**Rhetoric Studies**

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In rhetoric papers, students get to analyze and incorporate topics from a wide range of disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, politics, art, history, film and others through artefact analyses. What distinguishes rhetoric papers from others is the fact that you analyze what is being said, and not necessarily what happened. However, the student does need to provide some background for artefact analyses.

You provide some background, not another interpretation of the event or artefact, but to see how it is used by people to communicate things, and how it communicates itself. An example would be a riot that occurs after a speech: even though it may not have been the intention of the orator (or rhetor, the producer of rhetoric) to cause a riot, the people reconstruct it to suit their own understanding. In the case of the speech, the student creates a historical context to analyze why the speech is reacted to in a certain way, how it has been circulated to serve different purposes, or how the speech creates an audience by addressing it.

As a rhetorician, your job is not to create a new interpretation to suit your own devices; it is to communicate how people have reconstructed certain situations, and what the outcome is.

**What is rhetoric? A contemporary definition:**

“Symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.” – Kenneth Burke

“As an art, Rhetoric communicates ideas according to…laws; as a science, it discovers and establishes these laws. Rhetoric is, therefore, the science of the laws of effective discourse.” – David Hill

“There is nothing outside of the text.” – Derrida

**The Common Prompt:**

Choose an artefact (speech, art, film, book, article, monument, etc.) and use theoretical material to analyze it.

**General Style Guide:**

The professor will be looking for clear, concise, and purposeful writing, not flowery writing. The words could be complicated, but it has to mean exactly what you’re saying. Be as transparent as possible. Passive voice is also acceptable, but not to the same level of science write-ups, because most often rhetoricians are examining the effects of objects. Rhetoric papers are most often written in Chicago or MLA style, but professors care less about what style is used and more that the paper diligently follows that style.

The student needs to provide 4 things:

* Context (Placing the artefact in its historical/political/societal context)
* Analysis
* Thesis (Needs to be non-obvious, arguable, supportable in the given constraints of the assignment, and debatable.)
* “So what” (Make an argument about why the paper is relevant. An easy way to do this is to analyze an artefact that would complicate a theory, or to apply a theory to an artifact that would shed new light on the artefact’s importance.

**Overall process**

* Analyze the artefact by focusing on how aspects of it can be applied to theory.
* Look at background information that make people react to a certain message or situation in a certain way.
* Examine how people use it or how it has been circulated, not necessarily at the original intent of the rhetor.

**Tips**

* Avoid analyzing intent.
* Understand the main concept of agency and how that ties to intent (see below).
* Try not to create another interpretation, or argue more than necessary.
* Try to be as transparent as possible.
* Don’t treat anything as the indisputable truth—just analyze.
* Focus on analysis and weave in theoretical concepts along the way.
* Be slightly more explicit than you think is necessary when organizing your paper.

**Professor Pet Peeves:**

* Spelling/grammar mistakes.
* Poor organization.
* Theses that are hard to find or represent muddled thought processes.
* Over-analysis of how people communicate things at the expense of how what they said was interpreted or re-constructed.
* Lack of a “so what” aspect to the thesis and the paper.

**Common Slipup:**

* The unimportance of authorial intent and the non-existence of agency is what differentiates Rhetoric from Philosophy, Sociology, and especially Psychology. Rhetoric is mostly how interaction with other people creates reality, but not about the real, personal intent of the rhetor. Only what people *perceive* is the intent. Getting past this is what most beginning rhetoric students have the most trouble with.
* Agency: When you have agency, you can say everything whenever and however you want and have people listen to you. For example, the president has a lot of agency, so does someone who has been to college for many years. The important thing is how this ties to intent.
* Intent: It does not matter at all what people intend by what they say, but how their words are understood and used. For instance, it does not matter if you think what you say is not racist, if someone else thinks it is, then it is for them. It is impossible to be in control of the words you say and how they are interpreted, which is why rhetoric for the most part argues that no one really has agency.