

Year 2 Rhetorical Analysis Assignment

This short essay will take the form of a two-page close reading of a rhetorically situated utterance. From the play, you will choose an element on which to focus your analysis:

- An exchange of 3-6 speeches
- A speech
- A line

For example, you might focus on the exchange between Portia and Shylock in the trial scene, *or* the "mercy" speech, *or* the line "The quality of mercy is not strained" in that speech. Remember as you choose that you are analyzing that element as an element of that type. Thus, if you choose an exchange, don't do so simply to talk about the characters in the scene, or even just what happens in it. You must talk about that exchange as a series of dramatic, rhetorically motivated utterances.

The goal of your analysis is to make and support a claim about the rhetorical significance of your chosen element. What sort of rhetorical work is it doing in the scene? What do we learn if we pay close attention to that particular part of the play? What does it contribute to our understanding of the play, and how does it do so? Does it go against what we might assume, or does it help generate or perpetuate our assumptions? How does it help fashion the imaginative world of the play, and how does it function within that world? What does it tell us about the speaker, or the audience? Most broadly, what is that element of the play doing, and how is it doing that?

For example: think about how Salerio and Solanio speak to Antonio in the opening moments of *Merchant of Venice*. They aren't simply guessing why he's sad; they're attempting to insinuate themselves into his better acquaintance, an effort which they abandon as soon as the other characters enter.

The key to these essays is to offer **a thorough consideration of the element itself and a detailed discussion of how it works in its rhetorical situation**. You are not simply summarizing what happens or paraphrasing what is said, though such activities will help you. A strong thesis statement will encapsulate not just *what* the element does rhetorically, but *how* and *why* it does. One can imagine two papers of equal quality that make completely opposite claims about what a given element means but offer convincing argumentation and evidence for those claims. Both papers might earn 'A's (or 'F's'), because the grade is based not on who is "right" but on whether the paper demonstrates serious critical thinking, strong writing, detailed analysis, and a thoroughly considered thesis. Indeed, if you can't imagine someone making a different argument than you about the element you've chosen, you may need to reconsider your thesis claim.

These essays provide a chance to practice close-reading, one of the most important skills you will gain in an English class. Bear in mind that close-reading combines good **observation** of textual and contextual detail, thoughtful **analysis** of the text, and strong **interpretive** claims about the text. A close-reading isn't complete without these three components. You must therefore quote selectively from the text, but don't leave those quotations to speak for themselves. Don't, for example, write merely that "Portia tells Shylock that 'mercy seasons justice.'" Write instead that "Portia's use of 'seasons' suggests that mercy is not the opposite of justice but something added to it."

Analyzing one element, of course, means taking all the others into consideration. If you analyze a single speech, for example, you'll need to consider the lines that make it up, even as you consider the exchange to which it belongs. But again, remember that you're analyzing the element *as such an element*. Your thesis statement about an exchange in the trial scene, for instance, should not finally tell us something about Portia or her "mercy" speech. It should tell us about the exchange.

To some this assignment may seem too narrow and constricting. This is by intention, because I am asking you to unpack and discuss, explain or clarify, how close attention to detail can open a wealth of interpretive possibilities. At the same time, bear in mind that *this is not merely a response paper, nor should you simply recapitulate our discussions in class*. You must quote from the text and analyze it thoughtfully and closely.

Format: the essay should be about two pages long and should follow MLA format. Please transcribe the element you are close-reading and place it at the top of your paper, beneath the heading. The transcription does not count toward the length requirement. Citations from the plays should appear, parenthetically, in the text (like this: 4.1.56-59). Late papers will not be accepted. **Do not hesitate to contact me with questions or problems. Previous students have described paper conferences with me as "so helpful I vomited all over myself," "like blasting off in a rocket ship made of ideas," and "really helpful."**

A very successful paper will:

- be properly formatted
- be free of grammatical errors and stylistic unclarity
- address the central questions of the assignment clearly and cogently
- have a strong, clear thesis that unifies the paper into a single, strong claim about the rhetorical work of the chosen element
- be thoughtfully organized into a paragraph structure that most persuasively articulates the paper's argument
- have paragraphs that contain discernible topics, transitions, and a cogent structure
- marshal appropriate evidence and analysis to advance the thesis
- cite all sources appropriately

Less successful papers lack in one or more of these areas. Such papers may also need further development of the approach to the topic itself.