Tips for Your Visual Rhetoric Analysis

Introduction

Like any rhetorical analysis essay, an essay analyzing a visual document should quickly set the stage for what you’re doing.

1. Make sure to let the reader know you’re performing a rhetorical analysis. Otherwise, they may expect you to take positions or make an evaluative argument that may not be coming.
2. Clearly state what the document under consideration is and possibly give some pertinent background information about its history or development. The intro can be a good place for a quick, narrative summary of the document.
3. Give a basic rundown of the rhetorical situation surrounding the document: the author, the audience, the purpose, the genre.

Thesis Statements and Focus

Many authors struggle with thesis statements or controlling ideas in regards to rhetorical analysis essays. There may be a temptation to think that merely announcing the text as a rhetorical analysis is purpose enough. However, especially depending on your essay’s length, your reader may need a more direct and clear statement of your intentions. Below are a few examples.

1. Clearly narrow the focus of what your essay will cover. Ask yourself if one or two design aspects of the document is interesting and complex enough to warrant a full analytical treatment.

EX: The website for Amazon.com provides an excellent example of alignment and proximity to assist its visitors in navigating a potentially large and confusing amount of information.

2. Since visual documents often seek to move people towards a certain action (buying a product, attending an event, expressing a sentiment), an essay may analyze the rhetorical techniques used to accomplish this purpose. The thesis statement should reflect this goal.

EX: The call-out flyer for the Purdue Rowing Team uses a mixture of dynamic imagery and tantalizing promises to create interest in potential, new members.

3. Rhetorical analysis can also easily lead to making original arguments. Performing the analysis may lead you to an argument; or vice versa, you may start with an argument and search for proof that supports it.

EX: A close analysis of the female body images in the July 2007 issue of Cosmopolitan magazine reveals contradictions between the articles’ calls for self-esteem and the advertisements’ unrealistic, beauty demands.
These are merely suggestions. The best measure for what your focus and thesis statement should be the document itself and the demands of your writing situation. Remember that the main thrust of your thesis statement should be on how the document creates meaning and accomplishes its purposes.

**Analysis Order (Body Paragraphs)**

Depending on the genre and size of the document under analysis, there are a number of logical ways to organize your body paragraphs. Below are a few possible options. Which ever you choose, the goal of your body paragraphs is to present parts of the document, give an extended analysis of how that part functions, and suggest how the part ties into a larger point (your thesis statement or goal).

**Chronological**

This is the most straight-forward approach, but it can also be effective if done for a reason (as opposed to not being able to think of another way). For example, if you are analyzing a photo essay on the web or in a booklet, a chronological treatment allows you to present your insights in the same order that a viewer of the document experiences those images. It is likely that the images have been put in that order and juxtaposed for a reason, so this line of analysis can be easily integrated into the essay.

Be careful using chronological ordering when dealing with a document that contains a narrative (i.e. a television show or music video). Focusing on the chronological could easily lead you to plot summary which is not the point of a rhetorical analysis.

**Spatial**

A spatial ordering covers the parts of a document in the order the eye is likely to scan them. This is different than chronological order, for that is dictated by pages or screens where spatial order concerns order amongst a single page or plane. There are no unwavering guidelines for this, but you can use the following general guidelines.

- Left to right and top to down is still the normal reading and scanning pattern for English-speaking countries.
- The eye will naturally look for centers. This may be the technical center of the page or the center of the largest item on the page.
- Lines are often used to provide directions and paths for the eye to follow.
- Research has shown that on web pages, the eye tends to linger in the top left quadrant before moving left to right. Only after spending a considerable amount of time on the top, visible portion of the page will they then scroll down.

**Persuasive Appeals**

The classic, rhetorical appeals are logos, pathos, and ethos. These concepts roughly correspond to the logic, emotion, and character of the document’s attempt to persuade. You can find more
information on these concepts elsewhere on the OWL. Once you understand these devices, you could potentially order your essay by analyzing the document’s use of logos, ethos, and pathos in different sections.

**Conclusion**

Your conclusion for this paper will be a reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the approach the creator took and what the creator could have improved to enhance the impact of the argument.