



CHAPTER 1

READING CRITICALLY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will demonstrate an ability to do the following:

- ☐ Read with a critical eye and participate in the class discussion of college-level essays, visual images, advertisements, and websites.
- ☐ Demonstrate an understanding of the principles of rhetorical analysis by handing in a written evaluation of a reading, visual image, advertisement, or website.

MindTap

Start with a warm-up activity, and review the chapter Learning Objectives.

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF A WRITTEN WORK

Reading critically is the process of making a careful, thoughtful, and thorough consideration of a piece of writing by looking at its different parts, that is, making a **rhetorical analysis** of the work. **Rhetoric** is the study or examination of written or spoken language, particularly the way in which a writer communicates to an **audience**; **analysis** is the process of taking something that is whole and complex and breaking it into its individual components to better understand it. Thus, a rhetorical analysis is a close examination of not just what a work says but also how it says it. Although you will not be expected to do a formal rhetorical analysis of every piece you read, you will want to read critically, especially when considering the selections in this textbook. You will want to pay attention to various aspects of the piece as you read for two reasons: first, to understand the written work, and second, to assess it. You read for meaning first because,

obviously, you must understand what you read before you can examine it. Once you develop a clear understanding of a piece of writing, you have a solid basis for moving beyond comprehension to evaluation.

The process of reading critically involves examining an author's ideas and the evidence the author has supplied in support of those ideas. It means that you try to recognize the difference between reasonable, logical assertions and those that are unreasonable or lack credibility. It requires you to distinguish between fact and opinion; to sort out the evidence an author cites; and to evaluate that evidence in terms of its relevance, accuracy, and importance. Thus, reading critically means that you actively engage in what you read, you analyze it, and you evaluate it. Learning to be a critical reader also helps make you a better writer. The best writers are often those who read widely. If you pay attention to not only what the authors you are reading have to say but also to the ways in which they use language, structure their essays, and develop their ideas, you will learn some valuable lessons for your own writing.

The following questions to ask about a written work are useful for getting the most from your reading. They provide guidelines for reading that will also be helpful for any kind of writing required in your college courses, especially the one for which you are using this textbook. If you read the assigned selections carefully, you will very likely be fully prepared to write on one of the topics that end each chapter. Certainly, reading critically is a necessity for any of the varieties of writing and strategies discussed in Part One: summary, critique, argument, synthesis, and the research paper.

MindTap Read, highlight, and take notes online.

Questions to Ask about a Written Work

What Does the Title Tell You? Before you read, consider the title. A title often not only reveals the subject of the piece, but it can also tell you something about the way in which the subject will be treated. It may indicate the position the author takes on the subject or reflect the tone of the piece. (**Tone** refers to the writer's attitude toward the subject and audience, which is conveyed largely through word choice and level of language usage, such as informal or formal, colloquial, or slang.) A number of essays in this textbook have revealing titles. For instance, the title "Why Legalizing Organ Sales Would Help to Save Lives, End Violence" in Chapter 15 clearly indicates the position of its author, Anthony Gregory, on the subject of legalizing the sale of human organs. You cannot tell from the title alone what his arguments are, but you can expect him to argue in favor of legalizing organ sales. Similarly, the title in Chapter 9 "Why I Just Asked My Students to Put Their Laptops Away" sets up the expectation that author Clay Shirkey will explain his decision to ban electronic devices in his classroom.

What Do You Know about the Author? If information about the author is provided, read it. Knowing who the author is, what his or her profession is, and what his



4 CHAPTER 1 Reading Critically

or her publications are, for example, gives you an idea of the authority from which the author writes. In magazines, journals, and collections of essays, such as those you will use in many of your college courses, the headnote often tells you about the author. The headnote is the information located between the title and the beginning of the essay, usually highlighted or set off from the body of the essay itself. The title of the Clay Shirkey article mentioned above becomes all the more intriguing when you learn in the headnote that he is a professor of media studies, which seems at odds with his decision to not allow students to use their laptops in class. Another example is the headnote for Karen Sternheimer's "Do Video Games Kill?" (Chapter 8):

Karen Sternheimer, whose work focuses on youth and popular culture, teaches in the sociology department at the University of Southern California, where she is also a distinguished fellow at the USC Center for Excellence in Teaching. She is author of Pop Culture Panics: How Moral Crusaders Construct Meanings of Deviance and Delinquency (2015); Celebrity Culture and the American Dream: Stardom and Social Mobility (2011); It's Not the Media: The Truth about Pop Culture's Influence on Children (2003); Kids These Days: Facts and Fictions about Today's Youth (2006); and Connecting Popular Culture and Social Problems: Why the Media Is Not the Answer (2009). Her commentary has been published in several newspapers, and she has appeared on numerous television and radio programs. This article appeared in Contexts, a quarterly publication of the American Sociological Association.

The information about Sternheimer's professional interests as an instructor in the sociology department at the University of Southern California, the titles of her books, and the fact that she is invited to write and speak on her research interests all indicate that she is qualified to write on the subject of the relative harm of video games. The place of publication is also important in establishing Sternheimer's credentials as an authority on her subject: journals or periodic publications of professional associations are usually juried (indicating that not everyone who submits an article will be published), and such publications enhance their authors' scholarly reputations. Such qualifications do not guarantee that you will agree with the author's perspectives on a given subject or that you must adopt her position, but they do give clues as to how well informed about her subject the writer might be.

What Is the Purpose? Good writers have clear purposes in mind as they plan and draft their work. Most nonfiction writing falls into the categories of **persuasive**, **expository**, and **expressive** writing. These forms of writing are used to achieve different goals, and they adopt different strategies for achieving those goals. In **persuasive writing**, the emphasis is on the reader: the writer's purpose is to convince the reader of the validity of his or her position on an issue and sometimes even to move the reader to action. In **expository writing**, the goal is to inform or present an objective explanation. The emphasis is on ideas, events, or objects themselves, not on how the writer feels about them. Much of the writing in college textbooks is expository, as are newspaper, magazine, and professional journal articles, and nonfiction books. Expository writing can take many forms, including cause-effect analysis, comparison-contrast, definition, and classification. **Expressive writing** emphasizes



the writer's feelings and subjective view of the world. The writer's focus is on personal feelings about, or attitude toward, the subject. A journal or diary includes expressive writing. Persuasive, expository, and expressive writing often overlap, but usually a writer has one main purpose. From the opening paragraphs of a written work, you should be able to determine its general purpose or aim. A clearly implied or stated purpose helps the writer shape the writing, and it helps the reader understand and evaluate the work.

Who Is the Intended Audience? Writers make assumptions about the people they are writing for, including whether their audience will be sympathetic or opposed to their positions, how informed their readers are about the subjects they are writing on, what their education level is, and similar considerations. These assumptions that writers make about their readers directly influence the tone they use; the evidence they select; the way in which they organize and develop their writing; and even their sentence structure, word choice, and diction level. Knowing whom the writer is addressing helps you understand the writer's point of view and explain the choices the writer has made in writing the piece. In writing for college courses, students usually assume a general audience of people like themselves who are reasonably intelligent and interested in what they have to say. However, professional writers or scholars often write for specific audiences, depending on the publications in which their writing appears. Knowing whether an audience is familiar with a subject or whether the audience is specialized or general also governs what kinds of evidence to offer and how much to include. Where the writing is published gives you a good idea of who the audience is. Take, for instance, Karen Sternheimer's "Do Video Games Kill?" (Chapter 8), mentioned earlier. Her piece appeared in a publication of the professional society associated with her area of expertise, sociology. However, *Contexts* is not a professional journal but rather, according to the website of the American Sociological Association (www.asanet.org), "a quarterly magazine that makes cutting-edge social research accessible to general readers. We're the public face of sociology." Knowing this, you can expect the article to be written in accessible language, addressed to an audience familiar with social issues who will need to be presented with convincing or persuasive evidence in support of her thesis.

What Is the Thesis or Main Idea? The **thesis** states the main idea of the entire essay. Sometimes it is embodied in a single sentence—the thesis statement—and sometimes it is expressed in several sentences. If the main idea is not explicitly stated, it should be clearly implied. Whether the thesis is explicit or implicit, it is a necessary component of a clearly written work. A thesis helps the writer focus the writing and guides the organization and development of key ideas. It also helps to provide direction to the reader by making clear what the point of the essay is, thereby assisting the reader's understanding of the piece.

What Are the Key Ideas and Supporting Evidence or Details? For this step in your critical reading, you should underline or highlight the major points of the



6 CHAPTER 1 Reading Critically

essay. One important tool for an active, critical reader is a pen or pencil. As you read, underline, star, or in some way highlight major points of development. Look for topic sentences of paragraphs. Although the thesis statement answers the question, What is this essay about? the topic sentence answers the question, What is this paragraph about? If a topic sentence is not clearly stated, it should be clearly implied.

What Helpful Marginal Notes Can You Make as You Read? In the margins, write your response to a passage or make note of words, phrases, or entire passages you think are important to the piece. Make notes about the evidence or details that support major points. If you have a question about something that the author says, write it in the margin for later consideration. If you are not sure of the meaning of a word, circle it and look it up in a dictionary after you have finished reading. Finally, if you are struck by the beauty, logic, or peculiarity of a passage, note marginal comments on that as well.

Can You Summarize What You Have Read in Your Own Words? This is the point at which you test your understanding of what you have read. Go back now and look at your underlining and notations. Then try to state in your own words what the writing is about and the main points that the writer makes. If you can accurately summarize a piece of writing, then you probably have a good idea of its meaning. Summarizing also helps you recall the piece later, perhaps in class or in small-group discussions. Incidentally, summarizing is also a good strategy for your own study habits. After reading an assignment for any of your courses, try to write or tell someone a summary of your reading. If you cannot express in your own words the major ideas of what you have just read, you should reread. For a more detailed discussion of writing a summary, see Chapter 3.

How Would You Evaluate What You Have Read? When you are sure that you understand what you have read and can summarize it objectively, you are ready to respond. You can evaluate something in many ways, depending on its purpose. First, consider whether the author achieves the stated or implied purpose and whether the thesis or main idea is thoroughly explained, developed, or argued. Has the writer supplied enough details, examples, or other evidence? If you are evaluating an argument or persuasion essay, is the evidence convincing to you? Does the piece make a logical and reasonable argument? Are you persuaded to the writer's position? What questions do you have about any of the writer's assertions? Do you wish to challenge him or her on any points? If the purpose of the essay is to describe, has the writer conveyed to you the essence of the subject with appropriately vivid language? For any piece of writing, you can assess how well written it is. Is it organized? Is the writing clear to you? Does the introduction give you enough information to get you easily into the essay, and does the conclusion leave you satisfied that the writer has accomplished the purpose for the essay? In Chapter 4, Writing a Critique, you will find a more detailed discussion of how to evaluate a passage or an entire essay.



Angeles for six years, prosecuting federal fraud cases. Since 2005, he has been co-owner of his own firm, which specializes in all kinds of criminal defense, including white collar crime. His particular expertise is First Amendment litigation. This article was published in the Op-Ed section of the Los Angeles Times.

I enjoy unproductive talk. Bloviating, berating, snarking, and swearing about politics are all pleasures, and not even particularly guilty ones. Most of the time, I remember that my self-indulgence doesn't accomplish much. It pleases me, it entertains like-minded people and it reaffirms whatever my "team" already believes. But it doesn't persuade. It neither seeks nor finds common ground.

Much of our modern American dialogue about gun rights and gun control is like that. We yell, we signal to the like-minded, we circle our wagons, we take shots at opponents.

Imagine that we wanted to have a productive conversation. Imagine that we wanted to identify our irreducible philosophical and practical differences, seek areas of agreement and change some minds. What might we do?

First, we could stop culture-bundling. We culture-bundle when we use one political issue as shorthand for a big group of cultural and social values. Our unproductive talk about guns is rife with this. Gun control advocates don't just attack support for guns; they attack conservative, Republican, rural and religious values. Second Amendment advocates don't just attack gun control advocates; they attack liberal, Democratic, urban and secular values. The gun control argument gets portrayed as the struggle against Bible-thumping, gay-bashing, NASCAR-watching hicks, and the gun rights argument gets portrayed as a struggle against godless, elitist, kale-chewing socialists.

That's great for rallying the base, I guess, but that's about all. When you culture-bundle guns, your opponents don't hear "I'm concerned about this limitation on rights" or "I think this restriction is constitutional and necessary." They hear "I hate your flyover-country daddy who taught you to shoot in the woods behind the house when you were 12" and "Your gay friends' getting married would ruin America and must be stopped." That's unlikely to create consensus.

Second, we could recognize that accurate firearms terminology actually matters to the debate. Confused gun control advocates may suggest a ban on "semiautomatic

GUIDELINES FOR READING CRITICALLY

- ☐ Consider what the title tells you about the essay.
- ☐ Try to learn something about the author.
- ☐ Determine the purpose of the writing.
- ☐ Determine the audience for whom the piece was written.
- ☐ Locate the thesis statement or main idea.
- ☐ Locate key ideas and supporting evidence or details.
- ☐ Make marginal notes as you read, including not only a summary of key ideas but also your questions about the content.
- ☐ Summarize what you have read.
- ☐ Evaluate what you have read.

EXERCISE

Read the following opinion piece critically and carefully, following the steps outlined in the guidelines by answering these questions:

- What does the title tell you about the article before you begin reading it?
- What does the information in the headnote indicate about the author's qualification to write on the subject of the article?
- What is the purpose of the article?
- Who seems to be the intended audience?
- What key ideas and supporting evidence does the author provide?
- How would you summarize the highlights of the article?
- How well do you think the author supported his main idea or thesis? Are you convinced by what he says?

Your instructor may want you to write out your rhetorical analysis or bring your notes to class for classroom discussion.

"CULTURE BUNDLING" AND OTHER OBSTACLES TO A REAL GUN CONTROL DEBATE

KEN WHITE

May not be copied, scanned

Ken White is an attorney in Los Angeles. His experience includes working as Assistant District Attorney in Los



weapons,” believing that means automatic rifles, when it actually refers to nearly every modern weapon other than bolt-action rifles and shotguns. Such linguistic flimsiness drives the perception that mainstream gun control advocates want to take away all guns.

If you think precision doesn’t matter, forget about guns for a second. Imagine I’m concerned about dangerous pit bulls, and I’m explaining my views to you, a dog trainer—but I have no grasp of dog terminology.

Me: I don’t want to take away dog owners’ rights, but we need to do something about pit bulls. We need restrictions on owning an attack dog.

You: Wait. What’s an “attack dog”?

Me: You know what I mean. Like military dogs.

You: Huh? Pit bulls aren’t military dogs. In fact “military dogs” isn’t a thing. You mean like German Shepherds?

Me: Don’t be ridiculous. Nobody’s trying to take away your German Shepherds. But civilians shouldn’t own fighting dogs.

You: I have no idea what dogs you’re talking about now.

Me: You’re being both picky and obtuse. You know I mean hounds.

You: Hounds? Seriously?

Me: OK, maybe not actually “hounds.” Maybe I have the terminology wrong. I’m not obsessed with violent dogs the way you are. But we can identify breeds that civilians just don’t need to own.

You: Apparently not.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we can’t debate gun rights when we’re terrible at talking about rights in general. The 2nd Amendment debate is full of assertions like “My right not to be shot outweighs your right to own a gun” and “I have an absolute right to own any gun I want.” How can we evaluate these assertions, except on a visceral level?

When it comes to rights, we’ve lost the plot, particularly since 9/11. We don’t know where rights come from, we don’t know or care from whom they protect us, we don’t know how to analyze proposed restrictions on them, and brick by brick

we've built a fear-based culture that scorns them in the face of both real and imagined risks. We've become a nation of civic illiterates, mystified by the relationship between individuals and the government.

It is therefore inevitable that talk about gun rights will be met with scorn or shrugs, and that discussions of what restrictions are permissible will be mushy and undisciplined. Unless we approach all rights in a principled manner—whether it's the right to free speech in the face of offense, or the right to due process in the face of the war on terrorism—we're not going to have a productive debate about any of them.

20

I know. Productive debates sound like hard work. Unproductive debates are more fun. But can we leave those to Facebook?

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF VISUALS

Rhetorical considerations apply to visual images as well as to written forms of communication. Whether you are critiquing an essay in a book or periodical, a visual art form, or an Internet website, questions of audience, tone, purpose, organization, content, and meaning apply. With visuals, as with written works, you must consider perspective or **point of view**, **context**, and **connotation**. Connotation—the emotional associations of a thing—is perhaps even more important when viewing visuals than in reading words. Just as words have associations that go beyond the literal term or add layers of meaning to what they denote (“the dictionary definition”), so images have powerful associations. Images often have the ability to express things—emotions, nuances, insights—in a way that words cannot. They can reveal what is difficult to put into words by conveying impressions or depicting in sharp detail what it would take a great many words to describe or explain, including subtleties of meaning that emerge only after thoughtful consideration and careful perusal of the image. Visuals also have the potential to argue a viewpoint or persuade an audience; their authors use strategies to present a viewpoint or make a statement that is similar to those used by authors of the written text.

We see images daily in a variety of forms—in photographs, drawings, paintings, pictures, brochures, advertisements, CD album covers, posters, and Internet web pages, and of course on television and in film. Most of these images go unexamined because we see so many images in our lives that we simply do not have time to analyze them all. But when we find it useful to consider an image closely, how do we analyze it? What can we say about it? How can we express in words what an image means or implies? The answer is that analyzing images critically requires skills that are quite similar to those for analyzing a piece of writing critically. Just as writers



select details and organize essays to make specific points, so too do artists shooting a scene or painting a picture select details and arrange them in order to convey specific ideas or impressions. Writers and artists alike make judgments that in turn shape how readers or viewers perceive their work.

Analyzing a visual involves doing a close “reading” of the image and asking a series of questions about it. In looking critically at a visual image, you want to consider many aspects of it: what do you see when you first look at it? How do you respond initially? What details does the image highlight? What other details are included and what might have been excluded? How does the positioning of various elements of the image emphasize its meaning? The following list of questions will help you analyze the visual images that are located throughout the textbook in each of the chapters in Part Two. The answers you get when you ask these questions can give you a greater understanding of the images you are scrutinizing. Most of the visual images reproduced in this textbook are photographs or drawings, so the first set of questions is designed to help you in your analysis of them. However, the questions can easily be adapted to other kinds of images, such as advertisements, newspaper page layouts, and Internet web pages. Furthermore, television, film, music videos, and documentaries also convey messages through images that can be analyzed rhetorically in much the same way as the other forms of visual communication can be.

Questions to Ask about a Visual Image

- **What is your overall immediate impression of the image?** First impressions often linger even after rethinking one’s initial response, so what strikes you immediately about an image is particularly important.
- **What detail first catches your attention?** After noting your immediate overall response, consider what detail or details first attract you. Is it the prominence, size, or positioning of the subject? Is it the colors or absence of them? Is it the size, the physical space it occupies? More than likely, the artist wanted you to notice that detail first, and very likely it is an integral part of the “message” or “statement” the image makes.
- **What details emerge after you have studied the image for a while?** Do you detect any pattern in the arrangement of details? If so, how does the arrangement of details function to convey the overall impression?
- **How does the arrangement of objects or people in the picture help draw your attention to the central image, the one you are initially drawn to?** Are some things placed prominently in the center or made larger than others? If so, what is the effect of that arrangement? How does the background function in relation to what is placed in the foreground?
- **If the image is in color, how does the artist use color?** Are the colors selected to represent certain emotions, moods, or other qualities? If it is in black and white, what use does the artist make of the absence of color? Does the artist use degrees of shading and brightness? If so, to what effect?



2 CHAPTER 1 Reading Critically

- **From what perspective does the artist view the subject?** Is it close to or far away from the subject? Is the subject viewed straight-on or from the side? Why do you think the artist selected this particular perspective? How might a shift in perspective alter the view of the subject, not just physically but on the level of meaning as well?
- **What emotions does the image evoke in you?** Why? Which details of the image convey the strongest emotion?
- **Has anything important been left out of the image?** What might have been included, and why do you think it was left out?
- **What is happening in the picture?** Does it tell a story or give a single impression?
- **What does the picture tell you about its subject?** How does it convey that message?
- **If there are people in the image, what can you tell about them?** What details tell you those things? Is it the way they are dressed? Their physical appearance? What are they doing?
- **Does the picture raise any questions?** What would you like to ask about the image, the activity, or the people in it? How would you find the answers to your questions?

EXERCISE



James Schnep/Getty Images

FIGURE 1.1 What is your initial reaction to this photograph?

Ask the relevant questions for analyzing visuals listed earlier as you study the following photograph (Figure 1.1). Then, selecting the details you believe are important, write an analysis of the photograph in either full-length essay or one-paragraph format, depending on what your instructor asks you to do. If your assignment is to write an essay-length analysis, begin with an introductory paragraph that includes a thesis statement or a statement of the main idea of the photograph. This thesis should reflect your understanding of what the photograph means to you—its message, its story, what it suggests symbolically, or whatever ultimately you decide about the photograph. The rest of the paper should draw on details from



your answers to the questions as you explain or support your thesis statement. If your assignment is to write a paragraph-length analysis, begin with a sentence that states your understanding of the main idea of the photograph. This is your topic sentence. The rest of the paragraph should supply supporting details from the image that explain or support your topic sentence.

Here are some questions specific to this photograph that you might want to think about as you work through the questions listed earlier:

- Besides showing the tattoo, what effect is achieved by looking upward from about chest high?
- Identify the main images in the tattoo. What do the choices that he made to have tattooed on his body suggest to you about the man?
- Do the earrings, nose ring, and stud add anything to your image of the man?
- What does the man's shaved or bald head add to the overall effect?
- Does the man's stance—the way he is standing, the shape of his shoulders, the position of his arms—tell you anything about what he is thinking or how he views himself? Is the man anticipating a challenge? Contemplating something? Feeling secure about himself?
- Comment on the layout of the image, especially the effect of the palm tree fronds behind the man's head.

Questions to Ask about an Advertisement

Advertising is a powerful and pervasive force in our world. Ads have the ability to affect how we think, act, and even feel about ourselves and others. Ads can shape, reflect, or distort both individual perceptions and social values, and they do so by employing some of the classic strategies of argument and persuasion: they have a proposition, they know their audience, they make appeals, they use comparisons and examples, and they particularly want to persuade us to action. In addition to the questions to ask about visual images, the following questions will help you analyze both print and nonprint advertisements:

- **What is the message of the advertisement?** What does it say to the potential buyers of the product? That is, what is its argument?
- **Who is the intended audience?** How can you tell?
- **What strategies does the ad use to convey its message?** What appeals—to logic, to emotion, to ethics, or to shared values—does it use? Does it rely primarily on only one appeal, or does it combine them? How do the specific details convey that message?
- **How does the text—the actual words used—convey the message of the advertisement?** How are words arranged or placed in the ad and why are they

14 CHAPTER 1 Reading Critically

placed that way? If a nonprint ad, how are the voice-overs or dialogue used to convey the message?

- **How would you describe the style and tone of the advertisement?** How do they help convey the message or sell the product?

EXERCISE

- Select a print advertisement for analysis. Ask the questions noted in the previous section and write an analysis based on your notes, assessing the effectiveness of the ad in achieving its purpose. Attach a copy of the advertisement with your analysis when you hand it in to your instructor.
- Select two advertisements for the same kind of product (for instance, clothing, toothpaste, or laundry detergent). Apply the questions noted in the previous section and choose the one that you think is more effective at selling or promoting the product. Formulate a thesis sentence that states your preference, and use details from your scrutiny of both of them to support that statement. If the advertisements are print, attach copies of them if possible.

Questions to Ask about a Newspaper Page

Newspapers can shape reader response in the choices they make about the layout of text and photographs. Although we like to think that newspapers are unbiased in their reporting of news items, reading just two different newspapers on the same subject reveals that the choices a newspaper makes about a news item have a huge influence on the impressions it leaves on readers. Just the visual effect of a page layout alone tells us many things. What page an article or picture appears on and where on the page it is located represent a judgment on the part of the paper about the importance of the article or image and cannot help but shape how readers respond to it. Consider the following list about photographs and news articles when looking at a newspaper page:

- **Where in the paper is the article or photograph placed?** Front-page placement indicates that the newspaper considers it more important as a news item than placement on the inside pages.
- **How are photographs and news articles positioned on the page?** Items that are placed high on the page or in the center of the page are likely to draw the attention more readily than those placed low or off center.
- **How large are the photographs or the headlines?** Visually, larger photographs or headlines are likely to draw attention and interest more quickly than smaller ones.
- **Are photographs in color or black and white?** Choosing to run a picture in color indicates a value judgment that the paper has made about the interest or newsworthiness of the image.



EXERCISE

- Select a newspaper page for analysis. Front pages are particularly important in newspapers for attracting reader attention, so perhaps you will want to analyze the front page of the newspaper. Ask the questions listed earlier and write an analysis based on the answers to your questions. What article(s) does the newspaper think more important than others? How are photographs used on the page? Attach the page or a copy of it with your analysis when you hand it in to your instructor.
- Select two different newspapers covering the same news story and compare their treatment of the story. How do the two newspapers compare and contrast in their handling of the story? Is one more effective than the other in reporting it? Formulate a thesis that reflects your ultimate judgment of the two papers' treatment of the news story and support that thesis with details gathered from your comparison of the two. Attach the pages or copies of them with your analysis when you hand it in to your instructor.

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF WEBSITES

The Internet provides a seemingly endless variety of sites to visit for every taste and interest. Web pages can function rhetorically to influence visitors to the site in much the same way as other forms of discourse. The very way in which the web page is constructed can work to produce a desired effect, especially if the constructor of the site wishes to persuade an audience, sway opinion, or impose a particular point of view. A rhetorical analysis looks at the ways a site achieves its stated or implied purpose. Because websites vary considerably in their reliability and currency, you will find additional information about evaluating them in Chapter 7. Many of the same questions one asks when evaluating a website apply when doing a rhetorical analysis of it. What follows are some questions to ask as you analyze the rhetorical effectiveness of a website whose goal is to inform, educate, or entertain.

Questions to Ask about a Website

- **Who created the web page?** Is it an individual, an organization, a government agency, an educational institution, or a corporation? Does the text at the site give you information about the author? If not, why do you think that information is not provided? Does the site tell you how to contact the author?
- **What audience does the web page target?** How can you tell? Is the intended audience stated or implied? Does it make assumptions about values, beliefs, age, sex, race, national origin, education, or socioeconomic background of its target audience?
- **What is the purpose of the website?** Does the web page want to inform, entertain, sell, argue a position, or persuade people to change their minds or to

d. May not be copied, scanned

16 CHAPTER 1 Reading Critically

take action? If it has more than one purpose, what combination of purposes does it have? Is the implied purpose the same as the stated purpose? Does the text state one purpose while word choice, graphics, and page layout suggest or imply another? For instance, a political candidate's website might state that it has no intention of bringing up an opponent's past wrongdoings, while the very fact of stating that there are past wrongdoings to bring up casts doubt on the character of the opponent.

- **What rhetorical appeals does the written text make?** Does the text of the website make an appeal to logic or reason? Does it appeal to emotions? If emotions, which ones does it appeal to—pity, fear, joy, anger, sympathy?
- **How would you evaluate the content?** Does the website cover the topic thoroughly? Does it use language that you understand? Does it offer links and, if so, how many links? Are the links still active? What is the quality of the links?
- **What use does the site make of color?** How does the background color choice affect the mood and tone of the page? Is it a vibrant color or a sober one? Does it intrude on the text or enhance it?
- **What do you observe of the page layout?** Is there space between items on the page or are things cramped together? How does the use of space on the page affect your overall impression of the page and your ability to read it?
- **What gets loaded first when you go to the web page?** Where is that material positioned? What is loaded later or positioned low on the page? Sometimes certain components of a web page are purposely programmed to load first in order to further emphasize the purpose of the site.
- **Are graphics on the web page static or active?** Is the print used for the text large, small, or a mix of both? If a mix, what does larger print emphasize that smaller print doesn't? What font is used? Are bold print, italics, or underlining used, and if so, to what effect? Is there a banner? What purpose does the banner serve?
- **If photographs or other images are used, what is their function?** Do they illustrate or help explain something, give information, or serve to decorate the page?
- **Does the web page make use of contrasts of light and dark?** If so, what is the effect of those contrasts?

EXERCISE

Locate two websites on the same topic and compare and contrast their rhetorical effectiveness by applying the relevant questions listed earlier. After deciding which one you think is more effective, write an analysis in which your thesis states which site you prefer. Use details from your perusal of both of them as proof or evidence to support your thesis statement.



Forums on the Web

In addition to websites that people go to for information, entertainment, or news, the Internet has available a number of forums for people to participate in, such as chat rooms, newsgroups, discussion lists (listservs), blogs, and social networking sites. Although most websites are fairly dynamic in that they are (or should be) regularly updated, forums typically change throughout the day. Popular forums such as **listservs**, **blogs**, and **social networking sites** are capable of influencing people's views or the way they think about the topics being discussed at the sites; they even have the potential to actually bring about changes because of the high degree of involvement that they have generated among visitors to their sites. Another distinguishing characteristic of such sites is that people are invited to participate in an ongoing, ever-changing discussion. People who become members of these sites have an opportunity to be not just passive readers but also active writers.

Listservs. Listservs are e-mail-based discussion groups linked to specific topics. Listservs function as forums for the exchange of ideas, where members can debate, discuss, post news items, seek or give advice, and share in a community of people who have in common their interest in the topic of the listserv. Although listservs have official websites where people can subscribe, read the rules for posting, and locate archived postings, among other things, the real activity takes place through e-mail. Members can elect to receive messages either individually as they are posted or in digests that are sent daily, or whenever a specific number of messages have posted. Members are usually required to follow certain standards, primarily those related to conduct and appropriate content, and often the listserv has a moderator who monitors the content of messages to make sure that posts do not violate those rules. Listservs typically archive messages by date, subject of message, and/or author, and these archives can be viewed by nonmembers as well as members. They vary widely in membership numbers, from just a few people to thousands. Because listservs attract people with at least the subject of the listserv in common, they can create a strong sense of community among subscribers. Although listservs are good for reading what many people have to say on various subjects related to the primary topic of the discussion group, postings are, in general, unedited and may not be completely reliable. On the other hand, a posting that seems wrongheaded or erroneous is likely to be corrected or at least commented on by other members of the group.

Blogs. The term *blog* (web log) describes an activity that people had been doing long before the term was coined: maintaining a website where they record personal thoughts and provide links to other sites. Many of them are essentially personal pages that bloggers (owners of the sites) update daily. They provide a forum for the bloggers themselves to argue, explain, comment on, vent frustrations, air opinions, or just gossip, while visitors to the site can express their own opinions or make observations. Membership is not required; anyone can read and respond to anyone's blog. In addition to online journals, blogs can be news summaries, collections of bits and pieces from other websites, and valuable resources for instant access to the latest news. Thus blogs have been described as a cross between an online diary and



18 CHAPTER 1 Reading Critically

a cybermagazine, but one of the key characteristics of the most successful or popular blogs is that they are constantly updated. Although just a few years ago there were only a small number of blogs, today there are millions of them. Many blogs are run by professionals like educators, reporters, researchers, scientists, and political candidates, with visits to the sites numbering in the thousands and in a few cases millions, but the vast majority are run by individuals who see them as chatty, stream-of-consciousness journals and whose readership is very limited.

A few blogs have attracted so many readers that they have achieved or exceeded the kind of readership that large newspapers enjoy. Because of the sheer number of readers and their ability to communicate instantly with other bloggers around the world, a few blogs have been responsible for bringing to light events or issues that mainstream media have ignored by focusing public attention on a current issue. Blogs with the most impact on public affairs appear to be those with large numbers of daily visitors, and they tend to have the most influence in politics. Blogs have certain common features, including making it convenient for people to post or respond to the blog owner, posting messages in reverse chronological order for others to read, and providing links to other blogs and websites. However, blogs differ greatly in the quality and reliability of the information at the site. Blogs by definition are logs or journals and as such are often unedited, not-very-well-thought-out musings on a variety of topics. Be very careful when choosing blogs to follow and even more careful in accepting as truth what you read on a blog. You can apply the same questions to blogs that you would use for analyzing other websites rhetorically, but keep in mind the special nature of blogs and how their unrestricted, constantly changing content is very likely slanted or biased to fit the viewpoint of the blogger.

Social Networking Websites. There are many online services dedicated to establishing networks among people. Some are fairly limited to certain groups of people, such as those graduating from a particular high school or college or those belonging to certain ethnic, religious, or even family groups. Two worldwide, all-encompassing, and well-established services are Facebook and Twitter. Facebook users can register personal information, communicate with friends and colleagues, post pictures, and establish networks with people all over the world. Twitter is similar in purpose to Facebook but is a microblogging site that limits messages to 140 characters. Twitter emerged as a significant service when users began posting what was happening at moments of key social and political unrest or upheaval. As with all websites with countless users of all political, social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds, postings can be extremely biased and inaccurate.

EXERCISE

Select one of the following:

- Locate two listservs on topics that interest you and read a few days' worth of posts. How do they compare and contrast? What is your impression of the sense of community among the members? What sorts of posts do people send?



Do they stay on topic? Do the listservs have moderators? If you were going to join a listserv, which one would you prefer?

- Locate several blogs on a topic that interests you—baseball, water skiing, crime prevention, politics, a hobby, your major—and assess their rhetorical effectiveness, using the guidelines discussed.
- Follow a thread or two on a social networking service, and assess the sorts of postings people make. How would you characterize the sense of community among the posters? How would you rate the quality of the comments? What conclusions can you draw about the usefulness or purpose of the service?

MindTap Reflect, personalize, and apply what you've learned.

d. May not be copied, scanned

