

• Reading Rhetorically

Reading is more than simply scanning a page for pertinent information or consuming a text for its main point or points. The act of reading involves the reader and the text itself, as well as the writer of the text. Reading is an exchange of information between reader and writer.

Furthermore, knowledge is constructed on both sides of this exchange; both the writer and the reader play a role in constructing an interpretation of the text between them.

Reading a text rhetorically does not involve a correct interpretation or a decision on a reader's part to "believe" a text. And while you may choose to focus on the symbolism of a text, for example, or the historical elements of a text, you may do so as part of a larger goal: deciding and making an argument about how an author, even of fiction or drama, makes rhetorical choices as a means to persuade their readers of some "truth" at work in their text.

Below is a list of questions that may help you begin reading rhetorically. These questions are familiar starting points for any textual analysis; however, by foregrounding these questions in rhetorical terms, you can apply these reading skills across any text.

Subject matter. What is the general subject of the text? Does the subject mean anything to you? Does it bring up any personal or public associations? Is the subject a controversial one?

Thesis. What is the thesis (the overall main point)? How does the thesis interpret/comment on the subject? Are there any secondary points (subplots)? What are they? How do they interpret/comment on the subject? Do these secondary points coincide with the main point?

Tone. What is the tone of the text? Do you react on an emotional level to the text? Does this reaction change at all throughout the text?

Purpose. What is the writer's purpose? To explain? To inform? To anger? Persuade? Amuse? Motivate? Sadden? Ridicule? Anger? Entertain? Is there more than one purpose? Does the purpose shift at all throughout the text?

Presentation of ideas. How does the writer develop her/his ideas? Narration? Description? Definition? Comparison? Analogy? Cause and Effect? Example? Why does the writer use these methods of development?

Arrangement. How does the writer arrange her/his ideas? What are the patterns of arrangement? Particular to general? Broad to specific? Spatial? Chronological? Alternating? Block?

Transitions. Is the text unified and coherent? Are there adequate transitions? How do the transitions work?

Style. What is the sentence structure like in the text? Does the writer use fragments or run-ons? Declarative? Imperative? Interrogative? Exclamatory? Are they simple? Compound? Complex? Compound-complex? Short? Long? Loose? Periodic? Balanced? Parallel? Are

there any patterns in the sentence structure? Can you make any connections between the patterns and the writer's purpose?

Dialogue. Does the writer use dialogue? Quotations? To what effect? How does the tone of the dialogue shift between characters? How does the writer use dialogue to develop character(s)?

Diction. How does the writer use diction? Is it formal? Informal? Technical? Jargon? Slang? Is the language emotionally evocative? Does the language change throughout the piece? How does the language contribute to the writer's aim?

Punctuation. Is there anything unusual in the writer's use of punctuation? What punctuation or other techniques of emphasis (italics, capitals, underlining, ellipses, parentheses) does the writer use? Is punctuation over- or under-used? Which marks does the writer use when, and for what effects? Dashes to create a hasty breathlessness? Semi-colons for balance or contrast?

Repetition. Are important terms repeated throughout the text? Why? How does the writer incorporate that repetition?

Imagery. Are there any particularly vivid images that stand out? What effect do these images have on the writer's purpose?

Figurative language and tropes. Are devices of comparison used to convey or enhance meaning? Which tropes—similes, metaphors, personification, hyperbole, etc.—does the writer use? When does she/he use them? Why? Does the writer use devices of humor? Puns? Irony? Sarcasm? Understatement? Parody? Is the effect comic relief? Pleasure? Hysteria? Ridicule?