Reading Rhetorically: Reading to Analyze a Text

How an author presents his/her ideas can be just as important as what the author has to say. In order to understand an author’s intentions and understand his/her ideas, it is important to read a text more than once. If you are reading the text to gather information for an analysis, your purpose for reading the text might be different every time you go through it, because you will be looking for different elements within the text. Also, your perspective on the text might change because your understanding of the text will probably change.

Be an active reader! Mark your paper by highlighting or using post-it notes to identify ideas or strategies the author uses that help convey his/her ideas, or simply jot notes on a separate piece of paper.

1. Pre-analyze.
   - Read over the article to get a general idea of what the author is trying to say.
   - Identify the type of text it is. Is it an article that is trying to persuade? Is it an informative piece?
   - Look up or ask about unfamiliar vocabulary words or idiomatic expressions that may be confusing.
   - Use highlighters or sticky notes to also mark words or expressions you are unfamiliar with.
   - Look up any vocabulary that you find confusing before beginning your analysis.

2. Find out information about the author.
   - What is the author’s background? What did the author study? What are the author’s interests and affiliations? What is the author’s career background?
   - How is the author’s background relevant to his/her position in the text? (e.g., a politician may have a different perspective on the War on Iraq than a parent who has had a child in the military.) What biases might the author harbor because of that background, or how could that background influence possible author biases?

3. Find out about the publication.
   - Is the text in a magazine, newspaper, or other source?
   - What types of articles are in the publication, if any?
   - Where does the publication typically appear? Who is its target audience?
   - What types of advertisements are in the publication?

4. From what historical or cultural context is the article written? Why do you think this article was written? Does it refer to an event in history? Why do you think it does this?
   - How is the timing of the article’s publication relevant to the issues presented in the article? (An article written directly after 9/11 about the attacks would differ from an article written about the attacks ten years after they happened.)
• What is the author’s nationality?
• What cultural considerations should be considered? (e.g. The views of how the elderly should be cared for would differ from culture to culture.)

5. Determine the audience of the text.
• Who reads or looks at the publication in which the text appears? Think about gender, economic status, age, and race.
• What values could possibly be held by the audience (i.e., if the article is in a Sports Magazine, perhaps the audience values competition or athleticism)
• What cultural information (clichés, references to sporting events or food, etc.) is present in the text that would help define the audience?

6. Determine what strategies the author uses to tell his/her story.
• Does the author use personal experience? Excerpts from other sources? Statistics?
• What type of vocabulary is used? Are words repeated? Does the language the author selected convey a particular tone?
• Are certain words preferred? What effect does the author’s word choice have on the reader? (e.g., in a speech by Eli Weisel about the war in Iraq, he uses the words “conflict” and “intervention” in place of the word “war”, softening the negative associations that are connected to “war”.)
• What organizational choices has the author made?
• What sentence structure does the author favor? Does the author favor complicated sentences or sentences that are more simple and easy to understand? (Sentence structure can also give clues about the author’s intended audience.) Does the sentence structure convey a certain mood or theme? (e.g., A passage that demonstrates anger may use short, choppy sentences.)
• Were Aristotle’s Persuasive Strategies of Logos, Ethos, and Pathos used? (See “The Rhetorical Triangle: Understanding and Using Logos, Ethos, and Pathos” worksheet.)
  o Logos appeals to reason. It can be thought of as the logic of the argument and how well the writer has made his point. Are statistics present? Is factual information used as evidence?
  o Ethos examines the credibility of the writer. What kinds of sources does the author use? How credible are they? What are the reputations of the authors and their sources? How current are the sources?
  o Pathos deals with the values, beliefs, and emotions of the reader. What in the article triggers an emotion? Anger? Fear? Sadness? Relief?

7. What questions does the article raise for you? What issues did the author miss? Is there a different opinion that could have been explored that wasn’t? Did the author address all sides of the argument? What areas does the author do a nice job of discussing? Why?