

A Sample Rhetorical Analysis

What should a rhetorical analysis look like? An analytic essay is a relatively straightforward genre. It does not call for a very long introduction. Like most good answers on essay examinations, it calls on the writer to state clearly what he or she intends to demonstrate, to offer a map of how the development will proceed, to offer strong claims (specifically, claims about how the component parts of the text flesh out its take-home idea, purpose, and tone), to support those claims with specific evidence drawn from the text under consideration, and to conclude briefly and forcefully.

Let's return to Walter Isaacson's "Benjamin Franklin and the Invention of America" reprinted above. Consider the sample rhetorical analysis produced by the exemplary first-year college student Darcy Bell.

Darcy understands "rhetorical analysis for whom," and she will take Isaacson's audience into consideration.

Darcy introduces tone as a point of analysis.

Darcy summarizes what she sees as Isaacson's central idea.

Darcy has learned about the six-part oration for argumentative essays (see Chapter 5).

Darcy provides a map of her essay, laying out the analytic points she will unpack.

Darcy shows how Isaacson uses anecdote and detail to support each of the four points she listed in her summary of the main idea.

Darcy Bell

A Rhetorical Analysis of Walter Isaacson's "Benjamin Franklin and the Invention of America"

Writing to an audience of readers interested in politics during an era when Americans might not have held their leaders in high esteem, Walter Isaacson in "Benjamin Franklin and the Invention of America" offers a glowing portrait of Benjamin Franklin, explaining that Franklin's character is particularly appealing to a twenty-first-century audience because of his emphasis on his own humble humanity, his practical wisdom and inventiveness, his faith in "the middling people," and his belief that faith in the divine translates into doing good for his fellow humans. Hinting that contemporary politicians might heed Franklin's model, Isaacson achieves his explanatory purpose by providing a rich store of vivid anecdotes, both real and hypothetical; by creating a sound model of a six-part essay; and by crafting his diction and syntax so that the admiring, almost reverential tone of the essay is inescapable.

Like all good writers, Isaacson does not merely tell his readers about his topic, the virtuous characteristics that Franklin embodied. He shows Franklin's qualities by providing lively stories from the past, inventing amusing scenarios that might exist today, and listing abundant

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concrete details. Isaacson shows Franklin's humble humility early in the essay, relating the story of his first encounter with Deborah Read, who would eventually become his wife. According to Franklin, Read "thought I made, as I most certainly did, a most awkward ridiculous appearance." Isaacson demonstrates Franklin's practical, wise, and innovative nature by offering a specific record of his inventions: a device to detect static electricity, bifocal glasses, the clean-burning stove, charts of the Gulf Stream, to name a few. Isaacson makes Franklin's faith in "the middling people" real with a humorous imagined scene from our own time: We are invited to consider ourselves (who, I maintain, are "the middling people") having a beverage with Franklin, showing him how to use a Palm Pilot (or maybe an I-Phone now), laughing at corny jokes with us. Isaacson makes a case that Franklin perceives his faith in the divine as requiring service to humankind by focusing on the most famous civic organization founded by Franklin: the public library. When we read, late in the excerpt, that Franklin's motto for the public library he founded was "[t]o pour forth benefits for the common good is divine," we can just nod in assent since we have encountered the evidence behind that claim.

The arrangement of Isaacson's essay is brilliantly designed both to demonstrate his central claim about Franklin and to anticipate and address any possible objections to it. Notice how Isaacson crafts the introduction. He begins not with general assertions but with details: Franklin's famous entry into Philadelphia carrying loaves of bread under each arm, his penning a fictitious letter to an illegitimate son, his first encounter with his eventual wife. We're drawn into this character before we even learn his full name, Benjamin Franklin, in the middle of the second paragraph. Isaacson then devotes several paragraphs to providing well-documented background information about Franklin's character and achievements, contrasting his approachability with the "austere" Washington and the potentially "intimidating" Jefferson and Adams, and

This paragraph explains the six "moves" that Isaacson makes: introduction, background, partition and thesis, confirmation, refutation, and conclusion.

Darcy doesn't simply describe the arrangement. She also shows how it creates *ethos* or credibility.

listing the aforementioned inventions and initiatives that Franklin is responsible for. It's not until the beginning of the tenth paragraph that Isaacson sounds the note that will eventually become his thesis, by introducing the idea that "Franklin has a particular resonance in twentieth-century America." And while Isaacson hints that he clearly will have more details to offer in support of that claim as the essay proceeds, he pauses in the eleventh paragraph to anticipate and address possible objections, suggesting that some people might perceive in Franklin "a shallowness of soul and a spiritual complacency that seem to permeate a culture of complacency." But Isaacson quickly moves in the remainder of the chapter to dismiss those qualms, arguing that Franklin's critics "mistake his moral maxims for the fundamental faiths that motivated his actions." Such a clearly arranged and well-structured chapter builds Isaacson's *ethos*—we tend to trust people who lay out their cases so clearly. We're open to being convinced.

Finally, one can drop into the excerpt almost anywhere and notice how Isaacson crafts his diction and syntax so that his admiration for Franklin and his own balanced persona shine through. Notice, for example, the reference in the second paragraph to Franklin's "pilgrim's progress," a direct allusion to John Bunyan's seventeenth-century British novel about the ideal Christian's path toward salvation. By equating Franklin with the central character, named Christian, Isaacson is hinting strongly that we should take note of Franklin's exemplary character.

Darcy focuses on only a few paragraphs as a representative example of diction, making it easier for her own readers to follow her analysis.

The third paragraph is a particularly rich site to notice Isaacson's craft. We learn in the first sentence that "Franklin is the founding father that winks at us." What an evocative metaphor. Of course, Franklin does not literally wink at us, but the character Isaacson creates engages in lots of "winking" behavior, and someone who winks at you is probably saying, "I want to be your friend" or "we're on the same side here." While some winks might be troubling, Isaacson certainly suggests this is a warm, affectionate one. Further along

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in the paragraph, Isaacson characterizes Franklin as “a genial urban entrepreneur.” Notice again the evocative language—“genial” meaning kind but also resonating with “genius,” “urban” meaning “of the city” but also resonating with “urbane” or wise. Late in the paragraph, Isaacson contrasts “orotund rhetoric” with Franklin’s “chattiness.” We don’t even have to know what “orotund” means (it means “pompous” or “pretentious”) to perceive its similarity to the more common “rotund”—flabby, overweight, out of shape. As a speaker, Franklin was trim, fit, agile.

The syntax of the eleventh paragraph suggests that Isaacson himself possesses the same stable, sensible character that he portrays Franklin as having. Notice the balance Isaacson creates in just these four sentences: “Some who see . . . They say” (the critics’ views); “Others see . . . His admirers” (the devotees’ views).

We leave Isaacson’s excerpt not only convinced of Franklin’s admirable characters but also impressed by the writer’s vivid, clear anecdotes and details and his rich, suggestive diction.

In this paragraph and the next two, Darcy shows how Isaacson’s diction and syntax are not only impressive and precise but evocative of supporting thoughts.

No elaborate conclusion is necessary. A strong sentence indicating the end is sufficient.

CHAPTER ACTIVITY

Rhetorical Analysis of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address

Throughout this chapter, we have cited words, sentences, and passages from Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address to provide examples of his rhetorical skills as a writer. Now your task is to pull together everything you have learned in the chapter and produce a rhetorical analysis of the address on your own. Here’s the task.

In his Second Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln, in his characteristically brief and eloquent fashion, makes an impassioned plea to the citizens of both the United States of America and the Confederate States of America. In a well-organized essay, analyze the rhetorical strategies Lincoln uses to make his central point about actions that need to happen or what states of mind need to prevail to bring the American Civil War to a conclusion.