

Writing a Rhetorical Analysis

The following guidelines for writing a rhetorical analysis will be exemplified in the samples that are based on the Hazlitt essay prompt:

The passage below is an excerpt from “On the Want of Money,” an essay written by nineteenth century author William Hazlitt. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the rhetorical strategies Hazlitt uses to develop his position on money.

Opening/Thesis: In a timed setting, writing just a thesis is acceptable. If you are writing a multi-draft paper, then you will need to add context to the opening.

Thesis: The thesis must include the answer to the over-arching question that is derived from the essay prompt. The thesis may also include the rhetorical strategies that are being analyzed.

Example Opening: (Highlight the answer to the over-arching question)

Men who can spout off nothing more than clichés often say that money can’t buy happiness. William Hazlitt, author of “On the Want of Money,” says they are wrong. In his aforementioned essay, Hazlitt makes the argument that money is, in fact, a key part of a prosperous life, and by using a despondent word choice and interesting syntactical strategies, he effectively shows that, if money cannot buy happiness, a lack thereof can surely lead to sorrow.

Body Paragraphs: Following the “Show and Tell” method will ensure a solid analysis within your body paragraphs. Your show and tell must include the:

WHAT - This is the answer to the over-arching question in an abbreviated form or one part of the answer to the over-arching question. The WHAT is typically found in the topic sentence of the body paragraph.

HOW - This is your textual evidence. Textual evidence can be included either as paraphrase or quoted text. You should use some embedded quoted text to build your ethos. You do not have to use specific terminology, but you do need to explain what the strategy is. (i.e. listing of examples, repetition of “and,” comparing two items, etc.)

WHY - This is the part that ties it all together. This is the commentary/explanation of WHY the textual evidence (HOW) develops the answer to the over-arching question (WHAT). In developing your explanation, you need to use POWER verbs to accurately and effectively convey the effect of the strategies the author employs.

In the following body paragraphs, highlight the following:

WHAT - Pink

HOW - Yellow

WHY - Green

Underline the topic sentences

Circle the POWER verbs

One of Hazlitt's most effective methods of promoting the importance of money is his strong diction. The first three words of the piece "literally and truly" set the mood for the entire passage. Many fairy-tale idealists claim that ideally, happiness is not attached to wealth. However, by emphasizing two near-synonyms, literally and truly, with the word and, Hazlitt makes the point that the real world is all that matters. While love and happiness may be important, it is hard to love someone on an empty stomach, and this idea is enforced in Hazlitt's connotative diction. However, it is not only these adverbs that show Hazlitt's pragmatism; the entire piece is full of strong, albeit cynical, diction. The verbs in the primary sentence of the piece all vary, but inevitably end up meaning the same thing: beggars will be "rejected" and "compelled"; they will not be "asked out to dinner" or "noticed on the street," they are "scrutinized," "neglected," "assailed," and all-around abused. The straight denotation of these words is clear: poor men do not lead fun lives. In addition to this, however, it is important to note that all of these verbs are passive. The connotation of this is that the lower-class men are not in control of their lives, and are instead controlled by the rich who neglect them. This despairing word choice shines a dark light on the self-fulfillment and autonomy those without money can never achieve.

In addition to this diction, Hazlitt uses several syntactical strategies to convey his point about poverty. The most obvious of these is his one massive, extended sentence, which reaches across two or three standard-size paragraphs. This huge sentence models the massive obstacle course the impoverished must face in life; because of Hazlitt's negative word choice, the life of the poor is presented as a continual, unending stream of oppression. This stream-like idea of misfortune is further mirrored by the asyndeton in the passage. This asyndeton mirrors the idea that there are no breaks for the poor, no passes or rests, and this simply allows the despondency of the passage to build for over 40 lines. This compilation of misfortunes without end is enough to convince almost anyone of the horrors of poverty and is certainly enough to dissuade any idealistic notions of happiness within poverty.

Conclusion: The conclusion should address the "So What" element. Think of it this way: You are the reader and you have read the essay. At the end, your question is "So what did you want me to get from all of this?" That is the question you need to answer.

Example Conclusion:

Hazlitt's goal in this piece seems clear: to lay forth the horrors of living in poverty. By employing a non-stop, relentless string of misfortune in a continuous sentence structure, Hazlitt plays on the readers' heartstrings far more than enough to convince them of the importance of having money.