Jodi Rice posted the following on 04/30/2015 08:40 EDT

In general, students who write their rhetorical analyses as mainly a  
hunt-and-identify list of various devices (many related to style, like  
"diction" and "parallelism") tend to miss the broader understanding of the  
big-picture rhetorical "moves" that an author is making in order to convey  
a message -- usually in a particular context to a perceived or actual  
audience. They therefore have difficulty articulating the ways in which the  
author's choices help to further that purpose, instead focusing only on (at  
best) explaining what that device contributes to that moment, or (at  
worst), simply labelling a device and then moving on to the next.  
  
Earlier prompts used language that tended to itemize some techniques as  
guidance for students; in their origins, the analysis questions on the  
Language exam started as style analysis, rather than as broader rhetorical  
analysis (style is just one feature of rhetoric), so this was more in line  
with what the question was asking students to do at the time.  
  
As the analysis question evolved to encompass the larger spectrum of  
rhetorical strategies, in an effort to steer students away from this  
pitfall, the exam development committee has in the past few years tried to  
adopt language in the prompt that doesn't itemize anymore, but instead  
tries to push students to think about the broader picture of what the piece  
does, and then the various ways -- including, but not limited to style --  
in which it does it. Thus the shift to ask students to analyze strategies.  
  
Another way to think of it is to have students start by thinking not about  
the \*bits\* of the piece first, but of the piece as a whole. Get them into  
the habit of thinking, first, not "What is this word choice or this  
sentence structure doing?" but "How does this piece of writing function  
rhetorically to accomplish something?"  
  
In simple terms, I explain it to my students kind of like this: When  
someone sets out to accomplish something with their writing or speaking,  
when they take a moment to think about their approach to the situation,  
they don't start out by thinking, "Well, I'm going to need to use  
personification and imagery. Then I'll use parallelism, and maybe a bit of  
diction." Instead, they think, "Well, I'm going to need to make sure my  
audience cares about this thing, and then really make them care enough to  
do something about it. I'll probably need to describe it in ways that will  
make them see it as something worth caring about. Then I'll need to  
reinforce that feeling to the point where a call to action makes sense to  
them." The first thought identifies techniques and devices; the second  
thought, however, sets out a strategy.  
  
As the author is writing about the thing, they will start to deploy various  
techniques and devices in order to execute that strategy. An analysis  
deconstructs that process: the author wants the audience to act, but before  
they are willing to act, they must see the thing as worth caring about, and  
so the author personifies it to create that emotional attachment; the  
attachment established, the author can then repeat certain key phrases that  
re-emphasize what's most important, perhaps using highly connotative  
language that supports and deepens that emotional connection. Now the  
audience is primed to act.  
  
It's like the difference between a play in football, and the various  
football skills like throwing and catching. Plays are strategies -- you  
need the skills to execute them, but football games aren't usually  
described in terms of each discrete skill, but instead in terms of how the  
plays accomplished the goals -- literally.  
  
Students who analyze "moves" as big-picture strategies that involve the  
interaction of various writing techniques tend to develop and demonstrate a  
much stronger understanding of an author's rhetorical purpose and approach  
than students who approach the text as just a haphazard collection of  
techniques that somehow magically connect to a purpose just because the  
student has asserted that they do. Even students who run through the text  
only chronologically or through a mechanical application of the rhetorical  
appeals tend only to have a very thin appreciation of how the text  
functions rhetorically overall.  
  
Jodi  
  
  
  
  
\* \* \*  
\*Jodi Rice\*  
  
- ca.linkedin.com/in/jodirice/