

Rhetorical Analysis: Understanding How Texts Persuade Readers

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Suppose you want to understand better some piece of writing that you are interested in or find important. Maybe it is an environmental impact statement, or a piece of fiction set during World War II, or a magazine article about the death penalty, or a proposal under consideration by the local school board, or even a routine thing that you see on a daily basis, such as the comics or advertisements in your local newspaper. The previous chapters in this book have given you several approaches for analyzing such documents. But especially if those pieces of writing have a persuasive intent, especially if (in other words) they have designs on your beliefs and attitudes (and nearly all writing does have that purpose, to some extent), the activity known as rhetorical analysis can offer you additional perspective and understanding. This chapter is designed to give you a good understanding of the key concepts involved in rhetorical analysis and to make you comfortable conducting instructive rhetorical analyses on your own.

SOME BASIC CONCEPTS

Let's begin with some basic terms and concepts, beginning with the phrase **rhetorical analysis** itself.

There is no generally accepted definition of rhetorical analysis (or **rhetorical criticism**, as it is also called), probably because there is really no generally accepted definition of *rhetoric*. The various people who have written about rhetorical analysis (see the list of Further Readings at the end of

this chapter) inevitably differ on its meaning because they hold to different ideas about the nature of their subject. To the general public *rhetoric* most commonly seems to denote highly ornamental or deceptive or even manipulative speech or writing: “That politician is just using a bunch of rhetoric,” you hear people say; or, “the rhetoric of that advertisement is highly deceptive.” But the term *rhetoric* is also commonly used as a synonym for speaking or writing in general or for any other kind of communication: “*Silent Spring* is one of the most influential pieces of environmental rhetoric ever written,” someone might say. As an academic subject (and that gets at another important meaning of the term, for *rhetoric* has a long association with education—Aristotle wrote an educational treatise *On Rhetoric*, for example), the word is often associated with the means of producing effective discursive acts. Rhetoric textbooks are usually how-to books therefore—advice manuals for how to produce effective pieces of communication: “the art of discovering in any given case the available means of persuasion” (as Aristotle put it). But in recent years *rhetoric* has also taken on an interpretive function; *rhetoric* has come to be used not just as a means of producing effective communications, but also as a way of understanding communication.¹ In short, **rhetoric can be understood as both a productive and interpretive enterprise**: “the study of language—and the study of how to use it.”

Aristotle’s emphasis on persuasion, evident in the quotation from him that I just offered, has been influential in the history of *rhetoric*. And so it is now common to understand *rhetoric* as fundamentally involved in the study of **persuasion**. But “persuasion” as used here must be persuasion very broadly defined, because recently the realm of *rhetoric* has come to include a great deal of territory—written and oral language used to persuade, to be sure, but also a great many other kinds of communications that have general designs on people’s values and actions, attitudes and beliefs. Speeches and writing usually have such persuasive designs, and so *rhetoricians* attempt to understand how to produce effective acts of verbal and written persuasion. By extension, **rhetorical analysis or rhetorical**

¹Jeffrey Walker of Emory University, responding to an earlier draft of this essay, offered the following observations on Aristotle’s definition of *rhetoric*: “Aristotle’s definition actually calls *rhetoric* a ‘faculty’ (*dunamis*) of ‘observing’ (*theorein*): hence the phrase, ‘faculty of observing the available means of persuasion in any given case.’ Note further that ‘available means of persuasion’ comes from Greek words that can also mean ‘possible’ and ‘permissible’ means of persuasion. . . . That is, *rhetoric* is a trained faculty or capacity for analytically observing what is both possible to say in a given situation (an inventory of all possible arguments) and what is allowable (what lines of argument ought to be persuasive; what one can get away with; what one should assent to or not; etc.). What I find interesting about this analysis of Aristotle’s definition is the suggestion that he is mainly thinking of *rhetoric* as a critical faculty, and that rhetorical theory as he begins to outline it is a terminology for rhetorical analysis.” I am grateful to Professor Walker for that commentary and for a number of other comments that helped me to improve this essay.

criticism can be understood as an effort to understand how people within specific social situations attempt to influence others through language.

But not *just* through language: *Rhetoricians* today attempt to understand better every kind of important symbolic action—speeches and articles, yes, but also architecture (isn’t it clear that the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington makes an argument?), movies, and television shows (doesn’t “Ally McBeal” offer an implicit argument about the appropriate conduct of young professional women? doesn’t “Friends” have designs on viewers’ values and attitudes?), memorials (don’t the AIDS quilt and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial make arguments about AIDS and about our national understanding of the Vietnam war?), as well as visual art, Web sites, advertisements, photos and other images, dance, popular songs, and so forth. (Anne Francis Wysocki’s chapter in this book attends to visual rhetoric, and Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996), John Berger (1972), Alan Trachtenberg (1989), Charles Kostelnick and David Roberts (1998), and any number of others have also directed people on how to analyze visual images.) Recently a group of scholars together demonstrated that even physical bodies of various kinds make arguments too—through hair styles, clothing, musculature, make up, prosthetics, and piercings of various kinds (see Selzer and Crowley’s, 1999, *Rhetorical Bodies*). Doesn’t a woman who undertakes cosmetic surgery in order to appear like a living Barbie doll (as a young woman named Cindy Jackson has recently done²) embody arguments about the importance to our culture of a particular version of beauty?

Rhetorical analysis as it is discussed in this chapter is applicable to all these persuasive uses of symbolic words and acts (although I deal here mainly with written texts in line with the central focus of this book). Through rhetorical analysis, people strive to understand better how particular rhetorical episodes are persuasive. They get a better sense of the values and beliefs and attitudes that are conveyed in specific rhetorical moments. It might be helpful to think of **rhetorical analysis as a kind of critical reading**: Whereas “normal” (i.e., “uncritical” or “reactive”) reading involves experiencing first-hand a speech or text or TV show or advertisement and then reacting (or not reacting) to it, critical reading—rhetorical analysis, that is—involves studying carefully some kind of symbolic action, often after the fact of its delivery and irrespective of whether it was actually directed to you or not, so that you might understand it better and appreciate its tactics. The result is a heightened awareness of the message under rhetorical consideration, and an appreciation for the ways people manipulate language and other symbols for persuasive purposes. Although normally people read as a member of a speaker’s or writer’s intended or actual audience and as a person very interested in the subject at hand, when they read rhetorically they may or may not be a member of the audience and

²Aimee Agresti, “Addicted to Perfection,” *Mademoiselle*, January 2001, pp. 38–40.

may or may not care much about the issue; all that is necessary is that a rhetorical analyst try to get some distance and perspective on the reading experience. It's almost as if rhetorical analysts are eavesdropping on what someone is saying or writing to someone else, with the purpose of understanding better how it is said or written. When people read rhetorically, in any event, when they engage in rhetorical analysis, they not only react to the message, but they appreciate *how* the producer of that message is conveying the message to a particular audience too, whether that intended audience includes the analyst or not.

For example, as a citizen you may have experienced George W. Bush's inaugural address firsthand; you may have been swept up in the moment and carried away by his words. But as a rhetorical analyst, after the speech you might try to understand and appreciate how President Bush marshaled his rhetorical resources—ideas, phrases, cultural symbols, even gestures and clothing and intonation—in order to begin to achieve the aims of his administration, especially given the fact that he was elected without a majority of the popular vote and after a controversial court battle. A second example: As a reader you might respond very forcefully even today to the words of Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg or to Martin Luther King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech or to Abigail Adams's famous letters to her husband—rhetorical performances never intended for you at all. But as a rhetorical analyst your job is not so much to react to these rhetorical acts as to understand them better, to appreciate the **rhetorical situation** (i.e., the circumstances of subject, audience, occasion, and purpose) that Lincoln, King, and Adams found themselves in—and how they made choices to further their aims. A third example: For entertainment you might watch "Ally McBeal" (and its commercials); but as an analyst you would try to learn who watches "Ally McBeal" and what its creators are trying to teach those watchers, knowingly or not, and through what means.

I do not want to overemphasize the differences between these two kinds of reading, for even in the act of "normal" reading people usually read critically (to one degree or another) as well as for content; and the two activities of reading and reading critically aren't really separable. But you get the point of my comparison: Rhetorical analysis is an effort to read interpretively, with an eye toward understanding a message fully and how that message is crafted to earn a particular response.

METHODS OF RHETORICAL ANALYSIS— AND SOME EXAMPLES

Rhetorical analysts—readers who are committed to understanding how persuasion works—must attend to the same matters that persuaders themselves attend to: how an idea should be shaped and presented to an audience in a

particular form for a specific purpose. There are many approaches indeed to rhetorical analysis, and no one "correct" way to do it; there is no simple recipe for it. But, generally, approaches to rhetorical analysis can be placed between two broad extremes—not mutually exclusive categories but extremes along a continuum. At the one end of the continuum are analyses that concentrate more on texts than contexts. They typically use one or another kind of rhetorical terminology as a means of careful analysis of a single symbolic act considered on its own discrete terms. Let me call this approach **textual analysis**. At the other extreme are approaches that emphasize context over text; these attempt to reconstruct a rhetorical moment within which a particular rhetorical event (the one under scrutiny) took place, to create a thick description of the (sometimes complex) cultural environment that existed when that rhetorical event took place, and then to depend on that recreation to produce clues about the persuasive tactics and appeals that are visible in the performance in question. Those who undertake **contextual analysis**—as I'll call this second approach—regard particular rhetorical acts as parts of larger communicative chains, or conversations. By understanding the larger conversations that surround a specific symbolic performance, an analyst can appreciate better what is going on within that performance. Let me discuss each approach in detail.

TEXTUAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS: USING RHETORICAL TERMINOLOGY AS AN ANALYTICAL SCREEN

Over a period of many years, experts in rhetoric have developed sophisticated terminologies to help them teach their lessons. Just as expert teachers in every field of endeavor—from baseball to biology—devise specialized vocabularies to facilitate specialized study, rhetoricians too have developed a set of key concepts to permit them to describe and prescribe rhetorical activities. A fundamental concept in rhetoric, of course, is the concept of **audience**—that term used to denote any one of three general ideas: the actual listeners or readers of a rhetorical act, or images of those readers in the mind of one developing an argument, or (more recently) the presence of an audience within the text itself (as "Bill Bennett" is present in one of the example documents I discuss later). Aristotle was at pains to describe audience (understood as actual listeners) in his *Rhetoric*, where he detailed the kinds of strategies likely to compel particular types of auditors and readers, and he also classified the most common and vital rhetorical occasions faced by rhetors in ancient Athens: **forensic rhetoric**, characteristic of courtrooms, involved questions of guilt and innocence (concerning actions done in the *past*); **deliberative rhetoric**, characteristic of legislative

forums, was organized around the kinds of decisions a civic or social organization must make (about a *future* course of action); and **epideictic rhetoric** was ceremonial discourse used to create and reinforce community values (at a given *present* moment). In forensic and deliberative discourse, audiences are asked to make judgments or decisions—guilt or innocence, this course of action or that one; in epideictic discourse, the audience is asked to reconsider beliefs and values.

Moreover, classical rhetoricians in the tradition of Aristotle, Quintilian, and Cicero developed a range of terms around what they called the “canons” of rhetoric in order to describe some of the actions of rhetors: **inventio** (i.e., the finding or creation of information for persuasive acts, and the planning of strategies), **dispositio** (or arrangement), **elocutio** (or style), **memoria** (the recollection of rhetorical resources that one might call upon, as well as the memorization of what has been invented and arranged), and **pronuntiatio** (or delivery). These **five canons** generally describe the actions of a rhetor, from preliminary planning to final delivery, although no specific sequence of events was envisioned by the ancients (especially since invention and memory are required throughout rhetorical preparation and action). Over the years, and especially as written discourse gained in prestige against oral, the first three and the last canons especially encouraged the development of concepts and terms useful for rhetorical analysis. Aristotelian terms like **ethos**, **pathos**, and **logos**, all of them associated with **invention**, account for features of texts related to the trustworthiness and credibility of the rhetor (**ethos**), for the persuasive reasons in an argument that derive from a community’s mostly deeply and fervently held values (**pathos**), and for the sound reasons that emerge from intellectual reasoning (**logos**). Arrangement required terms like **exordium** (introduction), **narratio** (generally equivalent to what we refer to today as “forecasting”), **confirmatio** (proof), **refutatio**, and **peroration** (conclusion) to describe the organization of speeches. Delivery has given rise to a discussion of things like voice, gesture, and expression (in oral discourse) and to voice and visual impact (in written). And a whole series of technical terms developed over the years to describe effective stylistic maneuvers (**elocutio**)—many of them terms still in common use such as antithesis, irony, hyperbole, and metaphor, but also many others as well—arcane terms, such as epanalepsis, antimetabole, and anacoluthon, that are rarely mentioned today. Although all these terms seem to have been devised to guide rhetorical performance, they have also been used to help analysts understand better the tactics visible in specific instances of rhetoric.³

³Fundamental to the classical approach to rhetoric is the concept of decorum, or “appropriateness”: that everything within a persuasive act can be understood as in keeping with a central rhetorical goal that the rhetor consistently keeps in mind and that governs consistent

Classical terminology is not the only rhetorical terminology, by any means. Many other terms, developed long after classical times (and sometimes quite recently, for rhetoric is a subject of particular interest in our culture today), have been used to help would-be persuaders and those who would understand those persuaders. My own favorite 20th-century rhetorician, Kenneth Burke, for example, developed a host of terms that he used to understand rhetorical performances, and his admirers have continued to employ Burkean terms like *act*, *agent*, *agency*, *scene*, *purpose*, *identification*, and *consubstantiality* (I will spare you a mention of many others) to understand better the rhetorical moves that exist in all sorts of rhetorical acts. Similarly, feminist critics for at least the past three decades have devised interpretive technologies that are especially attentive to gendered power relations as they are present in a text, and the philosopher Stephen Toulmin suggested a series of terms that would account for the conduct of arguments in particular fields. Recently cultural studies theorists have developed many terms to account for what happens in the act of persuasion, especially (but certainly not only) terms related to class conflict, ethnicity, and the distribution of power. Whereas most cultural studies practitioners concentrate on understanding phenomena against the frame of specific cultural events (and thus belong more to the next section of this chapter), after the methodological example of Roland Barthes’ pioneering analyses of wrestling and toys in his *Mythologies* (1972), other semioticians today examine cultural signs pretty much on their own terms, apart from considerations of setting. In short, a great many powerful terminologies—interpretive screens, Kenneth Burke called them—have been devised to permit powerful and telling rhetorical analyses of various kinds. What is good as advice for would-be persuaders is also frequently useful for analysts of persuasion, and vice versa.

DOING TEXTUAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS: AN EXAMPLE

A text-based rhetorical analysis considers the issue that is taken up, of course—what the writer has to offer on a given subject to a particular audience. But it also considers, more basically, things that rhetorical advice offers by way of invention, arrangement, style, and delivery. Let me offer an extended example of text-based rhetorical analysis, one that employs the terminologies associated with ancient rhetoric, because it should clarify what I am talking about and should illustrate one approach to rhetorical

choices according to occasion and audience. The concept of decorum lies behind rhetorical analysis in that decisions by a rhetor are understood as rational and consistent—and thus are available for analysis.

analysis. The reprint in Appendix A is E. B. White's (1944) well-known short essay, "Education." Let us use the terms of classical rhetoric (terms that continue to be very influential in rhetorical studies) to understand it better.

What is the purpose of E. B. White's essay? (If you haven't read "Education" before, take time to do so now; that way, you can more easily follow the rest of this analysis.) **Is it an argument—a piece of deliberative rhetoric or epideictic rhetoric or forensic rhetoric?** Is it meant to influence public policy or to reinforce or form community values or to offer a judgment? White wrote the essay a half century ago, but you probably find it to be interesting and readable still, in part at least because it concerns a perennial American question: What should our schools be like? Is education better carried out in large, fully equipped, but relatively impersonal settings, or in smaller but intensely personal, teacher-dominated schools? Which should count for more: the efficiencies of an educational system that is "progressive" (the word comes from paragraph two), or the personal traits of the individual classroom teacher? In other words, you might easily look at the essay as deliberative in nature. On the other hand, maybe you find the essay to be less deliberative than epideictic; maybe, in other words, you see it as designed to shape values more than to persuade about specific public policy. The essay is a personal one (as opposed to public), after all, in that it is the education of his own son that White is "worried about" and writing about. And yet it is public matter, too. White published it in *Harper's*, a magazine with a readership wide and influential. *Harper's* is a magazine that people read for enjoyment too; it accommodates both deliberative and epideictic rhetoric. Or maybe you even consider "Education" to be forensic in nature—to make a judgment between two alternatives, as in a courtroom. After all, the essay is a comparison, and comparisons often are offered to provide a judgment or preference. Does White, in short, have a position on the issue of education? Is he recommending support for one kind of school?

Or maybe it is not an argument at all. At first it might seem that the author takes no sides, that he simply wishes to describe objectively the two alternatives, to record his son's experiences in each circumstance, and to celebrate each as an expression of national values. He gives equal time to each school, he spends the same amount of space on concrete details about each, and he seems in firm control of his personal biases ("I have always rather favored public schools"). Through his light and comic tone White implies that all will be well for his son—and for our children too—in either circumstance, that the two schools each are to be neither favored nor feared by us. "All one can say is that the situation is different" (paragraph four), not better, in the two places.

Or is it? Many readers—I'm one of them—contend that "Education" is less an objective, neutral appraisal than it is a calculated, **deliberative argu-**

ment that subtly favors the country school and schools like it (with an **epideictic undertone** concerning the values that we want to sponsor through our education system). To such readers, White's objective pose is only that—a created pose, an attempt to create a genial, sympathetic, and trustworthy speaker. By caring so obviously for his son (final paragraph), by confessing his biases, and by treating both schools with distance and detachment and reliable detail, White creates effective *ethos*—that quality of **a piece of writing that persuades through the character and trustworthiness of the speaker or writer**. By poking gentle humor at just about everything—his son "the scholar"; his wife the prim graduate of Miss Winsor's private schools; himself "the victim of a young ceramist"; and, of course, both schools—White makes himself seem enormously sympathetic and trustworthy: fair-minded and unflappable, balanced and detached.

But is this reliable speaker arguing or merely describing? Those who see the essay as a deliberative argument supporting the ways of the country school can point to the **emotional aspects** of White's "Education"—to its *pathos*, in other words. The image of the one-room schoolhouse, for instance, is imprinted in positive terms on the American psyche, and White exploits that image for his argumentative purposes. The "scholar" walks miles through the snow to get his education; like the schoolhouse itself, he has the self-reliance and weather-resistance to care for himself and to fit into a class with children both younger and older; and he learns a practical curriculum—there is "no time at all for the esoteric"—"just as fast and as hard as he can." It is all Ben Franklin and "Little House on the Prairie," Abraham Lincoln and "The Waitons," isn't it? And the teacher who presides over the country school appeals to the reader's emotions as only The Ideal Mother can (at least the "ideal mother" as some would stereotype her). This teacher-mother is not only "a guardian of their health, their clothes, their habits . . . and their snowball engagements," but "she has been doing this sort of Augean task for twenty years, and is both kind and wise. She cooks for the children on the stove that heats the room, and she can cool their passions or warm their soup with equal competence."

No such individual Ideal Mother presides over the city school. Instead, that school is supervised by a staff of Educational Professionals—a bus driver, half a dozen anonymous teachers, a nurse, an athletic instructor, dietitians. The school itself is institutional, regimented, professionalized. There the scholar is "worked on," "supervised," "pulled." Like the one-room schoolhouse, the regimented institution is ingrained in the American psyche and in popular culture. But in this case the **emotional appeal** is negative, for The System is something that Americans instinctively resist. True, the city school is no prison; and true, the scholar in this school learns "to read with a gratifying discernment." But the accomplishments remain rather abstract. Faced with such an education, such a school, no wonder

the students literally become ill. At least that is the implication of the end of paragraph three, where the description of the city school is concluded with an account of the networks of professional physicians that discuss diseases which never seem to appear in the country schools.

For all these reasons many readers see "Education" as an argument against the city school (and its "progressive" education) and an endorsement of the country one (and its "basics"). They see the essay as a comparison with an aim like most comparison essays: to show a preference. The evaluative aim is carried out by reference to specific criteria, namely that schools are better if they are less structured and if they make students want to attend (because motivated students learn better); a structured, supervised curriculum and facilities are inferior to a personalized, unstructured environment that makes students love school. Days at the country school pass "just like lightning"; to attend the country school the boy is literally willing to walk through snowdrifts, while to get to the city school he must be escorted to the bus stop—or be "pulled" to classes. The country school is full of "surprises" and "individual instruction," while the city school is full of supervision; there are no surprises in the "progressive" school. In a real sense, therefore, White persuades not only by the force of his personality or through emotional appeals (*pathos*) but also through hard evidence, or *logos*. "Education" amounts to an **argument by example** wherein the single case—the boy scholar—stands for many such cases. This case study persuades like other case studies: by being presented as representative. White creates through his unnamed son, who is described as typical in every way, a representative example that stands for the education of Everychild. The particular **details** provided in the essay are not mere "concrete description" but hard evidence summoned to support White's implicit thesis. The logic of the piece seems to go something like this: "Country schools are a bit superior to city ones because they generally make up for what they lack in facilities with a more personal, less authoritarian atmosphere that children readily respond to."

E. B. White, then, wins his reader's assent by means of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. But the country-school approach is also reinforced by the essay's **arrangement, or dispositio**. Notice, for example, that the essay begins and ends with favorable accounts of the country school. In other words, the emphatic first and final positions of the essay are reserved for the virtues of country schools, while the account of the city school is buried in the unemphatic middle of the essay. The article could easily have begun with the second paragraph (wouldn't sentence two of paragraph two have made a successful opener?); but such a strategy would have promoted the value of the city school. By choosing to add the loving vignette of the Ideal Teacher in his opening paragraph, White disposes his readers to favor country schools from the very start. Notice too that the comparison of the two schools in

the body of "Education" proceeds from city to country. Again, it didn't have to be so; White could have discussed the country school first, or he could have gone back and forth from city to country more often (adopting what some handbooks call an "alternating" method of comparison as opposed to the "divided" pattern that White actually did use). By choosing to deal first with the city school, all in one lump, and then to present the country school in another lump, White furthered his persuasive aim. After all, most writers of comparisons usually move from inferior to superior, from "this one is good" to "but this other one is even better," rather than vice versa. So when White opts to deal first with the city schools, he subtly reinforces his persuasive end through very indirect means.

A rhetorical analysis of "Education" that uses classical concepts must also consider **style, or elocutio**, those sentence and word choices that are sometimes equated with the style of a particular essay or author. Like most rhetoricians, I personally resist the idea that "style is the person"—that style is something inherent in a writer, that it amounts to a sort of genetic code or set of fingerprints that are idiosyncratic to each person, that it is possible to speak generically of Joan Didion's style or Martin Luther King's style or E. B. White's style. It has always seemed to rhetoricians more appropriate to think of style as characteristic of a particular occasion for writing, as something that is as appropriate to reader and subject and genre as it is to a particular author. In other words, stylistic analysis is often highly contextual, as opposed to textual: Words and sentences are typically chosen in response to rhetorical circumstances, and those words and sentences change as the occasion changes. If it is sometimes possible to characterize E. B. White's style or King's style or Faulkner's style in general (and I'm not even sure of that), then it is so only with respect to certain kinds of writing that they did again and again. For when those writers found themselves writing outside *Harper's* or *The New Yorker* (in White's case) or outside of fiction (in Hemingway's), they did indeed adopt different stylistic choices. It is probably wiser to focus not on the idiosyncrasies associated with a Didion or a King or a Faulkner or an E. B. White, but on the particular word and sentence choices at work in a particular rhetorical situation.

Nevertheless, textual analysis of style is still quite possible. White's sentences are certainly describable. They move in conventional ways—from subjects and verbs to objects and modifiers. There are absolutely no sentence inversions (i.e., violations of the normal subject/verb/object order—what classical rhetoricians called *anastrophe*), few distracting interrupters (what classical rhetoricians called *parenthesis*; the parentheses and the "I suspect" in that one long sentence in paragraph two are exceptions), and few lengthy opening sentence modifiers that keep readers too long from subjects and verbs. Not only that, the sentences are simple and unpretentious in another sense: White comparatively rarely uses subordinate (or

modifying) clauses—clauses beginning with “who” or “although” or “that” or “because” or the like (what the ancients called *hypotaxis*). I count only two such modifying (or dependent) clauses in the first and third paragraphs, for instance, and just five in the second; if you don’t think that is a low number, compare it to a 600-word sample of your own prose. When White does add length to a sentence, he does it not by adding complex clauses that modify other clauses, but by adding independent clauses (ones that begin with “and” or “but”—what classical rhetoricians called *parataxis*) and by adding modifiers and phrases in parallel series. Some examples? The teacher is a guardian “of their health, their clothes, their habits, their mothers, and their snowball engagements”; the boy “learned fast, kept well, and we were satisfied”; the bus “would sweep to a halt, open its mouth, suck the boy in, and spring away.” And so forth. The “ands” make White’s essay informal and conversational, never remote or scholarly.

White uses relatively simple sentence patterns in “Education,” then, but his prose is still anything but simple. Some of his sentences are beautifully parallel: “she can cool their passions or warm their soup”; “she conceives their costumes, cleans up their noses, and shares their confidences”; “in a cinder court he played games supervised by an athletic instructor, and in a cafeteria he ate lunch worked out by a dietitian”; “when the snow is deep or the motor is dead”; “rose hips in fall, snowballs in winter.” These precise, mirror-image parallel structures are known as *isocolons* to rhetoricians. White delights in them and in the artful informality they create. He uses parallelisms and relentless coordination—“and” after “and” after “and”—to make his prose accessible to a large audience of appreciative readers. And he uses those lists of specific items in parallel series to give his writing its remarkably concrete, remarkably vivid quality.

That brings us to White’s word choices. They too contribute to White’s purposes. Remember the sense of detachment and generosity in White’s narrative voice, the ethos of involvement and detachment apparent in the speaker? In large measure that is the result of White’s word choices. For instance, White has the ability to attach mock-heroic terminology to his descriptions so that he comes across as balanced and wise, as someone who doesn’t take himself or his world too seriously. The boy is a “scholar” who “sallied forth” on a “journey” to school or to “make Indian weapons of a semi-deadly nature.” The gentle *hyperbole* and *irony* (to use more terms from classical rhetoric) fit in well with the classical *allusion* inherent in the word “Augean” (one of Hercules’ labors was to clean the Augean stables): there is a sophistication and worldly wisdom in the speaker’s voice that qualifies him to speak on this subject. And remember the discussion of whether White’s aim was purely descriptive or more argumentative in character? White’s *metaphors* underscore his argumentative aim: The city school bus “was as punctual as death,” a sort of macabre monster that

“would sweep to a halt, open its mouth, suck the boy in, and spring away with an angry growl”; or it is “like a train picking up a bag of mail.” At the country school, by contrast, the day passes “just like lightning.” If the metaphors do not provide enough evidence of White’s persuasive aim (see Eubanks, chap. 2, for more on metaphor and argument), consider the **connotations** of words—their emotional charges, that is—that are associated with the city school: “regimented,” “supervised,” “worked on,” “uniforms,” “fevers.” And then compare these with the connotation of some words White associates with the country school: “surprises,” a “bungalow,” “weather-resistant,” “individual instruction,” “guardian,” and so forth.

This analysis by no means exhausts the full measure of rhetorical sophistication that E. B. White brings to the composition of “Education.” You may have noticed other tactics at work, or you might disagree with some of the generalizations presented here. And the use of terms from an approach to rhetoric outside classical rhetoric would have yielded different results. But the purpose of this discussion is not to detail every aspect of the rhetoric of White’s “Education.” It is merely to illustrate a method of rhetorical analysis, or critical reading, that you might employ yourself. The point has been to offer a method for permitting someone to read not just for what is said—although this is crucial—but for how it is said as well. For reading is as “rhetorical” an activity as writing. It depends on an appreciation of how writer, subject, and reader are all negotiated through a particular document. The precise terms of this negotiation are often uncovered by means of contextual analysis.

CONTEXTUAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS: COMMUNICATION AS CONVERSATION

Notice that the fact that E. B. White’s “Education” was originally published in *Harper’s* magazine did not matter too much to the previous discussion. Nor did it matter what material conditions motivated White to write it or when the essay was written (1939) or who exactly read it or what their reaction was or what other people at the time were saying about education. Textual analysis, strictly speaking, need not attend to such matters; it can proceed as if the item under consideration “speaks for all time” somehow, as if it is a sort of museum piece unaffected by time and space just as surely as, say, an ancient altarpiece once housed in a church might be placed on a pedestal in a museum. Museums have their functions, and they certainly permit people to observe and appreciate objects in an important way. But just as certainly museums often fail to retain a vital sense of an art work’s original context and cultural meaning; in that sense museums can diminish understanding as much as they contribute to it. Contextual rhetorical analy-

sis, however, as an attempt to understand communications through the lens of their environments, does attend to the setting or scene out of which any communication emerges. It does strive to understand an object of analysis as an integral part of culture.

And, as in the case of textual analysis, contextual analysis may be conducted in any number of ways. “Contextual analysis,” “frame analysis,” “cultural studies,” “reception analysis,” “historical analysis,” “ecocriticism,” and so forth: all of these and other terms can be rough synonyms for a constellation of analytical methods that can give people a better sense of how the particular pieces of a rhetorical performance emerge from, are owing to, and speak to specific contexts. Contextual rhetorical analysis proceeds from a thick description of the rhetorical situation that motivated the item in question. It demands an appreciation of the social circumstances that call rhetorical events into being and that orchestrate the course of those events. It regards communications as anything but self-contained: Contextualists understand each communication as a response to other communications (and to other social practices), they appreciate how communications (and social practices more generally) reflect the attitudes and values of the communities that sustain them, and they search for evidence of how those other communications (and social practices) are reflected in texts. Rhetorical analysis from a contextualist perspective resists notions of the “bounded text” cut off from others; it understands individual pieces as parts of communication chains that work together to perform rhetorical work; it resists the notion of transhistorical or ahistorical texts. Contextualists are drawn to metaphors such as *dialogue*, *dialectic*, *debate*, and *conversation*, for those metaphors carry with them the values of contextual criticism. (Another term useful to contextualists is *intertextuality*—the concept you learned about earlier in Charles Bazerman’s chapter 4.)

Here is a famous example of the conversation metaphor from Kenneth Burke’s *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941/1973):

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense. (p. 110)

Burke’s metaphorical account of the dynamics of all discourse—every particular item should be understood as part of and in relation to a larger conversation—challenges analysts to immerse themselves in the details of cultural conversations as a means of understanding any particular discourse.

As the passage from Burke suggests, contextual analysis will turn up information about what is said and why (invention), about the order in which it is said (arrangement), and how it is said (style and tone). Rhetorical analysis, like writing, is a social activity. It involves not simply passively decoding a message but actively understanding the designs the message has for readers who are living and breathing within a given culture.

How can you recover the cultural conversation surrounding a specific piece of rhetorical action? Sometimes it is fairly easy to do so. If you are an expert on any subject, you probably read about that subject quite often—often enough to know quite well what people are saying about that topic. People who carefully followed the presidential campaign of 2000, for example, could recover pretty easily the dialogue about the issues that was carried on by the Democrats and Republicans and their supporters. People who have strong feelings about the environment or cloning (or about gay rights, affirmative action, school choice, the lack of competitive balance in major league baseball, or any number of other current issues) are very well informed about the arguments that are converging around those topics. (In that sense, textual analysis and contextual analysis often work together, for often the text itself will contain important clues about context. A careful look at the text of Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address”—not to mention texts written in ancient times, about which we may know little—tells us quite a bit about its context.)

But other times it takes some research in order to reconstruct the conversations and social practices related to a particular issue—research into how the debate manifests itself in cultural practices or how it is conducted in current magazines, newspapers, talk shows, Web sites, and so forth (if the issue concerns current events); or archival research into historical collections of newspapers, magazines, books, letters, and other documentary sources (if the item being analyzed was from an earlier time period). That research usually puts people into libraries, special research collections, or film and television archives where it is possible to learn quite a bit about context.

DOING CONTEXTUAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS: AN EXAMPLE

Perhaps an example will clarify how contextual analysis works: It will take a while to reconstruct some of the “conversations” that a piece of discourse participates in, but the result will be an enhanced understanding—and an appreciation for how you might do a contextual rhetorical analysis yourself. This time take a look at Appendix B, Milton Friedman’s (1989) essay “An Open Letter to Bill Bennett.” (As you did for “Education,” take time to

read the article carefully before you read further.) You are probably able to follow Friedman's argument pretty well without the benefit of much background reading, because the possible decriminalization or legalization of drugs continues to be an issue in our society (witness the recent film "Traffic") and because the text-based ways of reading that I discussed earlier in this chapter permit you to appreciate some of the dynamics of Friedman's prose. You can certainly follow the basic thrust of Friedman's argument in favor of decriminalization and appreciate the supporting points that he makes, his overall arrangement, some of the ways he builds credibility, and his general stylistic choices. Textual analysis can supply all of that.

But a contextual analysis will give you even more appreciation for and understanding of this argument. For one thing, some research will tell you that Friedman (born in 1913), a well-known staunch conservative (even libertarian) whose "monetarist" approach to economics influenced the policies of Ronald Reagan and his successors, is a Nobel laureate in economics who taught for many years at the University of Chicago and who was later affiliated with the Hoover Institute at Stanford University. Thus his credibility, his ethos, is established not just by his textual moves but by his reputation, especially for *Wall Street Journal* readers who would recognize his accomplishment: the respected daily newspaper, which printed "Open Letter to Bill Bennett" on September 7, 1989, is published weekdays by Dow Jones and Company in order to disseminate news about financial affairs and some political affairs. Friedman in his essay was addressing not so much the "real" Bill Bennett, therefore—although Bennett, President George H. Bush's "drug czar" in 1989, certainly read the piece carefully, as I will indicate in a moment. (If he had really been addressing Bennett as his primary audience, Friedman would have written Bennett a personal letter.) Instead, "Bill Bennett" is mainly a textual construct, an implied audience who actually stands in for the host of conservative, mostly well-to-do people who read the *Wall Street Journal*.

Why does it matter when the essay was written? On September 5, 1989, President George H. Bush announced in a nationwide, televised address that he was proposing to launch a \$2.9 billion anti-drug campaign that he hoped would gain the support of congress. Declaring the moral equivalent of war, the President proposed to add \$719 million to his previous commitment, bringing the total to nearly \$3 billion, and he suggested that the funds might come from borrowing and/or from funds allocated from housing and juvenile-justice programs or pork-barrel projects. Democrats responded that they supported the initiative, but at the expense of military spending and certainly not at the expense of housing or juvenile justice; concerned about the budget deficits that were at historic highs, reluctant therefore to borrow money to support the initiative, and sensing that the war on drugs would give them an opportunity to leverage a reduction in military spend-

ing that they regarded as wasteful and unnecessary, Democrats were also loathe to appear soft on drugs. On the one hand, Bush and his supporters were concerned about the terrible social costs of drug abuse in America: A crack cocaine epidemic was ravaging the nation's cities and claiming the lives of citizens as prominent as University of Maryland basketball star Len Bias (who died in 1986); crack and other kinds of addictions were leading to serious crime, to serious illness, to lost work days, and to broken lives; many children were being introduced to illegal and potentially harmful drugs at a young age. On the other hand, other citizens were skeptical of the proposed initiative (even though many of them detested drug abuse as much as anyone) because its cost would contribute to a severe budget shortfall that was plaguing the federal government and the nation's economy; because they felt that the drug problem in America ought to be regarded as a medical problem more than a criminal one; because they were skeptical that the approach advocated by the President would be effective; because they feared that a crackdown on drug users might be a cure worse than the disease (if many otherwise law-abiding citizens were jailed as a result and if civil liberties were compromised by the drug war); and because they feared foreign policy difficulties would result from a drug war carried out beyond American borders. This national conversation about drugs was apparent in the magazines, books, newspapers, talk shows, barber shops, and hair salons of America in September, 1989. If I had more space, I would offer detailed examples of the scope and depth of that debate by quoting from some representative and influential articles and news programs in circulation at that time.

Nevertheless, I can still document here quite a good sense of the conversation surrounding the "Open Letter to Bill Bennett" simply by examining (with the help of my university library) the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* itself, in very rich detail, on that one very day—September 7, 1989. A front-page story in the *WSJ* that day entitled "In Columbia, the War on Drugs Is Producing Some Real-Life Heroes" lionized drug enforcement agents in South America who were doing their jobs under difficult, even life-threatening circumstances. Two other front-page items, both brief, mentioned that Congress was having trouble accommodating the anti-drug plan in its tight, debt-ridden budget and that Columbia a day before had extradited a reputed drug financier, Eduardo Martinez Romero, to the United States for prosecution. The *Wall Street Marketplace* page in the *WSJ* carried a story on September 7 about the dearth of evidence that drug testing plans work to curb drug abuse by employees. The Politics and Policy section that day carried two articles whose contents are fairly indicated by their headlines: an analysis entitled "Bush Drug Plan Sparks Scuffle Over Budget"; and a historical piece entitled "Bush's Get-Tough Drug Plan Shares Philosophy That Didn't Work for [New York Governor Nelson] Rockefeller 20 Years

Ago." The editorial page carried the essay by Milton Friedman that we are concerned with analyzing, but it also carried two related opinion pieces: an editorial expressing guarded support for the anti-drug plan (the writer was worried about Big Government and high taxes, and spoke of the need for personal responsibility); and a second editorial, "Only in America," that complained that the drug war was a result of a failure in American legal systems: The writer was especially incensed that three federal judges had recently overturned the convictions of four Colombian drug runners on a legal technicality. Following the editorial page, and next to the letters to the editor, was a sober, realistic column by Alexander Cockburn entitled "From Andes to Inner Cities, Cocaine Is a Good Career Choice": "A war on drugs has distinct political advantages" to President Bush and other Republicans, wrote Mr. Cockburn (a writer associated with the progressive magazine *The Nation*). "In the present drug war, long-cherished constitutional protections are being shunted aside with the same elan as [Police] Chief Darrell Gates's battering ram bashing in the doors of suspected crack houses in Los Angeles. In the end, the 'war' ends up as a boon in prison construction" that would especially affect minority citizens.

All of these articles are part of and representative of the larger national debate over drugs that was apparent in September, 1989. Although the *Wall Street Journal* is certainly a conservative newspaper, it still managed to offer a range of views on the subject—a surprisingly broad range, some might say, but in any event a reasonable representation of the conversation on the subject that one might have heard among informed American citizens at that moment. One could even argue that advertisements for beer, alcohol, and tobacco (in the *Wall Street Journal* and in so many other publications in September, 1989) were a part of that discussion—not to mention drug czar William Bennett's concurrent speeches and talk-show appearances on behalf of the President's plan during that week or in the months following (e.g., "Should Drugs Be Legalized," *Reader's Digest*, March 1990).

So of course was an earlier article on drugs that Friedman himself had written 17 years before for *Newsweek*—excerpts of which were carried in a sidebar to Friedman's 1989a *Wall Street Journal* essay. In that 1972 essay, which is worth summarizing at some length for reasons of comparison and because the 1989 piece accompanies and plays off it, Friedman had begun by quoting in a mocking way the evangelist Billy Sunday's predictions about the benefits he expected from "victory" in another "drug war" that had been waged in America at the turn of the last century: Because of Prohibition, predicted Sunday early in the 20th century, "Men will walk upright now, women will smile, and the children will laugh. Hell will be forever for rent." After that introduction, Friedman then developed this comparison of the war against drugs in 1972 to the days of Prohibition against alcohol—a period when a national social experiment in prohibiting a widely used and

frequently harmful drug, alcohol, had so "undermined respect for the law, corrupted the minions of the law, [and] created a decadent moral climate" that Prohibition was repealed by a 1930 amendment to the constitution. Friedman did not even need to mention explicitly the gangsterism, police corruption, and other social ills that people routinely associated with the 1920s because those problems were understood by his readers, many of whom would have been devoted fans of the popular 1960s TV series "The Untouchables," which represented the heroism of Chicago police detective Eliot Ness against the hooliganism of rumrunning mobsters like Al Capone and which was still in popular syndication in 1972. Friedman then noted that "the individual addict would clearly be far better off if drugs were legal" and turned to benefits to the rest of society: Depending on the economic law of supply and demand—something Friedman believes is a natural force akin to gravity—he contended that legalization would eliminate pushers, drive down prices, and consequently reduce the crime rate since addicts would no longer be "driven to associate with criminals to get drugs, become criminals themselves to finance the habit, and risk constant danger of death and disease." And legalization would mean that other nations would no longer be corrupted by illegal drug manufacture. On that final note, and with a final allusion to Prohibition, Friedman closed his *Newsweek* essay: "We cannot end drug traffic. We may be able to cut off opium from Turkey—but there are innumerable other places where the opium poppy grows."

How are these discourses visible in—intertextual with—Friedman's 1989 article? How does all of this background make the "Open Letter to Bill Bennett" more understandable? This contextual study comes to fruition when it becomes apparent that a great many things indeed in Friedman's essay in fact derive from or speak directly to other discourses and social practices. To take the most obvious example first, consider Billy Sunday's predictions about the benefits that he expected from Prohibition, quoted obliquely in paragraph 7 (indeed, that paragraph cannot easily be understood without a knowledge of the Billy Sunday quotation in the 1972 essay). That allusion works far more strongly when it is read against the full text of Friedman's 1972 *Newsweek* essay, which begins by ridiculing Prohibition as the social experiment of buffoons like Sunday. In both cases, 1972 and 1989, the ridicule of Billy Sunday fits in well with the ideology of Friedman and the *Wall Street Journal*: Billy Sunday was poorly educated, low-church, and authoritative among the working-class Americans that *Wall Street Journal* readers often regard as beneath themselves. In that way the allusion allies Friedman with his readers' values, far better in fact than it had done in his *Newsweek* piece, since *Newsweek* reaches a more egalitarian set of readers. A second direct allusion in the 1989 essay, the unusual words from Oliver Cromwell that open the piece, performs very different and more compli-

cated rhetorical work. Since Cromwell is associated with religious Puritanism, the sympathetic allusion actually seems to position Friedman as in league with a social stance, social "puritanism" (small p) as it is informally and broadly known, that actually seems counter to his own stance on drugs (since people normally associate puritans with an anti-drug stance). The allusion to Cromwell, in other words, builds identification with members of his audience who are highly skeptical about legalization of drugs. Moreover, Cromwell is also associated with the anti-aristocratic, radically revolutionary forces who beheaded English king Charles I in 1649, another fact that positions the well-to-do Friedman as unexpectedly egalitarian against the implied elitism of William Bennett and his *Wall Street Journal* fellows.¹ (That the allusion is quite obscure also reinforces Friedman's ethos as a scholarly and cosmopolitan genius.) In short, the allusions to Billy Sunday and to Oliver Cromwell help Friedman to have it both ways; they permit him to draw cultural capital from both right and left and to present himself, in this instance at least, as above partisan politics.

More important, Friedman depends in 1989 on the same extended comparison that he exploited so thoroughly in 1972 and that the *Wall Street Journal* article on Rockefeller used—between the war against drugs in the 1980s (and 1960s) and the disastrous Prohibition-era war against alcohol conducted in the 1920s. Paragraph three alludes directly to the days of Prohibition: illegality "creates obscene profits that finance the tactics of the drug lords; illegality leads to the corruption of law enforcement officials; illegal-

¹The Cromwell quote is from a letter he wrote to the Scottish clergy, or more precisely to the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland, on August 3, 1650. After the execution of Charles I, the new English republic faced opposition from Ireland and then Scotland. Appalled by England's unilateral execution of their king, the Scots immediately declared the late king's son, Charles II, king of great Britain and Ireland. On July 22, 1650, Cromwell led a preemptive military invasion of Scotland. The letter of August 3 was an attempt to set the various elements among his opponents (royalist, Scottish, Presbyterian) against each other. Unlike the case of his quite brutal massacre of the Irish papists, Cromwell treated the Scots as erring brethren and wanted to bring them back into the fold; hence the appeal to shared biblical language. Here is the first part of the paragraph that the quote comes from:

"Your own guilt is too much for you to bear: bring not therefore upon yourselves the blood of innocent men, deceived with pretences of King and Covenant, from whose eyes you hide a better knowledge. I am persuaded that divers of you, who lead the people, have laboured to build yourselves in these things wherein you have censured others, and established yourselves upon the Word of God. Is it therefore infallibly agreeable to the Word of God, all that you say? I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken. Precept may be upon precept, line may be upon line, and yet the Word of the Lord may be to some a Word of judgment, that they may fall backward, and be broken and be snared and be taken."

I thank my colleague Laura Knoppers for the information in this note.

ity monopolizes the efforts of honest law forces so they are starved for resources" to fight other crimes. The final sentence of paragraph four makes the comparison explicit: "Our experience with the prohibition of drugs is a replay of our experience with the prohibition of alcoholic beverages." And the quotation from Billy Sunday reinforces that analogy further. If Friedman's 1972 essay alluded obliquely to "The Untouchables" TV series, his 1989 essay conjures up the 1987 movie of that same title (starring Kevin Costner as Eliot Ness⁵). Friedman did not even need to emphasize further the gangsterism, corruption of police, and other social ills that people were routinely associating with the 1920s.

Other discourses, other pieces of contemporary cultural conversations, are apparent in Friedman's 1989 performance. His point that drug use in America had gotten worse in the previous two decades picks up on arguments articulated in the historical essay on Governor Rockefeller's drug war of the 1960s: One failed attempt ought to testify to the likely failure of other attempts. Friedman's emphatic conclusion to paragraph six—"Fewer people would be in jails, and fewer jails would have to be built"—recalls Cockburn's argument about how the drug war feeds incarceration. The commentary on Columbia, Bolivia, and Peru (paragraph seven) alludes directly to *Wall Street Journal* news coverage of the conduct of the drug war in other nations. The comparisons to alcohol and tobacco in paragraph nine are brought home by the prevalent, even ubiquitous advertising for both substances apparent in 1989 media. And so on.

Note that Friedman in his "Open Letter" plays down the argument for legalization that he personally finds most appealing—the libertarian position that government has no right to coerce an individual to adopt any moral or ethical position. He had done the same thing in 1972, limiting himself to a paragraph defending the notion that government has "no right to use force, directly or indirectly, to prevent a fellow man . . . from drinking alcohol or taking drugs," to a short repetition of the libertarian slogan popularized by Henry David Thoreau—"that government is best when it governs least"—and to concluding his piece with an indirect reference to the same minimalist principle of government: "In drugs, as in other areas, persuasion and example are likely to be far more effective than the use of force." In 1989 he developed that argument even more obliquely, alluding only to libertarian "friends of freedom" and to the specter of "an army of enforcers empowered to invade the liberty of citizens" in his conclusion. Friedman depends instead on a resolute account of the practical consequences of his position, on a patient tabulation of the negative consequences of the drug war. Many of his 1972 appeals survive fairly intact in his 1989 argument, therefore—the

⁵It could be argued, however, that both the TV series and the 1987 movie are pro-drug-war arguments. Eliot Ness in both is depicted as a saintly government foe of satanic corruption.

harmful impacts on citizens and society, the lack of effective impact on drug usage, the inappropriate intrusions into the affairs of other nations. And Friedman's faith in the law of supply and demand is a staple grounds in both pieces as well: "Of course the problem is demand, . . . demand that must operate through repressed and illegal channels" (paragraph 3). Friedman takes as a basic assumption the argument that drugs are an economic commodity whose distribution can be understood best in economic terms.

True, economic theory would suggest that a reduction in price might increase use, just as a decrease in the price of any other commodity makes it more affordable and accessible. But Friedman for some reason claims the opposite in his "Open Letter": "There would today be far fewer addicts" if drug use had been legalized years ago, he offers in paragraph six; "the lives of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of innocent victims would have been saved." For some reason, Friedman seems to believe that economic "law" will have inevitable consequences sometimes but not always: legalization will increase supply of drugs, reduce prices, and drive out the incentive for crime; but somehow "there would today be far fewer addicts" if drugs were legal—a remark that echoes Friedman's 1972 text. As a result, Friedman leaves himself vulnerable to counterattack since opponents of legalization and backers of the war on drugs act as they do because they are committed to an interdiction on a hazardous economic product, as surely as if it were plutonium. If a substantial reduction in the price of cell phones, say, coupled with an increase in their supply, will increase exponentially the number of cell phone users, why will a reduction in the price of drugs not also result in an increase in the number of drug addicts—with disastrous results?

Precisely on these grounds was Friedman answered. On September 19, 1989, in the *Wall Street Journal*, several letter writers argued that legalization and lower prices for drugs could generate mass addiction. One of those responses was offered by William Bennett. "We know," he wrote, that whenever drugs have been cheaper and more easily obtained, drug use—and addiction—has skyrocketed. . . . Professor James Q. Wilson tells us that during the years in which heroin could be legally prescribed by doctors in Britain, the number of addicts increased forty-fold. And after the repeal of Prohibition—an analogy favored but misunderstood by legalization advocates—consumption of alcohol soared by 350%. Could we afford such dramatic increases in drug use? I doubt it." A few days later Friedman counterresponded to Bennett's response, again in the *Wall Street Journal*. He reasserted his main points and reaffirmed in a full concluding paragraph the libertarian principles on which he based his position on drugs: The drug war "would have been utterly unacceptable to the Founders [of our country]. I do not believe, and neither did they, that it is the right of government to tell free citizens what is right and wrong. That

is something for them to decide themselves." And he refined his economic, supply-and-demand argument to distinguish between innocent and guilty victims of drug use: "Legalization would drastically reduce the number of innocent victims [e.g., crime victims]. That is a virtual certainty. The number of self-chosen victims [of addiction] might increase, but it is pure conjecture that the number would skyrocket. In any event, while both groups of victims are to be pitied, the innocent victims surely have a greater claim on our sympathy than the self-chosen victims." And with that change in the argument between them (a change that might suggest that Bennett "won" the original argument), the direct conversation between Bennett and Friedman ceased.

Not that this analysis need cease. This discussion of the conversation about drugs in 1989 and about Milton Friedman's specific contribution to that conversation could be extended for a long time—indefinitely, in fact. If it were, an understanding of even more details of Friedman's essay would become clear; the traces of his language choices that derive from prior discourses would become even clearer. There is no need to belabor the point, however: My purpose has been simply to illustrate that contextual analysis of a piece of rhetoric can enrich its understanding.

I cannot resist offering one final point: All of this analysis and background suggests that there was nothing particularly original in Friedman's argument. Rather than inventing a new argument with new premises, Friedman was actually consolidating and rearticulating an argument already in circulation in various forms and forums. Contextual analysis usually works that way: It tends to reduce a sense of individual genius attached to specific communications. If the earlier textual analysis of E. B. White tended to confirm an appreciation of him as a uniquely gifted rhetor, the contextualist analysis of Milton Friedman has tended to make his impressive essay appear less original. For good reason, William Bennett happened to open his September 19, 1989 rebuttal to Friedman by saying that "There was little, if anything, new in your open letter to me calling for the legalization of drugs"—a charge that Friedman himself acknowledged as just in his counterresponse: "William Bennett is entirely right that 'there was little, if anything, new in' my open letter to him." Contextual analyses need not diminish respect and appreciation for outstanding rhetorical performance, however. If Friedman's arguments were not especially novel, if he is to be understood as just another contributor to a larger conversation about legalization taking place in 1989, he still deserves credit for the eloquence of his contribution—and for inserting it into a novel setting. At a time when Republicans and Democrats were beginning to line up to make the drug war into a partisan issue (or to pass on it as a done deal), at a time when it might have been expected that social conservatives like the ones who read the *Wall Street Journal* would routinely line up on the side of the Republican president, Friedman succeeded in making the issue non-

partisan. And to the extent that he drew new attention to the issue, he can be credited with breathing new intellectual life into its discussion and adjudication—discussion that continues to this day. “Originality” in the sense of unitary genius Friedman did not display in his “Open Letter”; but genius in the sense of original thinking and social relevance and verbal eloquence he most certainly did possess.

CONCLUSION

Effective rhetorical analysis can be generally textual or contextual in nature, then. But let me conclude by emphasizing again that these two approaches to rhetorical analysis should not be understood as mutually exclusive. Indeed, many if not most analysts operate some place between these two extremes; they consider the details of the text, but they also attend to the particulars of context as well. Or they employ both kinds of analysis simultaneously and recursively to get a fuller appreciation of the interplay between text and context, especially since clues about context are often embedded in text. Textual analysis and contextual analysis inevitably complement each other. Perhaps I could have demonstrated that by adding a contextual analysis of E. B. White’s “Education” to my textual analysis, or a close textual analysis of my discussion of Friedman’s “Open Letter to Bill Bennett.”

Then again, that would have been misleading too, for it would have implied that the two approaches together can somehow exhaust appreciation, can open up an understanding of a communication rather completely. Such an impression would be inaccurate. Rhetorical analysis, like any other kind of analysis, should be understood as necessarily and always partial: any approach to rhetorical analysis will be very good at teaching people some things about a particular communication, but it will also keep them from considering other things. In that sense, rhetorical analysis is as much a way of not seeing as it is seeing. In Kenneth Burke’s (1954) terms, any approach to analysis (rhetorical or otherwise) is a “trained incapacity”—a way of seeing some things more profoundly that simultaneously blinds people to other things, just as surely as peering into a microscope opens your eyes to what’s under the microscope but blinds you to everything else.

In fact, therefore, it might be appropriate for me to conclude this chapter with two challenges: First, try to use elements of both kinds of analysis whenever you would understand a rhetorical event more completely. Resist the distinction between textual and contextual approaches. Rhetoric is “inside” texts, but it is also “outside”: **Specific rhetorical performances are an irreducible mixture of text and context**, and so interpretation and analysis of those performances must account for both as well. Second, remem-

ber **the limitations of your analysis**; realize that your analysis will always be somewhat partial and incomplete, ready to be deepened, corrected, modified, and extended by the insights of others. As the contributors to a book called *Understanding Scientific Prose* (Selzer, 1993) demonstrated when they offered a dozen or so separate and yet complimentary analyses of a single piece of scientific writing, **rhetorical analysis can itself be part of the unending conversation** that Kenneth Burke celebrated—a way of learning and teaching within a community.

If you keep those two challenges in mind, you will find rhetorical analysis to be a truly rich intellectual experience. Not only that, you will find yourself growing as a writer and speaker as well; if you read critically, you’ll begin to adopt and adapt for your own purposes the best rhetorical maneuvers on display in the world. By becoming better able to understand and appreciate the “conversations” going on around you, you’ll learn to make more powerful and sophisticated contributions to the discussions that most engage you personally. Critical reading, the art of rhetorical analysis, can make you a better arguer, a better citizen.

ACTIVITIES

1. Now that you have read a *textual* analysis of E. B. White’s “Education,” do a *contextual* analysis of it. Place it in its original context, and see what that placement does to complement the textual analysis offered in this chapter.
2. Find an ad in a magazine designed for a particular audience (i.e., an ad not in *Time* or *Newsweek* but *Seventeen* or *Car and Driver* or *Esquire* or *Working Mother*). Then analyze how the ad makes its argument to its audience. Consider ethos, logos, pathos, arrangement, style, and visual presentation.
3. Find a Web site for an organization or public interest group. Analyze how (and how well) the site is suited to its aims and audiences.
4. Take your favorite piece of writing—fiction, poetry, essay, report, personal letter whatever—and analyze it as an argument.

FOR FURTHER READING

Some of the items listed under Works Cited offer plenty of additional information about rhetorical analysis. In particular, I would recommend the essays collected in *Understanding Scientific Prose* (1993)—a book intended as a primer on rhetorical analysis of any kind of writing—and Berger et al.’s (1991) *Ways of Seeing* as an introduction to analyzing visual images. Beyond

that, anyone can become more expert at rhetorical analysis by reading the following classics: James Andrews, *The Practice of Rhetorical Criticism* (1990); Thomas Benson, ed., *Landmark Essays on Rhetorical Criticism* (1993)—which includes a fine bibliography and many examples; Edwin Black's influential 1978 book *Rhetorical Criticism*; Bernard Brock et al.'s (1989) *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism*; Donald Bryant's (1973) pioneering effort to formalize approaches to rhetorical analysis, *Rhetorical Dimensions in Criticism*; Edward Corbett's (1969) *Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works* (an important effort to show how rhetorical analysis can open up belletristic works); Sonja Foss' (1989) *Rhetorical Criticism* (a very student-friendly account of many new ways of doing rhetorical criticism); Roderick Hart's (1990) *Modern Rhetorical Criticism* (another student-oriented discussion of methods of rhetorical analysis, especially ones that are employed in the field of speech communication); and Steven Mailloux's (1998) *Reception Histories*, an explanation and illustration of the branch of rhetorical criticism known as reception theory.

APPENDIX A: "EDUCATION" (BY E. B. WHITE)

I have an increasing admiration for the teacher in the country school where we have a third-grade scholar in attendance. She not only undertakes to instruct her charges in all the subjects of the first three grades, but she manages to function quietly and effectively as a guardian of their health, their clothes, their habits, their mothers, and their snowball engagements. She has been doing this sort of Augean task for twenty years, and is both kind and wise. She cooks for the children on the stove that heats the room, and she can cool their passions or warm their soup with equal competence. She conceives their costumes, cleans up their messes, and shares their confidences. My boy already regards his teacher as his great friend, and I think tells her a great deal more than he tells us.

The shift from city school to country school was something we worried about quietly all last summer. I have always rather favored public school over private school, if only because in public school you meet a greater variety of children. This bias of mine, I suspect, is partly an attempt to justify my own past (I never knew anything but public schools) and partly an involuntary defense against getting kicked in the shins by a young ceramist on his way to the kiln. My wife was unacquainted with public schools, never having been exposed (in her early life) to anything more public than the washroom of Miss Winsor's. Regardless of our backgrounds, we both knew that the change in schools was something that concerned not us but the scholar himself. We hoped it would work out all right. In New York our son went to a medium-priced private institution with semi-progressive ideas of education, and modern plumbing. He learned fast, kept well, and we were satisfied. It was an

electric, colorful, regimented existence with moments of pleasurable pause and giddy incident. The day the Christmas angel fainted and had to be carried out by one of the Wise Men was educational in the highest sense of the term. Our scholar gave imitations of it around the house for weeks afterward, and I doubt if it ever goes completely out of his mind.

His days were rich in formal experience. Wearing overalls and an old sweater (the accepted uniform of the private seminary), he sallied forth at morn accompanied by a nurse or a parent and walked (or was pulled) two blocks to a corner where the school bus made a flag stop. This flashy vehicle was as punctual as death: seeing us waiting at the cold curb, it would sweep to a halt, open its mouth, suck the boy in, and spring away with an angry growl. It was a good deal like a train picking up a bag of mail. At school the scholar was worked on for six or seven hours by half a dozen teachers and a nurse, and was revived on orange juice in mid-morning. In a cinder court he played games supervised by an athletic instructor, and in a cafeteria he ate lunch worked out by a dietitian. He soon learned to read with gratifying facility and discernment and to make Indian weapons of a semi-deadly nature. Whenever one of his classmates fell low of a fever the news was put on the wires and there were breathless phone calls to physicians, discussing periods of incubation and allied magic.

In the country all one can say is that the situation is different, and somehow more casual. Dressed in corduroys, sweatshirt, and short rubber boots, and carrying a tin dinner pail, our scholar departs at the crack of dawn for the village school, two and a half miles down the road, next to the cemetery. When the road is open and the car will start, he makes the journey by motor, courtesy of his old man. When the snow is deep or the motor is dead or both, he makes it on the hoof. In the afternoons he walks or hitches all or part of the way home in fair weather, gets transported in foul. The schoolhouse is a two-room frame building, bungalow type, shingles stained a burnt brown with weather-resistant stain. It has a chemical toilet in the basement and two teachers above the stairs. One takes the first three grades, the other the fourth, fifth, and sixth. They have little or no time for individual instruction, and no time at all for the esoteric. They teach what they know themselves, just as fast and as hard as they can manage. The pupils sit still at their desks in class, and do their milling around outdoors during recess.

There is no supervised play. They play cops and robbers (only they call it "Jail") and throw things at one another—snowballs in winter, rose hips in fall. It seems to satisfy them. They also construct darts, pinwheels, and "pick-up-sticks" (jackstraws), and the school itself does a brisk trade in penny candy, which is for sale right in the classroom and which contains "surprises." The most highly prized surprise is a fake cigarette, made of cardboard, fiendishly lifelike.

The memory of how apprehensive we were at the beginning is still strong. The boy was nervous about the change too. The tension, on that first fair morning in September when we drove him to school, almost blew the windows out of the sedan. And when later we picked him up on the road, wandering along with his little blue lunch-pail, and got his laconic report "All right" in answer to our inquiry about how the day had gone, our relief was vast. Now, after almost a year of it, the only difference we can discover in the two school experiences is that in the country he sleeps better at night—and *that* problem is more the air than the education. When grilled on the subject of school-in-country vs. school-in-city, he replied that the chief difference is that the day seems to go so much quicker in the country. "Just like lightning," he reported.

APPENDIX B: "AN OPEN LETTER TO BILL BENNETT" (BY MILTON FRIEDMAN)

Dear Bill:

In Oliver Cromwell's eloquent words, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken" about the course you and President Bush urge us to adopt to fight drugs. The path you propose of more police, more jails, use of the military in foreign countries, harsh penalties for drug users, and a whole panoply of repressive measures can only make a bad situation worse. The drug war cannot be won by those tactics without undermining the human liberty and individual freedom that you and I cherish.

You are not mistaken in believing that drugs are a scourge that is devastating our society. You are not mistaken in believing that drugs are tearing asunder our social fabric, ruining the lives of many young people, and imposing heavy costs on some of the most disadvantaged among us. You are not mistaken in believing that the majority of the public share your concerns. In short, you are not mistaken in the end you seek to achieve.

Your mistake is failing to recognize that the very measures you favor are a major source of the evils you deplore. Of course the problem is demand, but it is not only demand, it is demand that must operate through repressed and illegal channels. Illegality creates obscene profits that finance the murderous tactics of the drug lords; illegality leads to the corruption of law enforcement officials; illegality monopolizes the efforts of honest law forces so that they are starved for resources to fight the simpler crimes of robbery, theft and assault.

Drugs are a tragedy for addicts. But criminalizing their use converts the tragedy into a disaster for society, for users and non-users alike. Our experi-

ence with the prohibition of drugs is a replay of our experience with the prohibition of alcoholic beverages.

I append excerpts from a column that I wrote in 1972 on "Prohibition and Drugs." The major problem then was heroin from Marseilles; today, it is cocaine from Latin America. Today, also, the problem is far more serious than it was 17 years ago: more addicts, more innocent victims; more drug pushers, more law enforcement officials; more money spent to enforce prohibition, more money spent to circumvent prohibition.

Had drugs been decriminalized 17 years ago, "crack" would never have been invented (it was invented because the high cost of illegal drugs made it profitable to provide a cheaper version) and there would today be far fewer addicts. The lives of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of innocent victims would have been saved, and not only in the U.S. The ghettos of our major cities would not be drug-and-crime-infested no-man's lands. Fewer people would be in jails, and fewer jails would have been built.

Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru would not be suffering from narco-terror, and we would not be distorting our foreign policy because of narco-terror. Hell would not, in the words with which Billy Sunday welcomed Prohibition, "be forever for rent," but it would be a lot emptier.

Decriminalizing drugs is even more urgent now than in 1972, but we must recognize that the harm done in the interim cannot be wiped out, certainly not immediately. Postponing decriminalization will only make matters worse, and make the problem appear even more intractable.

Alcohol and tobacco cause many more deaths in users than do drugs. Decriminalization would not prevent us from treating drugs as we now treat alcohol and tobacco: prohibiting sales of drugs to minors, outlawing the advertising of drugs and similar measures. Such measures could be enforced, while outright prohibition cannot be. Moreover, if even a small fraction of the money we now spend on trying to enforce drug prohibition were devoted to treatment and rehabilitation, in an atmosphere of compassion not punishment, the reduction in drug usage and in the harm done to the users could be dramatic.

This plea comes from the bottom of my heart. Every friend of freedom, and I know you are one, must be as revolted as I am by the prospect of turning the United States into an armed camp, by the vision of jails filled with causal drug users and of an army of enforcers empowered to invade the liberty of citizens on slight evidence. A country in which shooting down unidentified planes "on suspicion" can be seriously considered as a drug-war tactic is not the kind of United States that either you or I want to hand on to future generations.