

## ENGLISH: UNDERSTANDING THE RHETORICAL ANALYSIS ASSIGNMENT




At first glance, the English “Rhetorical Analysis” assignment can seem confusing and overwhelming. Students might not understand what they are being asked to do, or why, leaving them wondering: “Ethos? Pathos? Logos? What is the point of all this?”


It may take some time to appreciate, but the Rhetorical Analysis has genuine importance; it helps students construct more convincing arguments of their own and it also helps them become more discerning individuals. Hopefully this handout will convince students that these claims are indeed true!

### TWO ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES



Let us start with an example. Imagine you are a scientist studying climate change, and you are asked to complete two different tasks. The first task is to write a newspaper article about your research. The second task is to write a grant proposal in order to obtain funding for your research. These two assignments have different purposes and intended audiences, which will affect how you write them.

 For the newspaper article, you know that your audience is the general public, and your readers probably do not have your level of scientific expertise. Additionally, the purpose of your newspaper article might be to warn readers about the increasing dangers of climate change. As a result, you might use plain language and avoid scientific jargon. Moreover, rather than data and statistics (logos) you might rely on emotional appeals (pathos), suggesting that readers think about the animal populations and future generations of human beings forced to live in terrible conditions.

 For the grant proposal, you know that your audience is a board of fellow scientists who are familiar with scientific terminology. In addition, the purpose of your proposal is to convince these scientists that your research is important and they should grant you funding. Accordingly, you will use all of your technical terms to explain your research and impress them. Furthermore, you might avoid emotional appeals (pathos) and focus instead on providing data and statistics (logos) that demonstrate the urgency of the climate change crisis (e.g. ocean acidity and temperature changes).

Notice how (1) what you are trying to accomplish with your writing (publishing a warning *versus* seeking funding), and (2) who you are trying to reach (the general public *versus* a board of scientists), changes the strategies that you will use when constructing your argument (e.g. word choice, types of appeals, etc.).

### BUT WHY SHOULD STUDENTS CARE?

The Rhetorical Analysis teaches students important lessons about: (1) how to use rhetorical strategies to construct more persuasive arguments, and (2) how to avoid being tricked by an author or speaker’s rhetoric (sometimes an author or speaker’s rhetoric is powerful but his/her argument is weak).

Being more aware of rhetorical strategies will help you convey your argument to your target audience; by thinking more about who you are trying to convince, and why, you will be better equipped to choose the best language to persuade your readers.

At the same time, being able to analyze a writer or speaker’s rhetoric makes you a stronger critical thinker; with your new skills it will be difficult for others to manipulate your emotions or to throwing misleading numbers at you when underneath it all their argument does not really make sense. 😊

