Writer at work

Kelsey Turner was asked to write a rhetorical analysis for her composition class. She made the following notes and observations on her assignment sheet:

Email 1010: Introduction to Writing
Rhetorical Analysis of an Argument

Choose a recent editorial from a popular newspaper or magazine and analyze the techniques it used to persuade its audience. You will want to focus on how the author employs logos, ethos, and pathos to persuade readers. Take a stand (make an argument of your own) as to how well these appeals work.

Important dates:
September 10: Bring your editorial to class for discussion.
Monday, September 17: Draft due
Wednesday, September 22: Draft returned with comments
Wednesday, September 29: Final draft due

Our Essay Evaluation Form states that we will evaluate this paper by looking at the following four categories. As a class, we will go through these categories and articulate our understanding of good performance in each, for this paper.

Logic and organization (25%)
Evidence and development (25%)
Style (25%)
Grammar and mechanics (25%)

Kelsey found a Washington Post opinion piece on food banks and poverty that interested her (see pages 305-309 in the full text). She began by asking the questions she would need to answer to write a good rhetorical analysis (see page 154). Here are the questions and her responses:

What is the author's purpose?
To make readers rethink their generous donations to food banks and look at causes of hunger.

Who is the audience?
Readers of Washington Post (national distribution). People concerned with hunger and poverty. People who usually make gestures rather than really working for change.

Who is the author?
An worked at a food bank, was very successful. Because disillusionment he understands the problem better than most people.

What is the background?
An was published right before Thanksgiving, when people are thinking about having enough food at an American tradition.

What rhetorical appeals are used?
All three.

Pathos—Appeals to readers’ sympathy for those who are hungry. Describes fatigue of donors and volunteers with current system. Makes volunteering and donating seem foolish and possibly harmful.

Ethos—This background. He assumes readers will agree that it is better to empower people and that we shouldn’t paternalize them just to make ourselves feel generous.

Logos—Presents bigger picture of poverty, of which hunger is just one part. But he goes back and forth between saying maybe food is given to people who don’t need it and then saying the more food we give the more people need it. It seems like the meaning of ‘need’ changes.

The pathos appeals are the strongest and most noticeable, but the ethos of the author probably works the best to persuade people.

How does the language and style contribute to the purpose?
Words like ‘play’ and ‘pop-rally’ are associated with frivolous activities. They belittle the actions of food pantry workers and donors. Author makes food-poor feel kind of stupid or self-interested and short-sighted. Like they are making the problem worse. Blaming them. Always.

Could structure around the three types of appeals

Use actual words from the editorial as evidence
2: Analyze context and text

Consider the medium and genre
- What is the medium?
- What is the genre of the piece? Is it an editorial? A speech? An advertisement?

Consider the main claim or claims
- Summarize the claim, or describe the subject.

Consider the evidence
- Note all the reasons and evidence given to support the claim.

Analyze the appeals
- How is the author presented? As a credible, trustworthy person?
- How logical are the arguments? Are there any logical fallacies?
- What emotions, if any, does the author appeal to?
- How effective is each one of these appeals and techniques? How effective are they all together? Why are they effective or not effective?

Situate the text in its context
- Where do you find evidence that this text was responding to other texts and events?
- What does this text contribute to the ongoing conversation of which it is part?

Consider the style and tone
- How would you characterize the style? Is the style formal? Informal? Academic?
- How would you characterize the tone? Does the writer or speaker use humor or satire?
- How is language used to influence the audience? Repetition? Contrast? Particular word choices? What metaphors are used?

Writer at work
Kelsey Turner read her chosen editorial carefully several times, making notes in the margins about the rhetorical appeals she saw being used.

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How can anyone not get caught up in the annual Thanksgiving turkey frenzy? At the food bank I co-founded in Middletown, Conn., November always meant churning the caravans of low-status trucks that roared into our parking lot. They came on the heels of the public appeals for “A bird in every pot.” “No family left without a turkey” and our bank’s own version—“A turkey and a $30 [token bill].”

Manipulating donors (instead of giving them the truth)?

Language makes us think of high school kids having fun rather than serious problem solving.

Like pom-pom girls leading a high school pep rally, we revved up the community’s charitable impulse in a fever pitch with radio interviews, newspaper stories, and preemptive television footage to extort the last gobbler from the allegation citizen. After all, our nation’s one great day of social equity was upon us, in kind row soup kitchens and the gated communities of hedge-fund billionaires alike. Everyone was entitled, indeed expected, to sit down to a meal of turkey with all the fixings.

Food banks are not a real solution to hunger—they just pretend to be.

And here we are, cutting on the same play again this year. But come Friday, as most of us stuff more leftovers into our bulging refrigerators, 36 million Americans will take their place in line again at soup kitchens, food banks and food stamp offices nationwide.

Finally, Kelsey developed a position that could serve as a working thesis for her paper. Mark Wilmot’s essay gives good reasons for readers to stop supporting the food banking industry, but the breathtaking tone he uses to describe food bank donors and workers may insult or offend readers, making them less likely to agree with him.
3: Write a draft

**Briefly describe the text you are analyzing**
- Describe the medium and genre (newspaper editorial, blog on the Web, radio interview, and so on).
- Who produced it? Where and when did it first appear?

**Make a claim**
- Analysis adds a new dimension to a text; what will your analysis reveal for readers? Be sure your claim is not an oversimplification and can be supported by textual and contextual evidence.

**Analyze the context**
- Through research, find out what else was being said about the subject your text discusses.
- Track down any references to other texts or events.

**Analyze the text**
- Select the most important parts of the text to focus on. Choose elements that will show a pattern or illustrate specific techniques you want to talk about. However, be honest: do not leave out evidence that might undercut your claims.
- Build a critical mass of evidence. Supply the evidence and examples to support your claim.
- Make larger patterns or conclusions visible for your readers. For example, does an author seem to be appealing to two different audiences in a single essay? What parts of the work appeal to one audience? What parts appeal to the other?

**Build a strong conclusion**
- Don't merely summarize what you have already said. Ask yourself: "Have I learned anything new in this analysis?" A conclusion can be a good place to succinctly describe a larger pattern you have been tracing in a work. Or, it may be a good place to make conjectures about other works by the same artist, about the motivations of a school or movement, or to tie your analysis of this text to other texts.