

Year 1 Rhetorical Analysis Assignment

The first short essay for this class will take the form of a two-page close reading. From the play, you will choose, from the list below, an element on which to focus your analysis:

- A scene
- An exchange of 3-6 speeches
- A speech
- A line
- A word

For example, you might focus on the trial scene, *or* part of the exchange between Portia and Shylock in that scene, *or* the "mercy" speech, *or* the line "The quality of mercy is not strained" in that speech, *or* the word "strained" in that line. Remember as you choose that you are analyzing that element as an element of that type. Thus, if you choose a whole scene, don't do so simply to talk about the characters in that scene, or even just what happens in it. You must talk about that scene *as a dramatic scene*.

The goal of your analysis is to describe and explain the significance of your chosen element. What do we learn if we pay close attention to that particular part of the play? What does it contribute to our understanding of the play, and how does it do so? Does it go against what we might assume, or does it help generate or perpetuate our assumptions? How does it help fashion the imaginative world of the play, and how does it function within that world? What does it tell us about the speaker, or the audience? What is Shakespeare doing with that element of the play, and why is he doing that? Or more broadly, what is that element of the play doing, and how is it doing that?

The key to these essays is to offer **a thorough consideration of the element itself and a detailed discussion of how it works in the play**. You are not simply summarizing what happens or paraphrasing what is said, though such activities will help you. A strong thesis statement will encapsulate not just *what* the element means, but *how* and *why* it means what it does. These last two concerns, the how and why, are perhaps the most important, since one can imagine two papers of equal quality that make completely opposite claims about what a given element means but offer convincing argumentation and evidence for those claims. Both papers might earn 'A's (or 'F's!), because the grade is based not on who is "right" but on whether the paper demonstrates serious critical thinking, strong writing, detailed analysis, and a thoroughly considered thesis.

These essays provide a chance to practice close-reading, one of the most important skills you will gain in an English class. Bear in mind that close-reading combines good **observation** of textual and contextual detail, thoughtful **analysis** of the text, and strong **interpretive** claims about the text. A close-reading isn't complete without these three components. You must therefore quote selectively from the text, but don't leave those quotations to speak for themselves. Don't, for example, write merely that "Portia tells Shylock that 'mercy seasons justice.'" Write instead that "Portia's use of 'seasons' suggests that mercy is not the opposite of justice but something added to it."

Each of the options comes with its own challenges and benefits. If you choose a scene, you will have to be very selective about what goes into the paper (e.g., you can't write about all of Shylock's speeches in a scene, but you can look at two or three key moments in the scene's trajectory). If you

choose a speech or exchange, you will have to articulate why it is significant (e.g., Prince Hal's "I know you all..." speech may tell us an awful lot, but it may also tell us nothing). If you choose a line or word, you might struggle unpacking a lot of meaning from such a small bit of text. If you choose one of the options thinking it's easier than the others, you're wrong.

Analyzing one element, of course, means taking all the others into consideration. If you analyze a single speech, for example, you'll need to consider the words and lines that make it up, even as you consider the exchange to which it belongs and the scene in which it occurs. But again, remember that you're analyzing the element *as such an element*. Your thesis statement about the trial scene, for instance, should not finally tell us something about Portia or her "mercy" speech. It should tell us about the trial scene as a scene.

To some this assignment may seem too narrow and constricting. This is by intention, because I am asking you to unpack and discuss, explain or clarify, how close attention to detail can open a wealth of interpretive possibilities. At the same time, bear in mind that *this is not merely a response paper, nor should you simply recapitulate our discussions in class*. You must quote from the text and analyze it thoughtfully and closely.

Format: the essay should be about two pages long and should follow MLA rules. Unless you are analyzing a whole scene, please transcribe the element you are close-reading and place it at the top of your paper, beneath the heading. If you are analyzing a whole scene, simply make that fact known in the first few sentences of the paper. The transcription does not count toward the length requirement. Citations from the plays should appear, parenthetically, in the text (like this: 4.1.56-59). Late papers will not be accepted. **Do not hesitate to contact me with questions or problems. Previous students have described paper conferences with me as "so helpful I vomited all over myself," "like blasting off in a rocket ship made of ideas," and "really helpful."**

A very successful paper will:

- be properly formatted
- be free of grammatical errors and stylistic unclarity
- address the central questions of the assignment clearly and cogently
- have a strong, clear thesis that unifies the paper into a single, strong claim
- be thoughtfully organized into a paragraph structure that most persuasively articulates the paper's argument
- have paragraphs that contain discernible topics, transitions, and a cogent structure
- marshal appropriate evidence and analysis to advance the thesis
- cite all sources appropriately

Less successful papers lack in one or more of these areas. Such papers may also need further development of the approach to the topic itself.