaluate the parts that make them up—carefully and systematically in relation to a text. In short, we'll focus on how to do **rhetorical analysis**.

Three Texts for Our Analyses

Throughout this chapter, we'll need to refer specifically to whole texts and passages to make clear how you do a rhetorical analysis. So here are three pieces that we'll use: (1) the first chapter of a biography, in which Walter Isaacson examines the relevance of Benjamin Franklin's accomplishments for our own time; (2) the entire text of President Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address; and (3) a poem, "Indiar Boarding School: The Runaways," by the contemporary writer Louise Erdrich.

Walter Isaacson

Benjamin Franklin and the Invention of America

His arrival in Philadelphia is one of the most famous scenes in autobiographical literature: the bedraggled 17-year-old runaway, cheeky yet with a pretense of humility, straggling off the boat and buying three puffy rolls as he wanders up Market Street. But wait a minute. There's something more. Peel back a layer and we can see him as a 65-year-old wry observer, sitting in an English country house, writing this scene, pretending it's part of a letter to his son, an illegitimate son who has become a royal governor with aristocratic pretensions and needs to be reminded of his humble roots.

A careful look at the manuscript peels back yet another layer. Inserted into the sentence about his pilgrim's progress up Market Street is a phrase, written in the margin, in which he notes that he passed by the house of his future wife, Deborah Read, and that "she, standing at the door, saw me and thought I made, as I certainly did, a most awkward ridiculous appearance." So here we have, in a brief paragraph, the multilayered character known so fondly to his author as Benjamin Franklin: as a young man, then seen through the eyes of his older self, and then through the memories later recounted by his wife. It's all topped off with the old man's deft little affirmation—"as I certainly did"—in which his self-deprecation barely cloaks the pride he felt regarding his remarkable rise in the world.

Benjamin Franklin is the founding father who winks at us. George Washington's colleagues found it hard to imagine touching the austere general on the shoulder, and we would find it even more so today. Jefferson and Adams are just as intimidating. But Ben Franklin, that ambitious urban entrepreneur, seems made of flesh rather than of marble, addressable by nickname, and he turns to us from history's stage with eyes that twinkle from behind those newfangled spectacles. He speaks to us, through his letters and hoaxes and autobiography, not with orotund rhetoric but with a chattiness and clever irony that is very contemporary, sometimes unnervingly so. We see his reflection in our own time.

He was, during his eighty-four-year-long life, America's best scientist, inventor, diplomat, writer, and business strategist, and he was also one of its most practical, though not most profound, political thinkers. He proved by flying a kite that lightning was electricity, and he invented a rod to tame it. He devised bifocal glasses and clean-burning stoves, charts of the Gulf Stream and theories about the contagious nature of the common cold. He launched various civic improvement schemes, such as a lending library, college, volunteer fire corps, insurance association, and matching grant fundraiser. He helped invent America's unique style of homespun humor and philosophical pragmatism. In foreign policy, he created an approach that wove together idealism with balance-of-power realism. And in politics, he proposed seminal plans for uniting the colonies and creating a federal model for a national government.

But the most interesting thing that Franklin invented, and continually reinvented, was himself. America's first great publicist, he was, in his life and in his writings, consciously trying to create a new American archetype. In the process, he carefully crafted his own persona, portrayed it in public, and polished it for posterity.

Partly, it was a matter of image. As a young printer in Philadelphia, he carted rolls of paper through the streets to give the appearance of being industrious. As an old diplomat in France, he wore a fur cap to portray the role of backwoods sage. In between, he created an image for himself as a simple yet striving tradesman, assiduously honing the virtues—diligence, frugality, honesty—of a good shopkeeper and beneficent member of his community.

But the image he created was rooted in reality. Born and bred a member of the leather-aproned class, Franklin was, at least for most of his life, more comfortable with artisans and thinkers than with the established elite, and he was allergic to the pomp and perks of a hereditary aristocracy. Throughout his life he would refer to himself as "B. Franklin, printer."

From these attitudes sprang what may be Franklin's most important vision: an American national identity based on the virtues and values of its middle class. Instinctively more comfortable with democracy than were some of his fellow founders, and devoid of the snobbery that later critics would feel toward his own shopkeeping values, he had faith in the wisdom of the common man and felt that a new nation would draw its strength from what he called "the middling people." Through his self-improvement tips for cultivating personal virtues and his civic-improvement schemes for furthering the common good, he helped to create, and to celebrate, a new ruling class of ordinary citizens.

The complex interplay among various facets of Franklin's character—his ingenuity and unreflective wisdom, his Protestant ethic divorced from dogma, the principles he held firm and those he was willing to compromise—means