

Analysis and interpretation of non-fiction

Introduction This guide will help you analyse and interpret works of non-fiction. This handout is just an overview, you might want to consult *Tools* or *Angles Analysis* (both on lectio) for more information.

Remember to always:

- Ask ‘why?’ and ‘what is the effect?’ (e.g., What is the effect of the use of pathos?).
- Support your analysis with specific examples (quotations).
- Focus on the most significant analytical elements for the text in question.
- Consider how different elements work together to achieve the author’s purpose

Genre: What type of text are you analysing?

Different non-fiction genres have different conventions and purposes:

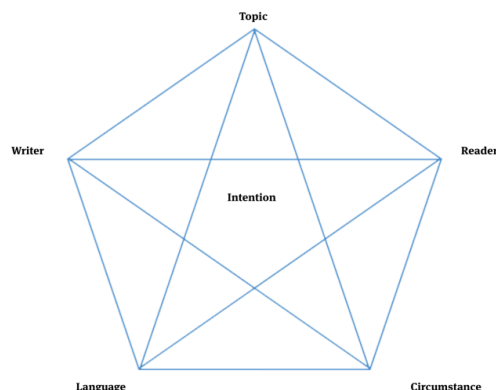
- Speech (formal address to an audience)
- Essay (exploration of ideas)
- Opinion piece/editorial (argument about current issues)
- News article (factual reporting)

Rhetorical situation

- **Topic/subject: What is the text about?**
 - What is the main subject? How is the topic framed or approached? What aspects are emphasized or minimized?
- **Sender/writer/speaker: Who created the text?**
 - What do we know about the sender’s background, status, views, qualifications etc.? Is the background reflected in the style and/or content?
- **Receiver/audience/reader: Who is the intended to read the text?**
 - Who would be likely to be the receivers of the communication (age, education level, nationality, cultural background, prior knowledge of the topic etc.)
- **Medium: where did the text originally appear?**
 - i.e., what paper, book, website etc.?
- **Context/circumstance:** Under what circumstances was the text created?
 - could be influenced by place, time, situation, culture) and for what occasion was the text written?
- **Language: Which language is used?** (see next pages)

The rhetorical pentagon

The rhetorical pentagon can be used to analyse non-fiction. The lines indicate that all five elements in the corners of the pentagon are linked. If you change one of these elements, it will influence the others. In the centre of it all is the intention.



Intention (purpose): Why has the text been written?

- a. To inform? To persuade? To entertain? To discuss? To provoke? Something else?
- b. Many texts have multiple purposes that work together.
- c. Example: A campaign speech primarily aims to persuade voters, but also informs them about policies and entertains them with engaging delivery and occasional humor.

Modes of appeal/ modes of persuasion: How does the writer try to convince the reader?

- a. **Logos** (appeal to reason) by using facts, figures, statistics, surveys, logical arguments etc.
 - a. Academic arguments often rely on logos, and logos is often used to strengthen/establish ethos by supporting the trustworthiness of the speaker.
 - b. Key elements: theoretical language, historical comparisons, definitions, factual data, statistics, and surveys.
 - c. Example: "Research from Harvard University shows that 85% of plastic bottles end up in landfills, creating 1.5 million tons of waste annually. This demonstrates the urgent need for recycling reform."
- b. **Pathos** (appeal to our emotions), e.g., scare us, make us angry, stir our compassion etc.
 - a. It can be made in the form of a personal stories, a claim that the matter is unfair or unjust or something else.
 - b. Key elements: emotional language, colourful descriptions, personal stories, and figurative language.
 - c. Example: A campaign speech primarily aims to persuade voters, but also informs them about policies and entertains them with engaging delivery and occasional humor.
- c. **Ethos** (appeal to our trust) by building our confidence in her/him.
 - a. A sender's ethos can be based on a person's background, job, experience, merits, and education. When you analyse ethos, you find out whether the audience can trust the speaker (whether the speaker has high or low ethos).
 - b. Key elements: a special interest in and authority on the subject, expert, correct grammar, suitable vocabulary, and balanced presentation.
 - c. Example: "As a marine biologist who has studied ocean pollution for twenty years, I've witnessed firsthand the devastating impact of plastic waste on sea life."

Language: what kind of language is used and what does it tell us about the sender's attitude towards the subject?

- **Formality:** Formal vs. informal (colloquial, slang)
- **Descriptive vs. minimalist** writing
- **Simple vs. complex sentence structures**
- **Word choice:** Does the author use many verbs/adjectives/adverbs, and what is the effect of this?
- Is the **tone** factual, humorous, aggressive, optimistic, friendly, hostile or something else?
- Use of **rhetorical devices** such as repetition, contrasts. See on the following page.
- How have specific words been chosen and what are their connotations ('associations')? Do they target a specific audience? Do they establish a specific level of formality and mood?

Arguments

- What is the claim(s) (påstand)? What is the evidence (beleg) (ways of proving the claim is true)?
 - Do the arguments (argumenter) hold water? Why/why not?
 - For the more advanced student: What is the warrant (hjemmel) in the argument? Does the sender use a rebuttal (gendrivelse)? (Consult *Angles Analysis* or *Tools* for more).
 - What could be some of the counterarguments?

Message

What is the message? Are we meant to learn something from the text? Do you suspect any hidden agendas or motives?

Relate the text to another/other text(s) from the theme.

Examples of rhetorical devices

A rhetorical device uses words in a certain way to convey meaning, to persuade, or to evoke certain emotions. Always consider the effect of the rhetorical device, why did the sender choose to employ this device?

- **Allusion** – a reference to an event, literary work, or person – *I can't do that because I am not **Superman**.*
- **Antithesis** – opposition or contrasts of words – *It was the **best** of times, it was the **worst** of times* or *Love is an **ideal** thing, marriage a **real** thing*
- **Euphemism** – a word or expression used in place of one that is deemed offensive or suggests something unpleasant – 'Senior citizen' is a euphemism for 'old person'.
- **Hyperbole** – an exaggeration – *I have done this a thousand times.*
- **Hypophora** – Hypophora is a figure of speech in which a writer raises a question, and then immediately provides an answer to that question – *What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities ...*
- **Idiom** – a group of words in a fixed order that has a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own – To 'have bitten off more than you can chew' is an idiom that means you have tried to do something which is too difficult for you.
- **Intertextuality** – the relationship between texts, especially literary ones (it could be an allusion).
- **Metaphor** – compares two things by stating one is the other – *The eyes are the windows of the soul.*
- **Onomatopoeia** – words that imitate the sound they describe – *Miaow, slam, pow and bang.*
- **Oxymoron** – a two-word paradox – *a wise fool, cruel kindness.*
- **Personification** – giving human qualities to something that is non-human – *happy trees.*
- **Pun** – a humorous use of a word or phrase that has several meanings or that sounds like another word – This is a well-known joke based on a pun: "What's black and white and red (= read) all over?" "A newspaper."
- **Repetition** (Each type of repetition serves different rhetorical purposes, including emphasis, rhythm, memorability, emotional impact, and persuasive effect.)
 - **Word or Phrase Repetition:**
 - **Amplification** – repeats a word or expression for emphasis – *Love, real love, takes time.*
 - **Anaphora** – repeats a word or phrase in successive phrase – *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity.*
 - **Antimetabole** – repeats words or phrases in reverse order – *Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.*
 - **Epistrophe** – the repetition of a word at the end of successive clauses or sentences – *I want the best, and we need the best, and we deserve the best.*
 - **Sound Repetition:**
 - **Alliteration** – the recurrence of initial consonant sounds – *Mary made magnificent muffins.*
 - **Assonance** – Repetition of vowel sounds – *The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain* or *He sees the sea and dreams of peace.*
 - **Consonance** – Repetition of consonant sounds – *Mike likes his new bike.*
- **Rhetorical questions** – a question that does not need an answer, because the answer is implied – *Are we winners or are we losers?*
- **Simile** – compares one object to another – *he smokes like a chimney.*
- **Tricolon (triplet, the rule of three)** – series of three parallel words or phrases – *Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn* Or *Yesterday, today, and tomorrow*
- **Understatement** – makes an idea less important than it really is – *the hurricane disrupted traffic.*