

A Method for Analysis: Composing to Learn

Here is the basic method for developing an interpretation of a text:

1. Notice and focus:

- List as many interesting, significant, revealing, or strange details about the text as possible. Remember that even small details can be useful as evidence in rhetorical analysis.
- Choose the three details that you think are the most important for understanding the text.
- Explain why these three details struck you as the most interesting, significant, revealing, or strange. Ask how these details contribute to the “message” of the text as a whole, or how the details relate to each other. In this last step, you will be making “interpretive leaps.”

2. Find patterns of repetition and contrast:

- List **repetitions**—details or words that repeat *exactly* and write the number of times you see the repetition for each.
- List **strands**. Strands are groupings of similar details or words. Be able to explain the strand’s logic—what holds it together?
 - For example, polite/courteous/well-behaved. That is a strand of similar adjectives. Similar buildings/shapes/colors in an image could also be a strand.
- List **organizing contrasts** (for example, open/closed, normal/strange, black/white, masculine/feminine). These are also called “binaries.”
 - Binary oppositions are sites of uncertainty, places where there is struggle among different points of view. Finding binaries can help you find what is at stake (for the composer and the audience) in the text.
 - Binaries are often oversimplified for the sake of convincing an audience. The either/or strategy (making a distinction between two things) is a particular rhetorical move. Part of your job in an interpretation is to analyze that binary critically and perhaps try to refine and reformulate it as something more complex than either/or.
- Select and list the **two most significant** repetitions, the **two most significant** strands, and the **two most significant** contrasts.
 - The formulation of primary repetitions, strands, or contrasts can reveal what the text (and the text’s composer) is about and interested in. This exercise often leads to a next step: what the text (and the composer) is worried about or trying to resolve.
- Select **one** repetition, **one** strand, or **one** binary that you take to be the most significant for arriving at ideas about what the text communicates. Explain your choice; this explanation might become a thesis statement.

3. Find anomalies:

- After you have produced your three lists, selected the most important repetition/strand/contrast from each, and written a paragraph explaining your ranking, look for details that don’t seem to fit any pattern. Find anything that stands out or anything you noticed but couldn’t list as a repetition/strand/binary above. Anomalies—while they can be annoying—are important because noticing them often leads to new and better ideas.
- Also look for anything that is *missing*. What does the text leave out or omit, and what are the implications of this omission? Obvious or subtle omissions can defy patterns and expectations.

This method is adapted directly from Writing Analytically by David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen.