

**ACTIVITY** A Quick Look at Audience

Having read Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, discuss these two questions with a classmate or in a group: Whom does Lincoln's text seem to be addressing? How do you know?

## Starting Rhetorical Analysis: Answering the Big Central Question and Four Related Questions

Writers always write to initiate the making of meaning. They create words that they know readers will encounter, interpret, and comprehend—in other words, readers will complete the making of meaning that the writers jump-start. The first step in writing analytically, therefore, requires you to be a “meaning-completing” reader, to take a leap of faith and *hypothesize* the big central question and a possible answer to it:

- **What is the central point, the major idea, that the author wants readers to understand about the subject?** In rhetorical terms, this idea would be the text's central **claim** or **thesis**. In this chapter, let's call it the “take-home idea.”

In addition, you need to hypothesize about four other questions related to the take-home idea:

- **What is the author's primary purpose?** What does the author want to do for the readers: Inform them about something they need to know? Convince them to accept a proposition? Persuade them to think or act in a different way? Clarify an unclear concept? Amuse?
- **What attitude toward the subject matter does the author want readers to believe the author holds?** Serious about the subject at hand? Whimsical? Reverential? Ironic? Angry? This component of analysis is the **tone** of the piece.
- **How does the author convince the readers that the author is credible, trustworthy, worth listening to?** In rhetorical terms, how does the author establish his or her *ethos*?
- **What emotional effect does the author want to have on readers?** Does the author want to make readers happy? Angry? Satisfied or dissatisfied? Comfortable or uncomfortable? In rhetorical terms, how does the piece appeal to the readers' *pathos*?

Some people would argue that you can never know for certain what main point an author wants you to get in a text, what primary purpose the author wants to try to accomplish, what tone the author hopes to convey, how the author creates credibility, or what emotional effect the author wants to have on readers. You can't get

inside an author's head, these people argue, and, besides, even if an author did tell you about any of these things, he or she might not tell you the truth.

Fair enough. But the analyst must play the “what if” game: “What if I propose that X is the main idea of this text? What if I propose the author was trying to accomplish this purpose? What if I propose this is the tone the author was trying to convey? What if I argue that the author's credibility is established in ways that I specify? What if I maintain that the author was trying to have this emotional effect on the readers?” Once you make *hypotheses*, thoughtful speculations about what's being studied, rather than attempting to guess at what the author intended, you can generate good interpretations of big ideas and the elements that make them up. Notice that the word *I* is important. Other readers might find other big questions, and alternate elements that they regard as important. Analysis, like writing itself, is no exact science. It's an act of communication and thus an act of negotiation, what we think, what we read, how we put our thinking and our reading together.

**ACTIVITY** A First Pass at Analysis

Read the introductory chapter from Walter Isaacson's 2003 biography of Benjamin Franklin. Assume that Isaacson's primary audience consists of mostly well-educated adults who have a strong interest in contemporary political and social issues. Then, with a classmate, answer as specifically as you can the following questions:

1. What do you think is the big central question Isaacson is addressing in this piece? What is your hypothesized answer to that question?
2. What is the primary purpose Isaacson is trying to accomplish for his readers? What are some secondary purposes?
3. What tone is Isaacson trying to convey about his subject?
4. Why do you find Isaacson credible and trustworthy on the subject?
5. What emotional effect do you think Isaacson hopes his chapter will have on readers?

### Hypothesizing about the Take-Home Idea

One big misperception that beginning analysts have is that the take-home idea is someplace on the page, in the text, and all you have to do is find it and underline it. That's generally not the case. There are often hints or clues about the main point in the text, but the actual construction of the take-home idea requires that you, the reader, participate in making meaning from the text as you read.

Let's assume that you and your classmates are interested in the political and social issues that Isaacson raises. Here's how you assist the text in *creating* the main idea:

1. **You ask yourself the big central question.** Why should we care about Benjamin Franklin now?

2. **You offer, as a hypothesis, your own answer to the big central question(s) that is full enough, robust enough to do justice to the text.** For example, simply quoting Isaacson and saying “Franklin has a particular resonance in twenty-first century America” doesn’t represent the richness of Isaacson’s thought. A better version would be this: “Franklin’s character is particularly appealing to twenty-first-century thinkers, like my classmates and me, because of his emphasis on his own humble beginnings, his practical wisdom and inventiveness, his faith in ‘the middling people,’ and his belief that faith in the divine translates into doing good for his fellow humans.”
3. **You find, in the text, specific pieces of evidence, examples, and reasons that support your answer to the big, central issue question.** You could mention, for instance, the anecdote he tells about his awkward first appearance to his eventual wife as demonstrating his humility. You could discuss his many discoveries and inventions—electricity in lightning, bifocal glasses, the lending library—as examples of his practical wisdom. You could examine how his list of virtues fostered religious and civic tolerance among his fellow citizens.
4. **You identify and explain (and this is the tricky part) the unspoken assumptions and ideas that come into play for the readers of the article when you connect your answer to the big, central issue question with the actual evidence, examples, and reasons you find in the text to support it.** In other words, you ask, “What do people like us think about when they consider subjects like the one at hand, and how does this text interact with that thinking?” So, for example, you might explain two sets of assumptions and ideas that come into play: (a) Some of us might think that true wisdom can only come from higher-level, specialized studies, rather than from interacting with humans and achieving a practical wisdom of human psychology. Franklin gives the lie to this assumption. (b) Most people genuinely trust a political figure who can convince them that he is truly altruistic, has their best interests in mind, and is just as “human” as they are. Franklin, of course, confirms that assumption.

Notice that, in this step, *you* participate in the making of meaning by drawing on these unspoken assumptions.

One way to characterize this four-part activity is shown in Figure 4.1:

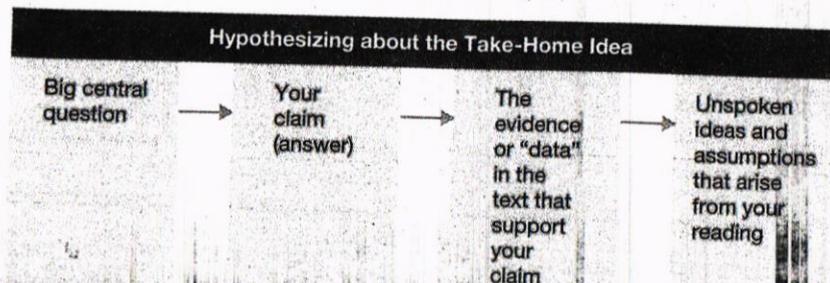


FIGURE 4.1

In short, to provide a basis for your analysis, you pose the big central question that you think the text is raising. Then you offer a *claim*, what you believe is a well-rounded answer to the big central question. You cite material that’s actually in the text or on the page—called “data” in scare quotes, because it’s not always “hard empirical data such as scientists generate, but it is tangible evidence, examples, or reasons—that you believe supports your answer. Then you explain those sets of ideas, attitudes, and assumptions that are usually not on the page but that people generally believe about the topic at hand.

## Hypothesizing about the Purpose

At first glance, offering a hypothesis about the author’s purpose is considerably more straightforward than constructing the take-home idea. You ask yourself, “What do I think the author—Walter Isaacson in this instance—is trying to accomplish for us, his readers?” Hypothesizing about purpose is not as simple as it might sound, though. A good analyst looks at all the *possible* purposes the text might accomplish for its readers and then asks which one is, arguably, the *primary* purpose and which are *secondary*.

Look again at “Benjamin Franklin and the Invention of America.” Certainly, Isaacson knows some facts about Franklin and is trying to convey them to us, but is his primary purpose to inform us? Maybe Isaacson would like us—well-informed readers in the twenty-first century—to act more like Franklin, but it’s not apparent from the text that he’d like us to change our behaviors. So is his primary purpose to persuade us to rethink what we might believe? A good hypothesis about the book’s purpose might be something like this: “Primarily, Isaacson wants to convey an idea to us—that Franklin’s attractiveness to twenty-first-century thinkers makes sense—and to convince us to accept that idea. So, the primary purpose of this excerpt would be to convince; its secondary purposes would be to inform and to rethink.”

## Hypothesizing about the Tone

This hypothesis is pretty simple. Isaacson clearly admires the daylights out of Franklin and wants us to share in his admiration. Notice the depth of detail Isaacson offers as he touts Franklin’s many accomplishments and his outgoing, amiable, altruistic personality. Clearly, Isaacson assumes that we, his readers, appreciate those accomplishments and characteristics as much as he does. Thus, his tone is admiring and respectful.

## Hypothesizing about the Author’s Credibility

Isaacson makes three “moves”—strategies that many successful writers use—to convince us that he’s a trustworthy, credible author.

1. He has done his homework: He *knows* lots of specific details and colorful stories about Franklin, and he shares them vividly.