

**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?