

# A Sample Rhetorical Analysis

What should a rhetorical analysis look like? An analytic essay is a relatively straightforward genre. It does not call for a very long introduction. Like most good answers on essay examinations, it calls on the writer to state clearly what he or she intends to demonstrate, to offer a map of how the development will proceed, to offer strong claims (specifically, claims about how the component parts of the text flesh out its take-home idea, purpose, and tone), to support those claims with specific evidence drawn from the text under consideration, and to conclude briefly and forcefully.

Let's return to Walter Isaacson's "Benjamin Franklin and the Invention of America" reprinted above. Consider the sample rhetorical analysis produced by the exemplary first-year college student Darcy Bell.

Darcy understands "rhetorical analysis for whom," and she will take Isaacson's audience into consideration.

Darcy introduces tone as a point of analysis.

Darcy summarizes what she sees as Isaacson's central idea.

Darcy has learned about the six-part oration for argumentative essays (see Chapter 5).

Darcy provides a map of her essay, laying out the analytic points she will unpack.

Darcy shows how Isaacson uses anecdote and detail to support each of the four points she listed in her summary of the main idea.

Darcy Bell

## A Rhetorical Analysis of Walter Isaacson's "Benjamin Franklin and the Invention of America"

Writing to an audience of readers interested in politics during an era when Americans might not have held their leaders in high esteem, Walter Isaacson in "Benjamin Franklin and the Invention of America" offers a glowing portrait of Benjamin Franklin, explaining that Franklin's character is particularly appealing to a twenty-first-century audience because of his emphasis on his own humble humanity, 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. Hinting that contemporary politicians might heed Franklin's model, Isaacson achieves his explanatory purpose by providing a rich store of vivid anecdotes, both real and hypothetical; by creating a sound model of a six-part essay; and by crafting his diction and syntax so that the admiring, almost reverential tone of the essay is inescapable.

Like all good writers, Isaacson does not merely tell his readers about his topic, the virtuous characteristics that Franklin embodied. He shows Franklin's qualities by providing lively stories from the past, inventing amusing scenarios that might exist today, and listing abundant

meanings or the meaning of a homonym. Puns have a bad reputation—and it's often well deserved. But sometimes a good pun can really attract a reader's attention:

The tipped-but-caught third strike, ending a bases-loaded rally, was a foul most foul.

Two additional word-play tropes are:

- **Anthimeria** (an-thuh-MEER-ee-uh): One part of speech, usually a verb, substitutes for another, usually a noun.

When the Little Leaguers lost the championship, they needed just to have a good cry before they could feel okay about their season.

- **Onomatopoeia** (ahn-u-mah-tuh-PEE-uh): Sounds of the words used are related to their meaning.

Oh, the tintinnabulation of the bells

**Tropes Involving Overstatement or Understatement** A writer, ironically, can help readers see an idea or point clearly by overstating it or understating it. The trope of overstatement is called **hyperbole** (hye-PUHR-boh-lee):

He couldn't make that shot again if he tried a million times.

while the trope for understatement is called **litotes** (LYE-tuh-tees):

Shutting out the opponents for three straight games is no small feat for a goaltender.

**Tropes Involving the Management of Meaning** Some tropes can be seen as techniques that simply allow a writer to play with the meaning and development of ideas in strategic ways.

- **Irony**: Words are meant to convey the opposite of their literal meaning.

Their center is over seven feet tall—where do they come up with these little pipsqueaks?

When irony has a particularly biting or bitter tone, it is called **sarcasm**.

- **Oxymoron**: Words that have apparently contradictory meanings are placed near each other.

When you have to face your best friend in competition, whoever wins feels an aching pleasure.

- **Rhetorical question**: A question is designed not to secure an answer but to move the development of an idea forward and suggest a point.

Aren't I a woman?

## ACTIVITY Analyzing Figures of Rhetoric

You've seen lots of examples of figures above, many of them coming from the literature you're reading in this book. See if you can find another example of a trope or scheme in either Lincoln's Second Inaugural or Isaacson's "Benjamin Franklin and the Invention of America" and explain how that figure produces an effect on your reading.