Analyzing Texts and Writing Thesis Statements

Chapter Preview Questions

1.1 How do we read and analyze texts rhetorically?
1.2 How do we define the rhetorical situation?
1.3 How do exigence and purpose affect persuasion?
1.4 What are effective strategies for analyzing rhetorical texts?
1.5 How should I brainstorm parts of an essay, including the thesis statement?

Everywhere around us, words and images try to persuade us to think about the world in certain ways. We can see this persuasive power at every turn: from newspaper articles to television broadcasts, blog posts, advertisements, political campaign posters, Facebook status posts, tweets, and even video footage circulated online. In each case, such texts—whether verbal, visual, or a combination of the two—try to move us, convince us to buy something, shape our opinions, or make us laugh.

Consider the text in Figure 1.1 by Mike Luckovich, a Pulitzer Prize–winning cartoonist who publishes in the Atlanta Journal Constitution. Luckovich created this cartoon after the 2011 assassination attempt on Gabrielle Giffords, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, outside a Safeway store in Tucson, Arizona. Six people were killed, including a 9-year-old girl. Giffords herself was critically injured, along with 12 other people. The incident raised concerns over political speeches and Website images that had used gun metaphors to target Democrats such as Giffords in upcoming elections. Some feared that such language and imagery might have contributed to the attack. In response to the controversy, Luckovich composed a cartoon as a persuasive text indicating his view. How does his text use both words and images to persuade audiences to think a certain way about the top term: “Violent Rhetoric”? Look at the hierarchy of values, beginning with “happy talk” at the bottom, moving through
“warm conversation” and “friendly debate” to a more vigorous “spirited discussion.” Notice how the words then become more negative, including “angry discourse” and “hateful speech.” While we usually consider “hateful speech” to be the worst form of communication, Luckovich places “violent rhetoric” above it, as the very apex of dangerous discourse. The cartoon is ironic since when most people think of rhetoric, they often think of political rhetoric, which they perceive as either empty and meaningless (all talk, no action) or worse, as negative: harmful to the reputation of others, fear-mongering, and even hateful. The cartoon emphasizes this common view placing the words “violent rhetoric” at the top.

But understanding this cartoon depends not just on analyzing the words. The location of words in particular places within the visual—and the visual elements themselves—also contribute in crucial ways to the meaning of the text. The lowered flag, for instance, might indicate that Giffords nearly died from her critical injuries, and indeed six people did die. The purposeful lowering of the flag to half-mast is itself a form of visual communication, well understood across America; it represents the nation’s act of honoring a deceased person. The dome of the Capitol Building in the background suggests that the government has lowered the flag and wants people to move from “violent rhetoric” to “spirited discussion.” In this way, the cartoon combines words and visual details to suggest both a tribute to Giffords and the need for calmer, gentler political communication. That is our understanding of the cartoon’s argument when we analyze the text rhetorically. As you develop your skills of critical thinking and rhetorical analysis, you will also learn how to interpret and write your own arguments about such texts.

At the same time, you will learn how to apply your skills of analysis across a range of media, including printed or spoken words. With regard to the assassination attempt, many writers commented on the event through newspaper articles, on blogs, via email, and on social media. In a post on the political blog Daily Kos, for example, Barbara Morrill used the term rhetoric
right in her title: “Violent Rhetoric and the Attempted Assassination of Gabrielle Giffords.” While the title seems objective in tone, the writer draws on very strong language in the opening paragraph in order to connect the two parts of the title:

In the two days since the attempted assassination of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, the debate has been raging over the culpability of the violent rhetoric that is so commonplace in today’s political climate. Which of course has led to the rapid-fire peddling of false equivalencies by the right, where now, saying a congressional district is being targeted is the same as actually putting crosshairs on a district and saying it’s time to “RELOAD.”

By accusing the right of “rapid-fire peddling,” the author frames words through a gun metaphor in a way that creates a vivid image in the reader’s mind. She also refers to the metaphoric language that politicians had used—targeting a district, crosshairs, and “reload”—as evidence for her claim. The details of her written text parallel the elements of the cartoon (Figure 1.1). As you develop your skills of analysis about texts, keep in mind that you can understand them better if you look closely at all the specific elements, whether verbal or visual. Once you recognize how texts function **rhetorically**—that is, how texts try to persuade you and shape your opinion about the world around you—then you can decide whether or not to agree with the many messages you encounter every day. To grasp this concept, let’s follow one hypothetical student—we’ll call her Alex—as she walks across campus and note the rhetorical texts she sees along the way.

### 1.1 How do we read and analyze texts rhetorically?

**UNDERSTANDING TEXTS RHETORICALLY**

By shadowing Alex and noticing what she notices, you can construct her **personal narrative**, or written account of her journey, about the rhetorical texts she sees along the way.

Let’s begin in her dorm room, which Alex and her roommate have decorated with a concert tour poster, an artsy map of New York City, a poster for the women’s basketball team, and a photo collage of pictures from their spring break cross-country trip. As she prepares to leave, she smiles as she glances at a meme she’s printed and taped over her desk: the black-turtleneck-wearing Hipster Barista, with the caption, “$120,000 Art Degree … Draws faces in latte foam.”
As Alex walks down the hall, she pauses when a friend calls her into the lounge to watch a brief clip from a rerun of Last Week Tonight with John Oliver on his laptop. Oliver is in top form, providing a satirical critique of the militarization of American police forces, and Alex and her friend laugh for a few minutes about the sketch before she heads out. Walking down the stairwell, she glances briefly at the flyers that decorate the walls—for a charity dance for the victims of a recent earthquake, a dorm meeting about a ski trip, and a rally against immigration laws. She does a double-take to look at the clever design of a flyer for the Zen club (see Figure 1.2), making a mental note about the meeting time, and then walks into the cool autumn air.

Outside, Alex looks down at her smartphone, scrolling through recent Instagram posts as she walks along. She sees one friend’s updated profile photo, another’s pictures from a recent trip to New Orleans, and a third’s reposting of a link to a parody video of a Taylor Swift song. She stops at the outdoor café and checks her Twitter feed while waiting for her coffee, amused by her favorite celebrity’s posting about the Academy Awards. As her coffee arrives, her phone buzzes, and she opens a funny Snapchat photo from her younger sister, pausing for a moment to send a selfie of her own, which she captions with the phrase, “Must have coffee.” Looking at the time, she realizes she’s running late and hurries off to class.

Now Alex has only 2 minutes before class starts, so she takes the shortcut through the student union, past a sign advertising the latest Apple laptop, and then heads outside and crosses in front of an administration building where a group of student protestors are chanting and waving signs demanding that the university divest from fossil fuels. She weaves alongside a cluster of gleaming steel buildings that constitute the engineering quad and passes the thin metal sculpture called Knowledge that guards the entrance to the library.

Finally she reaches her destination: the Communications department. Walking into the building, she stops to glance at the front page of the school newspaper, stacked by the door; intrigued by the headline, “Greek Life Claims University Targets Them,” she grabs a copy to read later. She
slips into the classroom for her Com 101 class on Media and Society and realizes that the class has already started. Ducking into the back row, Alex watches the professor advance his PowerPoint slides to one containing key questions for that day’s class (see Figure 1.4). As she sits down, the TA passes her a handout, and she opens her laptop to take notes. She’s immediately distracted by posts on the social media sites that pop up, calling for her attention: targeted advertisements, viral videos, even Buzzfeed quizzes. Ignoring them, she opens a blank document instead and then turns to examine the handout, which includes an editorial about a tragic shooting at the offices of a French satirical magazine.

With Alex safely at her seat, think about how many texts you noticed along her journey. Flyers, ads, posters, videos, Websites, newspapers, television shows, photographs, memes, sculpture, signs, PowerPoint slides, even architectural design: each is an example of rhetoric. Why? Because each text offers a specific message to a particular audience. Each one is a persuasive act. Once you begin to look at the world rhetorically, you’ll see that just about everywhere you are being persuaded to agree, act, buy, attend, or accept an argument: rhetoric permeates our cultural landscape. Just as we did above, you might pay attention to the rhetorical texts that you find on your way to class and then construct your own personal narrative consisting of words and images. Learning to recognize the persuasive power of texts and read them rhetorically is the first step in thinking critically about the world.

**FIGURE 1.4** PowerPoint slide from Alex’s class.

**WRITER’S PRACTICE**

Look back at the texts that Alex encountered in Figures 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4. How do they attempt to persuade their audience? For each one, jot down some notes about each text’s message and the different ways the texts try to make their arguments. Consider how they use words and images, alone and in combination, to convey their message.
UNDERSTANDING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

In one of the earliest definitions, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle characterized *rhetoric* as *the ability to see the available means of persuasion in any given situation*. While Aristotle’s lessons in rhetoric emerged in the fourth century BCE as a form of instruction for oral communication—specifically, to help free men represent themselves in court—today, the term *rhetoric* has expanded to include any verbal, visual, or multimedia text that aims to persuade a specific audience in a certain place and time. More generally, you can understand rhetoric as the strategies people use to convey ideas; in the words of scholar and rhetorician Andrea Lunsford, “Rhetoric is the art, practice, and study of human communication.”

To understand how a rhetorical text works, you need to analyze how it targets a specific audience, how it has been composed by a specific author, and how it conveys a particular argument. This dynamic relationship is called the *rhetorical situation*, and we have represented it with a triangle in Figure 1.5.

As a writer, when you compose persuasive texts, you need to determine which strategies will work to convince your audience in a particular situation. There are many different choices to consider, and that is why rhetoric is both a dynamic and a practical art. Imagine, for instance, that you are involved in the following rhetorical situations and have to decide which strategies would be most persuasive for each case.

- **Attend to audience.** If you were a politician writing an editorial for a newspaper or speaking at an interview on CNN about your definition of marriage, you would use strikingly different metaphors and statistics depending on which constituency (or audience) you are addressing.
- **Attend to author.** If you wanted to publicize a

![Figure 1.5](image-url)
message against drug use to local middle school students, you might compose pamphlets, emails, presentations, or posters with information graphics, and each one would be designed based on your position as *author*—teacher or police officer? student or parent?—while trying to reach that teenage audience.

- **Attend to argument.** If you were fashion industry intern updating the company’s social media marketing campaign, you would revise the message *(or argument)* of the advertisements to fit the media, whether Facebook posts, tweets, or even Internet videos.

Cartoonist Jorge Cham offers us an example in Figure 1.6 of how the rhetorical situation affects persuasion in relation to a communicative act that might be even more familiar to you: a students’ email to the instructor. In a panel for his series *PhD comics*, he shows how a misunderstanding of the rhetorical situation can sabotage successful communication.

What the comic illustrates is the instructor’s analysis of the student’s communication and his implicit criticism that the student misreads his *audience* and therefore composes an ineffective *argument*. The agitated arrows point us to evidence for this interpretation: misspellings, punctuation mistakes, jargon, and an uninformed message (the answers to the email apparently are all in the syllabus). However, the comic also invites us to critique the instructor’s assessment of the rhetorical situation. On the one hand, the fictional instructor has treated the email communication like an essay, scoring it with red-inked annotations; on the other, he uses an angry voice that seems inappropriate to the instructor–student relationship (“OMG, what are you, 14?”; “we are not friends”). In both cases, he fails in the same way as his student to create a moment of effective communication.

In fact, there are two layers to this cartoon, two rhetorical situations that we can explore (see Figure 1.7): the fictional situation of the email, where the relationship is between student (writer), instructor (audience), and

**FIGURE 1.6** This comic from *PhD comics* offers a pointed analysis of a hypothetical student’s misjudging of the rhetorical situation in emailing his instructor.
email (argument), and then the rhetorical situation of the editorial cartoon itself, which triangulates the relationship between Jorge Cham (writer), the cartoon’s readers (audience), and cartoon (argument). Cham encourages us to engage with both levels explicitly by including the asterisk and footnote. In his qualifier, "No offense to those actually called ‘Hey,’ ‘Yo,’ ‘Sup,’ or ‘Dude,’” he differentiates his own voice from that of the fictional instructor, helping us remember there are dual levels at work in the cartoon.

### UNDERSTANDING EXIGENCE AND PURPOSE

As you move toward better understanding rhetoric, another important concept to consider is **exigence**—the **urgent demand** that writers feel to respond to a situation, his or her motive for writing. Have you ever seen a news article or heard about an event on campus that prompted you to respond strongly? When this happens, in rhetoric, we call this the **exigencies of a situation**, or the demands put on a writer to respond immediately and urgently in the attempt to take action or raise a concern about a specific problem or issue.

Think about tweets sent out in response to a sports team winning a championship, a flash of celebrity gossip, a political debate, or a crisis on campus. These are all contemporary instances of exigency. The scholar who gave us the rhetorical situation shown in Figure 1.5, Lloyd Bitzer, emphasized that **rhetorical exigency** happens when change is possible: “An exigence is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and when positive modification requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse.” That is, rhetorical exigency exists when there is the possibility that discourse (i.e., forms of
communication) can effect change. For instance, policies regulating parking on campus can potentially be modified through discourse or language, but drought and death cannot.

Understanding exigence can help us likewise understand an author’s purpose. Whether that purpose be internal and emotional or more objective—for instance, seeking to affirm or reaffirm the status quo—motive and purpose shape the way authors write texts across media. Many rhetoricians identify three broad types of possible purposes for communication: to entertain, to inform or explain, or to persuade. However, purpose can be more nuanced. An author’s purpose might be to describe, to define, to influence, or to call to action, for instance; in fact, an author might have complementary purposes in crafting a text. By examining an author’s motive or purpose—what he wanted to accomplish with the text—we can get a better understanding of the rhetorical choices he made in communicating with his audience.

Let’s look at a contemporary example to see how rhetorical exigency combines with purpose to create persuasive texts. When Disney announced its acquisition of the Star Wars enterprise from George Lucas in 2012, people were shocked and even outraged. Many felt the need to respond through discourse—by tweeting, writing blog posts, composing articles in popular online magazines, and even drawing cartoons. In each case, the author felt prompted to respond urgently and immediately to what was widely viewed as a problem situation.

Consider, for instance, the cartoon in Figure 1.8 by Nate Beeler, an award-winning editorial cartoonist for the Columbus Dispatch, which he created in response to the merger. Entitled, “Disney Acquires Star Wars,” the cartoon demonstrates the exigency that caused so many Americans to speak out or write about this surprising amalgamation between two enormous entertainment companies.
The giant head of Mickey Mouse, floating in space toward the galactic fleet, has an ominous look to it, creating a sense of foreboding. It suggests the motive of the cartoonist might have been to criticize this acquisition. In fact, this critique is further amplified by the way Mickey’s head has been transformed into a version of the iconic Death Star, threatening to supplant the original space station/super weapon, which seems small and less imposing by comparison. Beeler is clearly presenting Mickey (and, by association, Disney) as the new “bad guy” of the Star Wars universe.

Moreover, the words emerging from the space station, “I sense a great disturbance in the force,” echo Obi-Wan Kenobi’s classic line from *Star Wars Episode IV*, “I felt a great disturbance in the force, as if millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror and were suddenly silenced.” In the original context, Obi-Wan refers to the destruction of an entire planet and the death of its inhabitants; here the fleet makes a similarly ominous pronouncement about the impact of the Disney acquisition on the Star Wars franchise. Putting the visual and the verbal together, we perceive that Beeler exploits the imagery and lexicon of Star Wars fans themselves for a specific purpose: to persuade his audience of the negative implications of Disney’s acquisition of Star Wars. It is a comic argument, to be sure, but it is an important position that arises from the exigencies of the situation.

Some writers opted for a different mode of editorial commentary, turning to Twitter to offer their perspective on the acquisition. As urgent responses to the deal, the tweets demonstrate how authors react in an attempt to use discourse to voice a personal position or in the hopes of modifying the situation. For instance, writer Andrés de Rojas, who goes by the Twitter handle @aderojas, tweeted the following:

May the Force be with … Mickey Mouse?

He plays on the iconic phrase, “May the Force be with you,” using ellipses and substituting Mickey Mouse for “you” to create a humorous tone. The final question mark, too, functions rhetorically, to convey his uncertainty over the implications of the acquisition. Raymond Kemp (@RaymondKemp) similarly responded to the exigence of the situation, composing a tweet that, like Nate Beeler’s cartoon, adapts Obi-Wan’s famous line:

There was a disturbance in the force like the voices of a million nerds were silenced.
His tweet would have greatest resonance with readers familiar with the Star Wars series, but his critique would be evident even to a broader audience. By stating that “the voices of a million nerds were silenced,” he demonstrates his motive or purpose: joining the outcry against the way in which the “nerdy” series of Star Wars might change under the ownership of the more pop culture-oriented vision of Disney.

Clearly, although tweets are brief, they still function as rhetorical acts. Authors who recognize the unique rhetorical situation of the tweet can turn these concise epithets into powerful editorial commentaries. Even the hashtags that writers append to their tweets add a layer of argument. Consider how a tweet about the Disney-Star Wars acquisition becomes more powerful when tagged with a hashtag such as #Depresseddarth, #Darth-gooey, #Don’tpanic, or #awholenewworld. In addition, some authors take advantage of the viral nature of Twitter to punctuate their tweets by attaching pictures, often mash-ups of popular images. For instance, over the first week after the acquisition announcement, scores of images spread through Twitter: photoshopped pictures of Mickey Mouse in Darth Vader’s robes, saying, “Luke, I am now your father”; visual remixes of a Disney poster with the caption, “When you wish upon a Deathstar”; a photo of R2D2 wearing mouse ears; a still from A New Hope showing the three suns of Luke Skywalker’s planet aligned to resemble Mickey Mouse’s head. One of the most widely re-tweeted images was originally posted by Eric Alper (@ThatEricAlper): a photoshopped version of a popular image of the Disney princesses with a cartoon version of Princess Leia from Star Wars, wielding her blaster rifle, inserted in the middle. Re-tweeted over 200 times to an ever-broader circle of audiences, the image makes a pointed argument about how it might be the Disney world—not the Star Wars universe—that would change most because of the merger. In each of these examples, the author was responding to the exigence of the situation, using the best available means of persuasion to make his argument to a broad audience.

Considering the concepts of rhetorical exigence and purpose reinforces the fact that rhetoric, since Aristotle, has been linked to action. It is far from “empty” but rather can motivate audiences to produce particular outcomes. As Bitzer has argued: “Rhetoric is a mode of altering reality [...] by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action.”
STRATEGIES FOR ANALYZING RHETORICAL TEXTS

As we turn to discussing practical strategies for analyzing texts, it’s important to understand how these can contribute to helping you develop critical literacy—a life skill that entails knowing how to read, analyze, understand, and even create texts that function as powerful arguments about culture and the world around us. In fact, some have argued that writing itself no longer refers just to words on a page, but that writing, redefined for the twenty-first century, invites us to express ourselves and make arguments across media and genres—whether in a book chapter, a podcast, a blog post, a video, or comic. In fact, in many cases, the most powerful arguments are those that combine word and image, the verbal and the visual; such multimedia texts often have greater persuasiveness and reach a broader audience than words alone.

This is the argument made by Scott McCloud in his groundbreaking book, Understanding Comics, one of the first texts to use graphic novel form to help readers understand visual rhetoric:

When pictures are more abstracted from “reality,” they require greater levels of perception, more like words. When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures.

McCloud tells us we need to develop “greater levels of perception,” or critical literacy, in order to read with greater levels of perception. In fact, we can look to the brief passage quoted here as an example of persuasive written rhetoric, in which McCloud makes very deliberate choices to strengthen his point. Notice how his words use comparison—contrast (pictures versus words), qualified language (“reality”), and parallel structure (both sentences move from “When” to a final phrase beginning with “more like”) in order to convince his audience that images and words operate in similar ways. Such attention to detail is the first step in rhetorical analysis—looking at the way the writer chooses the most effective means of persuasion to make a point.

What is interesting about McCloud’s piece is the way in which he uses both words and images to make his point. To fully appreciate McCloud’s rhetorical decisions, we need to consider the passage in its original context. As you can see in Figure 1.9, McCloud amplifies his argument about comics by using the form of the graphic novel itself.
FIGURE 1.9 Scott McCloud writes in the medium of cartoons to explain comics.  
Source: Courtesy of Scott McCloud

This complex diagram relies on the visual–verbal relationship to map out the complicated nature of how we understand both written text and images. The repetition and echoes that we found in the quoted passage are graphically represented in Figure 1.9; in fact, translated into comic book form, the division between word and image becomes a visual continuum that strongly suggests McCloud’s vision of the interrelationship between these rhetorical elements. The power of this argument comes from McCloud’s strategic assessment of the rhetorical situation: he, the author, recognizes that his audience (people interested in visual media) would find an argument that relies on both visual and verbal elements to be highly persuasive.

McCloud’s example is also instructive for demonstrating the way in which authors can strategically adapt their argument to different media. More than ever, rhetoric operates not just through word choice but also through choice of multimedia elements—images in a commercial, the audio of a viral ad on the Internet, the design choices of a website or flyer, even the layout strategies of your textbook. Therefore, we need to develop skills of analysis for all rhetorical texts. We need to understand argument as writing across diverse media and we need, therefore, to develop critical literacy, or a careful way of reading, analyzing, and understanding media (visual, verbal, and other rhetorical texts).

Understanding how rhetoric works across different media will give you the ability and confidence to analyze and produce texts of your own. That
is, these skills of analysis will help you approach other kinds of texts rhetorically: scholarly articles, books, editorials, letters to the editor, political speeches, and—as writing continues to evolve into new forms—blog posts, memes, mash-ups, and more.

Analyzing Visual Rhetoric

When persuasion—discourse or communication intended to change—happens through visual means, we often look to investigate its visual rhetoric. As we saw earlier in the chapter, such visual arguments surround us constantly in our everyday lives. We can use them as a starting point for developing strategies for analysis that we can then transfer to how we approach analysis of written rhetoric.

Editorial cartoons offer a rich resource for this sort of work since, as cultural critic Matthew Diamond asserts, they “provide alternative perspectives at a glance because they are visual and vivid and often seem to communicate a clear or obvious message.” Those messages might be powerful, but they sometimes might offend, as Pulitzer Prize–winning cartoonists Doug Marlette has suggested: “[T]he objective of political cartooning is not to soothe and tend sensitive psyches, but to jab and poke in an attempt to get at deeper truths, popular or otherwise.” Marlette’s words confirm what you probably already know—that cartoons are not just humorous texts but rather, as we have seen, they are rhetorical—they intend to persuade, and sometimes even to provoke.

Let’s begin with the editorial cartoon in Figure 1.10 by Bill Bramhall. Originally published in the Daily News on December 4, 2014, the cartoon represents a pointed response to the news that a grand jury declined to bring charges against a New York police officer for the death of Eric Garner, a 43-year-old black man, who died after being put in a chokehold during his arrest. In Bramhall’s cartoon, “I can’t breathe”—Garner’s last words—take on greater resonance when uttered by Lady Justice, shown sprawled on the sidewalk.

FIGURE 1.10 Bill Bramhall composed this powerful cartoon to comment on the 2014 death of Eric Garner.
By replacing Garner with the symbol of Justice, Bramhall is making a much stronger argument than just that Garner’s death was tragic: his cartoon suggests that justice itself has been laid low by the grand jury decision and that the American people can no longer look to the justice system to defend their rights (with its sword and balancing scales).

Keeping this analysis in mind, consider the different rhetorical effect the cartoon would have had if it had been drawn differently. What if the central figure speaking the words “I can’t breathe” were the Statue of Liberty? What if she were represented as African American? What if instead of being laid out on the sidewalk, she was shown crushed to her pedestal under three police officers, actively trying to restrain her? How would these changes alter the way you understood the cartoon’s argument? This is, in fact, the composition of a different cartoon created by editorial cartoonist Steve Benson. In both Bramhall’s and Benson’s cases, the text was generated out of the same exigence—the grand jury decision—but made different claims about the implications of the event.

Let’s look at another example of how a cartoonist uses visual rhetoric to make a powerful cultural critique on a similar theme.

 Appearing days after the Bramhall cartoon we examined above, this cartoon by Adam Zyglis (Figure 1.11) moves beyond the specifics of the Garner case to address the tense U.S. conversations over race prompted by the deaths of Michael Brown (which catalyzed riots in Ferguson, Missouri,
in late summer 2014) and Eric Garner. Notice the ways in which Zyglis uses seemingly simple rhetorical elements to convey a multilayered message:

- He heads the cartoon with a powerful title that plays on the word “color” both to refer to how we “fill in” or “shade” our conversations on race (the way a child would color in a picture in a coloring book) and also to allude to the issue of “color” that in itself underlies many discussions of race relations.
- He features an iconic image of a crayon box, replacing the trademark Crayola symbol with an American flag to make the symbolic force of his argument clearer to the audience.
- Instead of filling the box with a multitude of crayon colors, he simply draws one black and one white crayon, underscoring how all other variations, shades, and hues (i.e., racial and cultural identities) are absent from the “conversation.”

Looking at these elements, we can see his message: that conversations about race in America seem limited to a Caucasian-versus-African-American perspective. However, we can push this analysis even further. In choosing a crayon box, Zyglis seems to be indicating that we take a somewhat childish approach to these conversations. Additionally, if we consider the crayon colors to represent argumentative stances rather than symbols of racial identity, he also seems to be arguing against a “black versus white” approach to the issue, that is, an approach to an argument that relies on extreme oppositional stances rather than looking at the complexities or nuances of the issue.

As a final example, let’s turn to a visual argument that responds directly to an event very appropriate to the focus of this chapter: the Charlie Hebdo shootings. On January 7, 2015, two Al-Qaeda gunmen entered the offices of the French weekly newspaper, Charlie Hebdo, known around the world for its provocative and satirical articles, jokes, and political cartoons. By the time the shooting spree was over, 12 people were dead and 11 injured. Charlie Hebdo had long been a target of criticism from many groups, offended by their risqué portrayal of different cultural icons and customs; Muslim readers in particular often expressed displeasure at its irreverent caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed. However, despite the newspaper’s notoriety, the actions of the terrorist extremists were completely unanticipated and sent shock waves across the world.

As might be expected, the editorial cartoonist community in particular responded immediately to this assault on their French colleagues, and
newspaper columns and Internet websites were flooded with editorials—in words and images—reacting to this tragedy. Many of them relied on a central symbol to catalyze their argument: the pen or pencil as a symbol for free speech. One example can be found in Figure 1.12. This image by cartoonist Clay Bennett makes a powerful argument of resilience echoed by many of the other editorial cartoonists who responded to the incident. Notice the way that even with an extremely simplistic design, it articulates a powerful position: the pen, labeled “free expression,” takes center stage on the white background; broken in half and yet mended hastily with string, it suggests that free speech might have been damaged by tragic events, but it has not been destroyed and is ready to be wielded again by the next author who picks up the pen.

Bennett’s cartoon was one of many such visual responses to the tragedy. Graphic designer Lucille Cleric circulated a similar image on social media. Her cartoon featured three pencils stacked on top one another: on top, a sharpened pencil (labeled “yesterday”), in the middle, a broken pencil (labeled “today”), and, on the bottom, the broken pencil, resharpended to form two smaller pencils (labeled “tomorrow”). In its original version, Cleric reinforced her visual message with the caption, “Break one, thousand will rise.” She further punctuated her point by circulating it with the hashtag #raiseyourpencilforfreedom.

Her graphic accumulated over 100,000 “likes” almost immediately after its release, demonstrating its resonance with the “Je Suis Charlie” (I am Charlie) movement that swept the world within hours after the attack, as cartoonists, journalists, and citizens offered a hydra-headed expression of solidarity with those who had died in the service of free expression of ideas. In an interview with the website Mashable, Cleric made her motive
for creating the cartoon clear, saying, “I can only hope [the cartoon] will inspire people to use their pencils too and that there will be thousands of drawings like this very soon.” This purpose—to inspire, to move others to action—speaks once again to the power of rhetoric, visual and verbal, not only influence people’s ideas but, in some cases, to call them to action.

**WRITER’S PRACTICE**  
MyWritingLab

Look at this editorial cartoon created by Adam Zyglis (Figure 1.13). Practice your own skills of rhetorical and critical analysis by analyzing the editorial cartoon, taking into account color, composition, characters, and action. Then, try to answer the following questions:

- Who is the audience for the cartoon? How can you tell?
- What is the argument? What elements of cartoon contribute to this message?
- What is the exigency of the cartoon?
- What was the author’s motive or purpose for creating the cartoon?

Consider carefully how the artist uses words, images, and elements of composition to convey his message.

**FIGURE 1.13** by Adam Zyglis

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**Analyzing Written Rhetoric**

As we turn to developing your own analytical skills with regard to written rhetoric, you might find encouragement in Scott McCloud’s point from *Understanding Comics* that “Writing is perceived information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language.” The purpose of this book is to help you develop the tools and acquire the knowledge to understand—or decode—the symbols we use to communicate with each other, including visual images but also written rhetoric in all its complexity. The strategies of rhetorical analysis that we discussed above—considering the rhetorical situation, exigence, and the motive and purpose behind a text—will
serve you well as you examine communication in its many different forms. However, while with visual rhetoric we layered in more detailed examination of image, layout, color, and composition, as we move to more conventional written forms, you’ll correspondingly need to take into account additional rhetorical elements: word choice, word usage, structure, rhetorical devices (such as symbolism, metaphor, and allusion), and tone, to name just a few.

Let’s look at an article that derives from the same exigency as the cartoon in Figure 1.1: the assassination of Gabrielle Gifford. If we return to the blog post by Barbara Morrill that we looked at earlier in the chapter, we can see how the genre of the blog affords her different rhetorical opportunities than those presented to editorial cartoonists. In her piece, Morrill writes:

And while there are many examples of the violent language employed by the right: “Second Amendment remedies,” “resorting to the bullet box,” calls to be “armed and dangerous,” to name just a few, it’s more than that. […]

Because since the election of Barack Obama, the right, both elected Republicans and their minions in the media, have pounded the non-stop drumbeat that Obama/Democrats/liberals want to destroy the country, they want to kill your grandmother, they’re shredding the Constitution, they’re terrorist sympathizers, they’re going to take away your guns, that they’re enemies of humanity, that the government is the enemy …

And that, as much as the obvious examples of violent rhetoric, can appeal to the extremist, the mentally unstable, or the “lone nut,” to act. And last Saturday, one of them did.

The same way an editorial cartoonist sketches his argument with different shades, shapes, and strokes, so Morrill as an author powerfully draws her points through language. Consider some of the rhetorical techniques she uses:

- Morrill includes direct quotations of phrases used during the congressional election, listing them in a way that generates intensity and a sense of escalation (similar to how the hierarchy of words on the flagpole operated in Figure 1.1).

- In the second paragraph, she switches to a set of images that attack the character of elected Republicans through criticizing their “minions in the media” and asserting that they have “pounded the nonstop drumbeat” as if at war with Democrats. This condemning language produces a strong animosity in the writing that might also sway a reader toward condemning the Republicans.
Morrill uses a strategy called *anaphora*—deliberate repetition for rhetorical effect—by repeating “they’re” at the end of the second paragraph to create a powerful rhythm and build emotional energy.

The list itself relies on hyperbole and exaggeration ("destroy the country," "kill your grandmother," "shredding the Constitution," and so on) to present Morrill’s version of what Republicans tend to suggest in their media statements.

She concludes by reminding the reader of the exigence of the situation—how the “violent rhetoric” she has critiqued produced tragic action: the shooting of Giffords.

As you can see, such details can deeply move an audience. What we learn from reading this blog post rhetorically is that when you analyze written texts, you can apply similar strategies to those you use when reading visual texts: look for the vivid details, which in the case of language might include repetition, concrete metaphors, emotional phrases, and characterization of others that together act as what Aristotle would call “available means of persuasion” in writing. In this way, such written rhetoric, even while it disparages “violent language,” is actually also forceful, even violent in its emphasis. It, too, is a form of communication that has as its purpose the goal of persuading audiences.

Let’s consider a longer passage of writing. Remember Alex and her walk across campus? When she arrived at her Communication 101 class on “Media and Society,” her TA gave her a handout containing an editorial about the Charlie Hebdo attack from the news site Humansphere. Back in her dorm room, Alex sits down to read the article, writing *annotations* in the margins that indicate brief points of analysis or observation about the strategies of persuasion at work in each part of the article. As you read the article and Alex’s accompanying commentary, add your own marks on points that you find provocative or interesting. Use the strategies of *critical literacy* that we’ve been developing throughout this chapter and ask yourself:

- Who is the main *audience*?
- How does David Horsey position himself as *author*?
- What is his *purpose* or *motive* in response to the *exigency* of the situation?
- Where and what is his *argument*?
- What rhetorical strategies does Horsey use to persuade the audience?
- What is your response to the text?
OBNOXIOUS FREEDOM

David Horsey

I have received many messages of solidarity from friends and readers in the couple of days since Islamic terrorists stormed into the Paris office of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and murdered 12 people, including several cartoonists.

One friend—a prominent officeholder who, despite getting his share of barbs from reporters, nevertheless understands the absolute necessity of maintaining an unfettered news media—wrote in an email, “I am thinking of you following the France assault on journalists. It follows the loss of something like 40 journalists in the Mideast. Freedom cannot exist without people willing to ferret out the truth.”

I appreciated his words, but I responded with a crucial caveat: “Not only can freedom not exist without truth tellers, freedom cannot exist without obnoxious expressions of opinion, no matter who is offended.”

Throughout my career of giving offense, I have received an unending stream of comments from people who disagree with what I draw or write. Sometimes they are rude. Sometimes they are insulting. Sometimes they are seriously angry. And sometimes they are just having fun sparring with me. Only once have I gotten anything like a death threat, which was unsettling, but quickly forgotten. One guy offered to fight me, but he lived 3000 miles away, so the bout never happened.

Love or hate the way I think, though, just about everyone would agree my right to free speech is unassailable. That’s what makes America great, of course, and why there is near unanimous shock about the attack on the cartoonists in Paris. But, as people get a closer look at the kinds of images those French satirists were publishing, some are having second thoughts about all this freedom.

Editorial cartoonists in the United States are an essentially tame species. Traditionally part of the establishment media,
American cartoonists mostly poke fun at obvious targets. Even when the cartoons my ink-spewing compatriots and I produce are sharply barbed and a little bold, they stay within fairly tight boundaries of social responsibility and good taste. I do not think that’s a terrible thing—even though it encourages too many bland cartoons with elephants and donkeys and labels galore—but it does mean we very seldom really test the limits of what our readers will tolerate.

The martyred cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo were different. Unrestrained mockery, not reasoned commentary, was their raison d’etre. Page after page, week after week, they turned out scatological, simplistic images attacking not only the political figures everyone picks on, but the cherished images and idols of organized religions. There were cartoons of Christ partaking of three-way sex with God and the Holy Spirit; nasty cartoons of the pope that got the magazine sued numerous times by Catholics; images of Orthodox Jews reminiscent of the anti-Semitic art of Nazi Germany; and, of course, caricatures of Mohammed doing all manner of disgusting things, sometimes with his genitals exposed.

It is those images that outraged the Parisian Muslim community and brought the cartoonists into the extremists’ line of fire. The magazine office was firebombed in 2011 and the publication’s editor, Stephane Charbonnier, received enough death threats to justify hiring a bodyguard. The editor and the bodyguard are now among the dead.

Even with all our proud proclamations in favor of free speech, would a wildly iconoclastic magazine like Charlie Hebdo be tolerated in the United States? Conservative religious people would be deeply offended, of course, but neither would such a publication fare well on liberally minded university campuses. Given the social sensitivities in the academic world, a student cartoonist who drew even one cartoon of the type regularly produced by the Charlie Hebdo crew would be pilloried and run off campus.

My take? Most of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons I have seen are crudely drawn, crass, and juvenile. Giving offense simply for its
own sake has never been my style. Yet, I appreciate the principle on which Charbonnier took a stand. He kept publishing outrageous depictions of Mohammed mostly because people kept insisting he had no right to do it.

Religious fundamentalists may believe limits to free expression are what the Deity demands. College administrators may think it is the politically correct thing to do. Politicians may believe it will keep their constituents calm. But, without the freedom to offend—even in the most outrageous way—freedom is circumscribed and tepid. The French cartoonists were constant offenders and most people would not like their work, but they believed in freedom with a dedication few of us can match. And they died for it.

As Parisians are now saying in response to the terror, “Je suis Charlie.”

By annotating the essay, Alex acts as an active reader and begins to identify which aspects of the article’s written rhetoric interest her most. Her analysis evokes the rhetorical situation (see Figure 1.5): she analyzes the way the writer (or author) uses language (or argument) to persuade the reader (or audience) of the article (or text). She also noted the rhetorical moves of the author: word choice, structure, style tone, voice. She could then use those points in order to formulate her own argument about Horsey’s article.

As you develop your own skills of analyzing written rhetoric, you can also use annotations to help you identify and track your observations on how rhetoric works; these notes, gathered together, will enable you to generate your own interpretation and, ultimately, a persuasive argument. In fact, Sir Francis Bacon, the great philosopher, politician, and scientist from the Age of Enlightenment, developed a system of logical “inductive” reasoning based on the very practice of gathering observations and using them to construct knowledge, a new conclusion, or an argument. Echoing the position of Aristotle, he also saw rhetoric as that which moves others. Bacon asserted: “The duty and office of rhetoric is to apply reason to imagination for the better moving of the will.”
The varied ways that you and your classmates might read and respond to this editorial depend on both audience and context, bringing to light again the importance of the rhetorical situation. Differences in your interpretation also reveal the importance of learning effective means of persuading others to see the text through a certain lens or way of reading and analyzing the text. That is, your task as a reader and a writer is both to study a text carefully and to learn how to persuade others to see the text as you see it. In order to learn how to do so, we will turn next to the key elements in writing an argumentative essay about your interpretation of a text, so you, too, can “apply reason to imagination” to persuade others.

**WRITER’S PRACTICE**

Practice your skills of rhetorical analysis on this 2014 editorial by Chris Baker, also known as “Angry Nerd,” who critiques Disney’s decision to “destroy” what Star Wars fans call the “Expanded Universe canon”—including comic books, video games, and hundreds of pieces of fan fiction and unauthorized Star Wars–derivative texts—as part of creating continuity in the new Disney version of the Star Wars saga. Annotate like Alex did in the example above, looking for elements of the piece that make it particularly persuasive. Consider how Baker takes into account the rhetorical situation as well as exigency and purpose through style and composition. For added challenge, consider analyzing the video version of this editorial, available through YouTube.

**“IS DARTH DISNEY DESTROYING STAR WARS’ EXPANDED UNIVERSE?”**

*By Chris Baker*

Help me, George Lucas, you’re my only hope. Darth Disney is destroying the Expanded Universe. Please come back, George Lucas; this is our most desperate hour.

I felt a great disturbance in the force as if thousands of storylines cried out and were suddenly silenced. The Star Wars franchise is committing “canon-icide.” The fate of an entire universe
is at stake. You’ve understand: the Star Wars movies are the bar-
est fraction of star war stories out there.

The so-called “Expanded Universe” has existed in comic
books and novels and games for decades, and Lucas film is now
air-locking it all. The Thrawn trilogy novels; Shadow of the Empire
for Nintendo 64; the Tatooine manhunt module for the Star Wars
RPG; the holiday special: erased from existence. Only a Sith Lord
would decree that everything except the Star Wars films and the
Clone Wars series did not happen. All future tie-in cartoons and
novels—everything—will be forced to march in lockstep with the
JJ Abrams sequel films. You know who else marched in lockstep?
[The storm troopers.] And a new story group inside Lucasfilm
will make sure that all elements in the Star Wars continuity fit
together.

Normally I approve of an orderly and cohesive continuity, but
this crisis on infinite Endoors is deleting incidents that are more
interesting than almost anything that happened in the movies. No
Expanded Universe means Boba Fett never escaped from the Sar-
lacc Pit, Luke Skywalker never flirted with the dark side, and Han
Solo never befriended … Jackson Starhopper. . . .

Oh, Darth Disney, only you could be so bold! To think that I
was cautiously optimistic about your stewardship of Star Wars. I
was far too trusting.

The survival of the Expanded Universe is now in the hands
of Star Wars fans. Fan fiction kept Star Trek alive through the
lean years. We can do with the same for Star Wars. The more you
tighten your grip, Darth Disney, the more Expanded Universe sto-
ries will slip through your fingers. You may control the canon, but
you will never control the Fan-on. Your tightly controlled conti-
nuity can’t handle the pulse-pounding exploits of Pedanticus Nit-
pickser, a bald bespectacled jedi, who lectures the entire galaxy
about how lightsabers are scientifically impossible and how you
couldn’t actually hear explosions in the vacuum of space.

Strong he is in the force … of logic.
WRITING A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

We’ve seen that rhetoric works as a means of persuading an audience to accept the argument of the author. This is also true for the argument you make about a text. When you write an analysis essay for class, you are crafting a rhetorical text in order to persuade your readers (the instructor and your peers) to accept your interpretation. In some cases, your instructor might ask you to select your own text for analysis; in others, you may be assigned a particular text. In either case, ask yourself the following questions:

- What elements stand out that you might analyze in your essay?
- What do you know about the author or the intended audience?
- What do you know about the timing or context of this text?
- What is your interpretation of the meaning or message of this text?

As you work through the questions above, you can see that your task as a writer is to argue convincingly for your audience to see the text the way you yourself see it. In the case of Figure 1.14, what is the cartoon’s argument about the NFL’s response to recent allegations of domestic violence among the players? What details could you discuss in order to support your interpretation?

**FIGURE 1.14** Gary Markstein’s comic humorously tackles the sensitive issue of domestic violence in the NFL.
Your challenge as a student of writing and rhetoric is not only to identify the argument contained by a text but also to craft your own interpretation of that text. This involves careful assessment of the ways in which the elements of the rhetorical situation work together to produce meaning in a text.

In looking at Markstein’s comic, you may notice many details—the uniforms, the hand gestures, the captions, the facial expressions, the shading on the referee’s pants, the use of black shadows, and the fact that the lettering on the hats is yellow. However, when crafting your own argument, it’s valuable to remember that a successful rhetorical analysis does not need to discuss every component in the source text, only those relevant to supporting your interpretation. In fact, it’s also important to tailor your analysis itself to prioritize a particular approach. You might decide to focus on any one of these elements as you shape your overall interpretation:

- **Argument:** What is the text’s argument, and is it persuasive? How does the author use evidence to support his interpretation?
- **Audience:** How did the author compose the text to persuade a particular audience? How did he take into account their context and predispositions to try to create a convincing argument?
- **Genre:** How did the author either trade on or depart from the conventions of a particular genre (such as the conventional essay, blogging, twitter, even email as we saw in Figure 1.6)? How did that decision influence the persuasiveness of the argument?
- **Style:** How did the author use style as a persuasive tool? How did he use symbol, metaphor, word choice, voice, and other stylistic devices?
- **Exigence and Purpose:** How does the cartoon respond to a pressing need? What is the author’s purpose, and to what extent does he accomplish it?

**AT A GLANCE**

**Selecting and Evaluating a Text for Rhetorical Analysis**

*When choosing a text for analysis, ask yourself the following questions:*

- What is the text’s purpose? To entertain? Educate? Persuade?
- Are there sufficient elements in the text to analyze?
- What do you know about the author, the intended audience, and the context?
- What’s your interpretation of this image? Can you develop a strong claim that you can support with evidence from the text?