Making Sense of Messages: A Critical Apprenticeship in Rhetorical Criticism  
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* The process of critical analysis of messages
  + Description
    - Thorough, accurate, insightful, unbiased.
      * Now, having said that, some refinements. (1) before being able to describe an artifact, one has to be able to reproduce/present it. Do not skip presenting the artifact to rush to describe it. Part of the descriptive process is to accurately represent the rhetoric. One does not get to do rhetorical criticism on one’s description; we do criticism of particular, specific artifacts. (2) Notice, on page 30-32, that they illustrate by presenting the ad, then their description of it. They call against “mindlessly reproducing” the material. Yet note that they actually (have to) do both if you are to fully understand their work. (3) “Show me the money . . . I mean, the discourse.”
      * There is a call here for an unbiased description. Early perceptioning can “load” the process so strongly that one simply can’t do adequate criticism. The key here is to also describe one’s positioning so that the reader can understand how the description is influenced by your view/experience of it.
        + Describing the context
        + Historical background

Of the people

Issue

Action

Event

* + - * Communication situation

People

Issue

Action

Event

* + - Comparisons/contrasts with similar events
      * + Again, this step is better done later, with data analysis. But initial screening can develop a body of comparative data for examination.
    - In general, refer back to Bitzer’s “Rhetorical Situation.”
  + Analysis: systematically discovering, identifying, and articulating various parts of the messages and the relationships of those parts to each other.
    - Systematically find the parts (uncover that which was tried/done), name them and their functions, thereby uncovering the choices rhetors made.
      * It’s usually best to inform this process with theory; a search model.
        + Search models will change your point of view as they focus our attention on various aspects.
        + Although the direction/order in which critics work varies, it’s usually best to enable the artifact to dictate the method rather than running around with a method looking for data (like a baker with a cookie cutter looking for some pliable dough). There are, however, times when we look for data that validates/invalidates a method; but that’s a particular type of study.
        + Search models do provide a systematic set of concepts/relationships, and sometimes steps (oft-times, more or less of one or the other).
        + They also provide a validated measurement device. Inventing these is difficult for beginners: probably best for beginners to use extant methods rather than to try to invent them.
        + Oft-times, one may combine approaches. However, it is not wise for beginners to attempt to use more than one at a time.
        + Do both the description and analysis BEFORE doing ANY interpretation. There is always a temptation to draw conclusions, based on personal feelings about the act or based on trying to get the analysis to turn out this way or that, before completing the analysis. Resist. Do the work first, then draw conclusions.
  + Interpretation: draw conclusions: what did you find about what the rhetor did? What did we learn about (1) the act (2) the model? Remember that a model designed for/from one set of data may not fit 100% on your data. Lack of perfect fit is NOT failure/a negative finding. Gaps need to be explained.
    - Interpretations should be as tentative as the various limitations to the work/analysis. Don’t over interpret. However, interpretation is, by it’s very nature, an extension.
    - Deciding what it means that the rhetor used the particular devices you discovered in the analysis phase. Interpretations are inferences, reasonable conclusions based on evidence from the analysis.
    - There is sometimes evaluation mixed in with this step
    - Interpretation is a creative thinking process without absolute right/wrong answers
    - Interpretation is subjective; this is NOT science (yet the arguments made must still be supported via data and sound reasoning).
    - Interpretation and judgment are rhetorical acts in themselves.
    - Interpretation is inferential. Though it depends on data at the base, it often draws conclusions that do exceed the raw data.
    - How does a critic develop an interpretation?
      * By asking questions from factors that emerge during analysis
      * by comparing with previous findings/that which is known/similar-dissimilar cases
  + Evaluation: the critic’s use of stated criteria to determine the merit, worth, significance, or effectiveness of the rhetorical strategies.
    - This one is REALLY tricky.
    - First, you have to present and establish judgment criteria. That criteria has to make sense, given the data and the analytic approach. One has to be both relevant and fair.
      * Sometimes critical approaches “contain” judgment standards within them; but at other times, they do not. When the methods themselves don’t contain the judgment standards, one has to do research to discover related systems of judgment that provide adequate frames of reference.
    - Second, one has to make argument as to why the criteria are appropriate. One can’t just assume that because you pick them, the standards are the right ones.
    - Third, critics must make informed judgments, it’s part of the activity and is an important component in the benefits of doing criticism.
  + Types of Judgments
    - Truthfulness: perhaps using either internal or external aspects
    - Reasonableness/Quality & Quantity of the evidence and reasoning
    - Effectiveness: BEWARE—judging effectiveness, past speculation, requires additional research outside your critique of the rhetoric. One can sometimes finesse this, depending on the materials one has. But pretending that you have evidence about effects when you only have evidence about process is risky and probably wrong.
    - Ethics/Values: “Desirable standards” is an interesting issue. Once again, critics have to justify the standards as appropriate to both the discourse and to the event.
    - Ideology: very much like ethics or values . . . arguing that the rhetoric supports or subverts this or that ideology, appropriately or inappropriately, requires the establishment of the relevance of the “standard.” Ideological criticism often carries an extra burden as it is generally subversive of the status quo.