

BEYOND THE CHECKLIST: USING RHETORICAL ANALYSIS TO EVALUATE SOURCES AS SOCIAL ACTS

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A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO SOURCE EVALUATION

Several years ago, I suffered a pedagogical crisis: My efforts to teach source evaluation felt fruitless; abstract; devoid of meaning. The traditional set of evaluation questions described sources that were monolithic, discrete, and inert. This did not match my belief that they were complicated and dynamic acts of communication. I experimented with a succession of ideas, but none of them really worked. Then...I discovered rhetoric.

Of vital importance in the field of composition, teaching librarians have largely ignored the rhetorical nature of sources. Rhetoric looks at how people use language to influence the behavior of others. Texts—any form of communication that can serve as a source of information—are seen as deliberate, social acts designed to address a set of circumstances known as a rhetorical situation. Every situation consists of four separate, but inter-related parts: an author, an audience, a purpose, and a context. For a text to be effective, an author must recognize the requirements of the situation. He or she must make appropriate choices that achieve specific purposes and that meet the expectations of specific audiences. The author must also recognize how broader contexts (e.g., academic, political, cultural) impose further constraints on the way the message is constructed. As situations differ, so must responses. Forms of communication—from personal blogs to television news stories to journal articles—are different in content and style because they allow writers to address different purposes and

audiences. By their rhetorical nature, they will have varying levels of quality and credibility, which we can evaluate.

In the current paradigm of source evaluation, we simply ask students to identify the existence of credibility cues: features or actions that signal the credibility of a source.¹ This process implies that sources that include cues indicate trustworthy authority, high accuracy, and low bias are credible and good. Sources that lack these cues are unreliable and bad. While this allows for easy classification, it is based on flawed logic. It assumes students understand why communities value the use of certain cues—individually or collectively—in the production of high-quality information. As novices learning the conventions of an academic discipline, this may not be the case. It also suggests that every source of a certain type uses these cues in an identical manner. Authors choose specific cues to accomplish specific tasks. The inclusion or exclusion of certain cues is a purposeful and strategic decision, borne out of rhetorical necessity. For instance, high-quality sources may not use every high-quality cue. Conversely, low-quality sources may adopt high-quality cues to establish credibility. To understand the meaning of any cue, we must understand its use in a particular situation. This means, for example, a named author does not always indicate authority; extreme bias is not always problematic; and citing evidence is not always indicative of accuracy. To understand a source and avoid flawed conclusions, critical evaluation must account for social purpose.²

Rhetorical analysis can help students determine these meanings. It requires them to evaluate a source's social actions, analyzing how elements of the situation—the purpose, the author, the audience, and the context—interact to create a desired effect. Do the choices work to establish credibility? Does the lack of cues work to damage its credibility? Each text

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is an artifact of the situation. It provides valuable information about the values and beliefs of the people creating and receiving it, revealing their approach to authority, accuracy, and bias. As a communicative act, each situation requires a unique response; but that does not mean recognizable patterns do not exist. To create an effective text, authors would be foolish to ignore the precedent set by previous attempts. When there are common, reoccurring situations (e.g., scientific research, breaking news, product comparisons) conventions develop and dictate standard responses called genres (e.g., journal article, news bulletin, infomercial). Those who recognize the genre, also recognize that conventions govern responses.³ Evaluating a message rhetorically can expose these conventions and the rhetorical necessity behind their use. Recognizing these patterns and judging their intentions can help students differentiate sources, evaluate credibility, and determine a source's usefulness. This will help them make rhetorically appropriate selections and build better arguments.

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

Let us analyze and evaluate an example: The Institute for Historical Review (<http://www.ihr.org>).⁴ Do they craft an effective message? More importantly, is it credible? In rhetorical analysis, conclusions must be supported by examples from the text. The traditional set of evaluation questions is an invaluable part of the evaluation process.⁵ They reveal cues that signal authority, accuracy, and bias. Simple identification is not enough; we must look at how these cues satisfy elements of the situation: purpose, author, audience, and context. If we discover problems in the IHR's ability to craft a credible message, it should raise questions about an organization's claims.

To give the analysis focus, we must define the rhetorical situation. In the broadest sense, the Institute seems to address an academic situation. Specifically, it seems to engage in scholarship and have a need to share it. Therefore, it is not surprising that it uses genres familiar in academia. It published the *Journal of Historical Review*, a publication that covered "a wide range of historical, political, current affairs and cultural topics,"⁶ for nearly 20 years. Between 1979 and 2004, the IHR hosted a number of conferences. There is also a sizable collection of books, leaflets, and podcasts. With all of these elements, historians and political scientists are a likely audience. If that is the case, it raises expectations for the site's authority, accuracy, and bias. If research is one goal, education is another. The *About* page provides more information about the purpose:

independent educational research and publishing center that works to promote peace, understanding and justice through greater public awareness of the past, and especially socially-politically relevant aspects of twentieth-century history. We strive in particular to increase understanding of the causes, nature and consequences of war and conflict.⁷

The emphasis on increasing "public awareness of the past" suggests an agenda intended for a general audience. Is the IHR

speaking to both academic and general audiences? Or is the group targeting the public and using the elements of an academic situation to lend its message credibility? We need to look at the interaction of all elements to determine if the organization is worthy of our moral and financial support.

The conventions of academic genres set the standard of effective communication at a fairly high level. To count as credible evidence, academic audiences expect scholarly information to be trustworthy: considerable authority, high accuracy, and low bias. Thus, respected scholarship has a minimum threshold for participation. To gain authority, academic audiences expect authors to possess advanced degrees and work at an institution of higher education. According to a biography posted on the IHR site, Mark Weber—the organization's director and most prolific contributor—is a "historian, author, lecturer, and current affairs analyst," who holds a Master's degree in European history from Indiana University (Bloomington). This is clearly designed to establish Weber's authority, but there are a few potential problems. A critical reading of the biography shows that he has no academic credentials, other than some experience as a teaching assistant. Additionally, the "selected" bibliography he provides lists only material he has written for the IHR; there are no publications from peer-reviewed journals. While troubling, this is not definitive proof against his or the IHR's credibility. We must also consider Weber's apparent expertise. He is a productive author, writing on a wide range of topics. As an "articulate and seasoned commentator on current affairs and modern history,"⁸ he can be contacted for media appearances. The casual reader may not notice these small discrepancies, but is the site's overall authority sufficient to persuade an academic audience?

Much like authority, academic genres impose higher standards of accuracy. Citing its evidence is the most obvious way for a source to establish accuracy. On the surface, the IHR meets the criteria. Many of the articles in the *Journal* reference other sources, such as reports from the CIA, transcripts of the Nuremberg Trials, and the memoirs of Nazi-Hunter Simon Wiesenthal. Citing evidence is how scholars—and in particular, historians—place new research within the context of established research. Since Weber has a background in methods of historical research, it makes sense that the organization would establish its accuracy in this way. However, it is not enough to simply ask if a source cites its evidence; we must look at the kinds of evidence it cites. Scholarly works typically reference information from other peer-reviewed journals. It is the fastest way to build credibility and ensure accuracy. This is where the IHR's claim to accuracy begins to weaken. Many of the articles in the *Journal of Historical Review* cite other articles in the *Journal of Historical Review*. There are references to primary sources and popular articles, but there are no references to reputable history journals. These choices imply a limited research base. It could be that the IHR specializes in a fairly obscure field, but a look at the situation provides another, more likely, explanation. For something in an academic discipline to be considered accurate, it must be supported by the preponderance of credible evidence. The IHR's actions are at odds with the requirements of an academic situation. This suggests that it does not agree with

other scholars or other scholars might not agree with the IHR. If this is the case, we expect that the organization would provide extraordinary evidence to support its extraordinary claims. So, let us look at specific claims made by the organization. This will clarify the final element of the situation: context.

No message is created in a vacuum. Its effectiveness is mitigated by elements in the external environment. Time, geography, ideology, and culture impose behaviors, values, and beliefs, limiting the acceptable choices available to influence an audience.⁹ We have analyzed the IHR's problems operating within an academic context. These problems exist, because academia is not the only context the IHR must acknowledge. The site lacks overt symbols, such as swastikas or calls for racial purity, but it must acknowledge a context that is clearly anti-Semitic. Consider a quote from its leaflet, *Holocaust Remembrance: What's Behind the Campaign?*: "[T]his relentless campaign is an expression of Jewish-Zionist power, and is designed to further Jewish-Zionist interests."¹⁰ This viewpoint is echoed on the *Donate* page, "[W]e inform the public about the Jewish-Zionist grip on our cultural and political life, the corrosive impact of Holocaust propaganda, myths about the Israel-Palestine conflict, World War II lies, and much more."¹¹ Once this bias is recognized, a negative view of Israel and Judaism becomes apparent in nearly every image, title, example, and claim. To be clear, the concept of historical review is legitimate; historians must constantly incorporate new evidence into established history. However, the IHR is interested in primarily applying these techniques to one event—the Holocaust. Much of its scholarship questions the severity of the event, finding fault with existing evidence. But in this case, the rhetoric of academia is only to legitimize its bias. Bias is not part of acceptable research methodology; it casts doubt on the veracity of results. As authority and accuracy become suspect, Weber's lack of credentials and the Journal's tendency to cite itself begin to make sense. It may acknowledge an academic context, but it cannot work within it. As an example of effective and credible scholarly communication, it fails. The Organization of American Historians, publisher of the peer-reviewed *Journal of American History*, condemns the organization, "abhor[ing], on both moral and scholarly grounds the substantive arguments of the Institute for Historical Review.¹² We all reject their claims to be taken seriously as historians." The Anti-Defamation League corroborates this view, rejecting the IHR's "half-truths and methodologically flawed arguments."¹³ The organization clearly operates on the fringes of legitimate history. If we only ask students to only identify cues, they may come to different conclusions. They must gain a holistic each rhetorical choice and its meaning. Rhetorical analysis makes site's social purpose clear, exposing its extreme bias and lack of credibility. This is far more important than the simple classification of the IHR as a "good" or "bad" source.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

A few colleagues have expressed concern about the level of critical thinking required to evaluate sources rhetorically. It is true; judging a source's intentions and actions can be difficult, but I believe rhetorical approach is a more intellectually honest

activity than evaluating sources on the inclusion or exclusion of certain features. It is a flexible approach that accounts for the variety of sources students encounter online, on television, and in print. That said, we must rethink our practice for rhetorical evaluation to work.

First, we must also redefine what we mean by a source. In rhetoric, students evaluate actions, not objects. A container model of information (e.g., reference materials, books, journals, websites) does little to describe how messages act to effectively organize and communicate knowledge. A journal is not better than a website because of its format. It is better because of the type of information it provides. Sources exist as patterns of action known as genres. Different genres (e.g., scholarly articles, news stories, and editorials) address different situations and, therefore, approach authority, accuracy, and bias differently. By design, some genres will be more credible than others. Students must become aware of the range of possible actions. With knowledge of these conventions, they can evaluate and select sources that match the expectations set by an assignment, a professor, or the discipline.¹⁴

Second, rhetoric's pragmatism does not equate quality with value. It encourages authors to select the most appropriate sources to develop the most effective arguments. Sources are not simply "good" and "bad;" they are helpful or not helpful. The IHR's message may be odious, but it provides an inside perspective of Holocaust denial. To make rhetorically-appropriate choices, students need to *understand* the strengths and weakness of what they are using. Scholars have an advantage in the evaluation of the IHR. They understand the expectations and conventions governing the genres of scholarly communication. Fluency with these patterns is critical for success in their professional activities. Therefore, disciplinary knowledge and experience make it easier to recognize and explain anomalies. For a novice student, making sense of these aspects may be difficult, since it requires looking at circumstances beyond the text. Our instruction should aim to expose these patterns of social action. Through practice, students can develop their expertise, as well as their confidence in analyzing, critiquing, and using the conventions of academia.¹⁵ This is critical thinking: When students understand the demands of the situation, they will be able to make rhetorically-appropriate choices and build more persuasive arguments.

ENDNOTES

1. Daniels, E. (2010). Using a targeted rubric to deepen direct assessment of college students' abilities to evaluate the credibility of sources. *College and Undergraduate Libraries*, 17(1), 31-43. Though not about rhetoric, this article provides an excellent description of the credibility cue concept.
2. Critical Information Literacy suggests a similar approach to sources. For an overview, read the works of James Elmborg, Cushla Kapitzke, and Troy Swanson.
3. Miller, C. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70(2), 151-167. This article describes the foundational elements of modern Genre Theory.
4. This site was redesigned in late April 2012. The following analysis is based on the older, slightly different version.
5. California State University, Chico's CRAAP Test is an excellent example.
6. Institute for Historical Review. (2011). The Journal of Historical Review. Retrieved from <http://ihr.org/main/journal.shtml>
7. Institute for Historical Review. (2010). About the IHR. Retrieved from <http://www.ihr.org/about>
8. Institute for Historical Review. (2008). Mark Weber: A biographical profile. Retrieved from http://www.ihr.org/other/weber_bio.html
9. Devitt, A. J. (2004). Writing genres. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press. Building on the work of Miller (1984), Devitt explores the influence of context on the creation and use of genres.
10. Weber, M. (2006). Holocaust remembrance: What's behind the campaign? Retrieved from http://ihr.org/leaflets/holocaust_remembrance.shtml
11. Institute for Historical Review. (2012). Donate. Retrieved from <http://www.ihr.org/main/support.shtml>
12. Organization of American Historians Executive Board. (1993). OAH statement on the IHR controversy [Editorial note]. *Journal of American History*, 80(3), 1213.
13. Anti-Defamation League. (2005). Institute for Historical Review. Retrieved from http://www.adl.org/learn/ext_us/historical_review.asp?LEARN_Cat=Extremism&LEARN_SubCat=Extremism_in_America&xpicked=3&item=ihr
14. Burkholder, J. (2010). Redefining sources as social acts: Genre theory in information literacy instruction. *Library Philosophy and Practice*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/413/> In this article, I explore the implications of this idea for information literacy instruction.
15. Simmons, M. H. (2005). Librarians as disciplinary discourse mediators: using genre theory to move toward critical information literacy. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 5(3), 297- 311. In this article, Simmons recommends librarians use Genre Theory to accomplish this task.

APPENDIX: LESSON PLAN

Objective:

Rhetoric is the study of how people use language to influence the behavior of others. This lesson is intended to help students use the concepts of Rhetorical Analysis to understand the social nature of a source and evaluate its credibility.

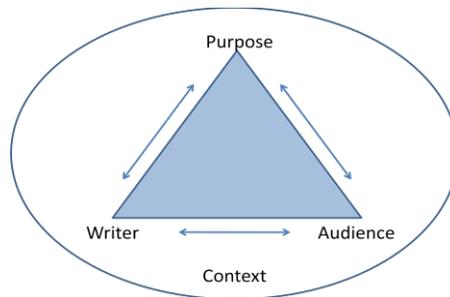
Outcomes:

1. Students will be able to identify and define the four parts of the Rhetorical Situation.
2. Students will be able to identify credibility cues that signal authority, accuracy, and bias.
3. Students will be able to apply the concepts of Rhetorical Analysis to determine if these cues achieve the desired effect within the Situation.

Procedures:

1) Warm-up Prompt: You have just failed my class. You, however, disagree with my decision. Compose an email asking me to me to reconsider. For it to be effective, what specific choices do you need to make? Think about issues relating to me, language, tone, and format. Be able to defend each of your decisions.

In a class discussion, ask for suggestions. As you receive answers, introduce and define each element of the Rhetorical Situation:



Discuss how the interactions of these elements dictate the choices available for constructing effective messages. Spend some time on the influence of Context—external elements (e.g. time, geography, ideology, culture) that impose constraints (e.g. behaviors, styles, values, etc.).

Describe Credibility Cues—features or actions that signal Authority, Accuracy, and Bias. These cues can be used to build a case for or against a source's credibility. Discuss how different situations require different choices; thus, cues may not signify the same thing in every circumstance.

Draw the Rhetorical Situation on the board as a point of reference. Ask if students have any questions about its make-up and function.

2) Rhetorical Analysis: We must understand how individual elements interact to create a desired effect. Go to the website for the Institute for Historical Review (<http://www.ihr.org>). Ask students to rhetorically analyze the organization's message.

- Who is behind it?
- What is their intended Purpose?
- Who is their intended Audience?
- Within what context(s) does this site operate?
- What cues do they use to signal their Authority, Accuracy, and Bias?

With specific examples from the source, have students develop an evaluation of the site. Does the source's handling of these elements create an effective message? Does it create a credible message? Why or why not?

3) Assessment: In discussion, have students share their analysis. Explore each element individually. Then discuss how they interact to create a desired effect. Record all comments on the board.

4) Closure: Every text is an argument attempting to persuade you. Some of these texts are effective; some of them are not. Rhetorical analysis can be helpful for understanding all types of information.