Document Analysis: A Rhetorical Checklist

Every document is an action that takes place in a rhetorical situation. The elements of this situation influence the content, style, and organization of the piece.

Purpose

- What is this document about?
- What is the writer of the document trying to accomplish? Why is he or she writing?
- What kind of *ethos* or image does the writer project? What are some of the elements that create this *ethos*? Is it believable?

Audience

- Who is the primary audience for this document?   What are their characteristics? Is the document well-adapted to this audience?
- Who else might read this document? What are their characteristics? Does the document work for them too?
- What kinds of arguments and evidence (*logos*) does the writer use to persuade the audience? Are the arguments convincing?
- Does the writer provide all of the information that the reader needs to know? Has the writer left anything out on purpose?
- Does the writer try to create an emotional response (*pathos*), or keep the reader's emotions in check?
- What kind of action does the writer want from the reader? Do you think the reader will react in this way?

Form

- What form or genre is this document? Does it meet the reader's expectations for this genre?
- How will readers use the document? Is it well-designed and organized for that use?
- What kind of style does the writer use? Is it formal or informal? Is it simple or complex? Are word choices appropriate for this form and this audience?
- Is the document an appropriate length? Could it be cut?
- Are font choices, subheads, and other design choices effective?
- If images, charts, graphs or videos are part of the document, are they clear and attractive? Do they support the overall purpose?

Stylistic Choices

- Who are the main players in the situation? What words are used to define their roles and the relationships between them? Do these words have negative or positive connotations? Are you comfortable in the role assigned to the reader? What is the reader supposed to think or do?

- How does the writer construct the situation? What words in the text help define the situation? If there is a problem, what words are used to define who is responsible for it? How are causes and consequences represented? (Look at the use of passive voice, how actions are represented in verbs, and how mental actions are represented.)

- What attitudes—outrage, impartiality, fear, concern, amusement, sarcasm, irony, etc.—are represented in the text? What words create this impression?

- What social values—justice, patriotism, love, diligence, morality, citizenship, freedom, etc.—are represented in the text? What words create this impression?

- Do you think that the situation has been accurately represented, or has it been consciously constructed to favor the writer's purpose? What makes you think so? If the situation is not accurately represented, would you characterize it as a little biased, somewhat deceptive, or outright fraud?   What are some other ways the situation might be represented?