**Reading Rhetorically**

Most people associate the term “rhetoric” with its negative connotation: false or superficial ways of speaking, as in “I’m tired of that politician’s rhetoric.” Rhetoric is actually far more complex. For our purposes, we will define **rhetoric** as the use of language and/or visual signs to persuade an audience. In this class, we will complicate this definition by thinking about how rhetoric works differently based on social contexts, and by examining how rhetoric changes based on the language using practices of particular groups, including both the groups that the writer is coming out of and the groups the writer is writing into. As we move further along in the course, we will continually revisit this definition of rhetoric to develop our understanding of the variety of possibilities for the use of rhetoric.

This definition of rhetoric now leads us to a discussion of *reading rhetorically*. Reading rhetorically is about being actively engaged in reading. It is not just about understanding the content of a text. It is about interacting with a text, going beyond just understanding what the text says to thinking about the implications of that text for you and your communities. This can happen through the process of being able to situate the writer, being able to compare the writer’s ideas with your own, being able to argue against what the writer has said, being able to recognize the moves within a piece of writing that the writer makes to pull in an audience or to make the readers understand his / her point of view.

Below are some questions to consider to help you learn how and practice reading rhetorically. To practice, you can use these questions when reading texts for this course to help you situate the writer and the writer’s community:

* What language does the writer use? What kinds of verbs, specialized terminology, or repeated words are used in the text?
* What is the writer’s worldview (values, attitudes, assumptions)? How does the writer talk about his or her subject? What assumptions are being made about attitudes and points of view (by the writer or by who s/he thinks is her audience)?
* Who is the intended audience for this text? How do you know?
* What is the purpose of the piece? How do you know?

Knowing how to read rhetorically is an important habit and ability. The options provided from being able to read rhetorically can also be infused in the elements of your everyday life. These options go from assessing the news you get, to learning how to communicate with your significant other, to working well with your boss and coworkers, to making educated decisions about minor and major purchases, to researching and making choices about your health, to analyzing the speeches and writing of candidates and holders of public offices, and so on.

Finally, learning how to read rhetorically also helps us to write rhetorically, to look more specifically at how a text is constructed so that we can have a range of choices when we tackle our own writing. Reading rhetorically helps us to see the choices that writers have made so that 1) we learn different strategies for approaching our own writing and 2) we come to texts with more knowledge about how to read that particular kind of text.