

Rhetorical analysis

Rhetoric is the art of using effective means of communicating to *inform*, *motivate* or (especially) *persuade* audiences. A situation becomes rhetorical once you believe that you can change something by uttering something.

You can perform rhetorical analyses on almost any text, but it is especially relevant when analyzing non-fiction texts such as:

- Speeches
- Opinion pieces
- Advertisements
- Essays
- Articles
- Documentary films, etc.

The point of rhetorical analysis is basically to examine how the author of a text argues, and whether he/she is likely to influence his/her intended audience.

Typically a good rhetorical analysis will consist of (at least) these two elements:

1. An analysis of the **rhetorical situation** (using the rhetorical pentagon, see next page).
2. An analysis of the **modes of persuasion** used in the text (ethos, logos, pathos).

Modes of persuasion

There are three modes of persuasion: *ethos*, *logos*, *pathos* — each signaling a specific way for the speaker to appeal to his audience. All three of them are always present in a rhetorical text, although it is rare that they are all used to the same extent.

Ethos: Appeals to trust

A speaker's *ethos* is based on his background, job, experience, merits, education, etc. When you analyze from an *ethos* perspective, you determine whether the speaker seems trustworthy.

Pathos: Appeals to emotions

Pathos is used to make the audience emotionally involved in the text.

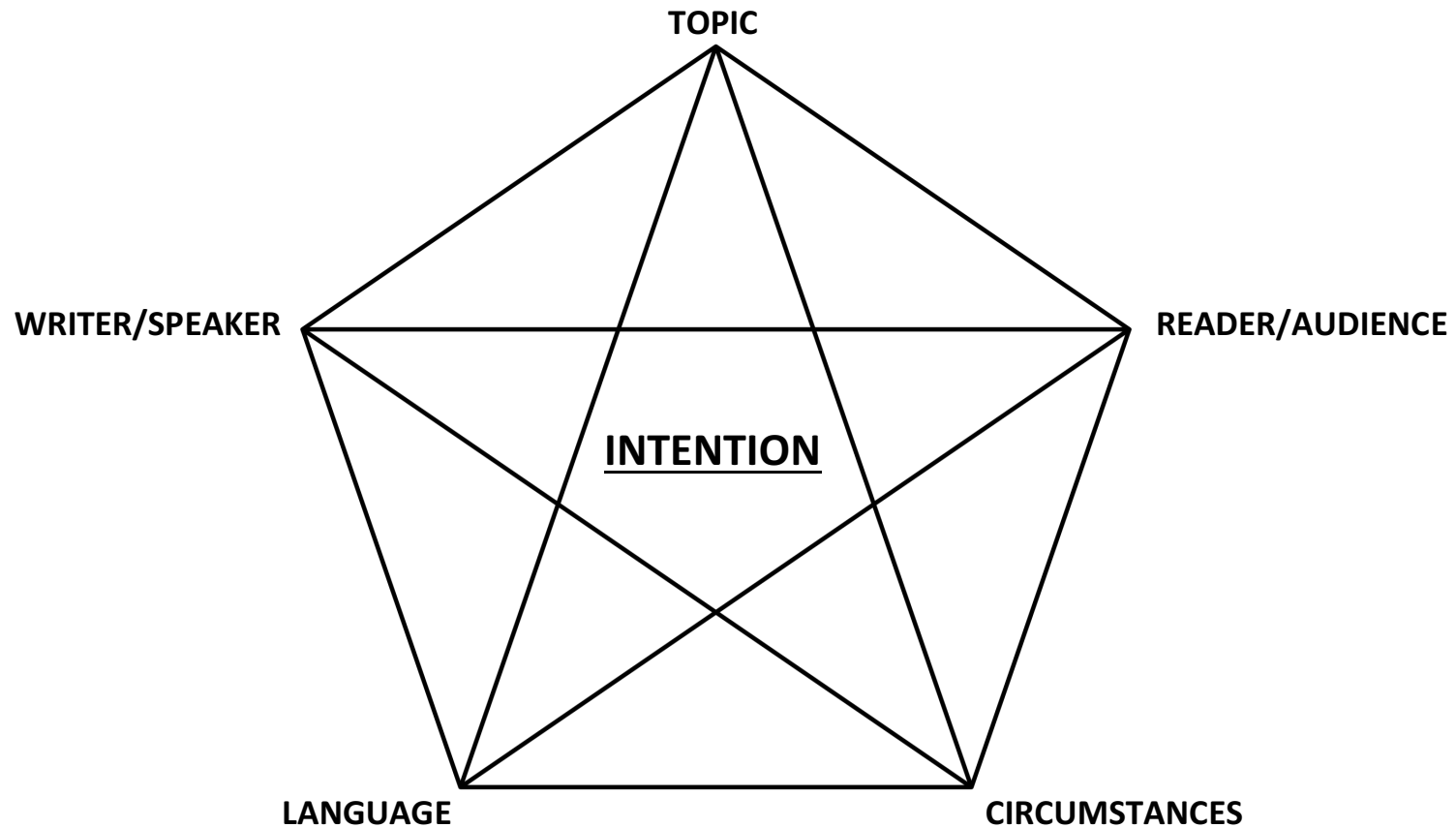
When you comment on *pathos*, you point out where in the text the speaker says something that appeals to the listener's emotions and why he does so. If, for example, a speaker mentions children, many listeners will become emotional because many people become vulnerable when thinking about their own children, their childhood, etc.

Logos: Appeals to logic

Logos is used when the speaker mentions facts, historical events, statistics, etc. When actual facts are mentioned, the text may seem more trustworthy, and the use of *logos* can thus convince the listener to trust the speaker.

The rhetorical pentagon

The five basic components of the model (topic, writer, reader, language, circumstances) are placed in each of the corners of the rhetorical pentagon, while the most important component, **intention**, is placed in the middle.



Topic

What is the subject of the speech/text?

Writer/speaker

Who is giving the speech/writing the text?

- And what do we know about this person?

Reader/audience

Who is likely to be the recipient of the text?

Be aware of the possibility that there might be several recipients!

Language

What kind of language does the writer use?

- Is it slang? Complex language? Something else?
- What does that tell you about the writer/reader?

Circumstances

Under which circumstances was the text produced?

- Did an event make motivate the writer to produce the text?
- Under which circumstances does the reader read the text?
- What is the medium used for the text?

It makes a difference whether it is a text meant for national TV or a small-scale personal blog.

Intention

What does the writer want to achieve?

Example: *George W. Bush's speech after 9/11*

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, President George W. Bush (**writer**) gave a speech to the American public.

The **topic** of the speech was to overcome and fight back against the attack.

The **circumstances** of the speech were that the Americans had just been victimized by terrorists. The President reacted to the event by commemorating the victims, trying to unite the citizens against the terrorists. The President used national TV as a medium to reach as many citizens as possible (**reader/audience**), and his audience was eager to hear what he had to say.

The **language** was everyday American, neither too advanced nor too colloquial, but including a biblical quote. Throughout the speech there was a prominent use of *pathos*.

The **intention** of the speech was to unite the American public in sorrow for the victims and to move forward as a stronger country.

Sources

- Bianca Erlich-Møller & Mathilde Thomsen, "Black Voices: The African-American Experience from Slavery to Current Racial Issues". Gyldendal, 2016.