

Reading Memes: Rhetorical Analysis of Memes as Multimodal Texts

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Abstract:

As a mode of visual communication, internet memes carry a lot of meaning in a concise digital package.¹ While memes were originally defined by Richard Dawkins as "units of cultural transmission,"² the term internet memes applies to virtual artifacts in a range of media that are circulated and iterated upon by many different people.³ Many meme formats combine images with text in a slapdash or haphazard way.⁴ Mixed with the elements of humor and viral iteration, memes have a unique rhetorical impact that can both persuade and provoke.⁵ As a result, memes are popular tools of social commentary and political discourse and can be used to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and tropes as well as dismantle them.⁶ Many students make, edit, remix, and swap memes over social media and through direct messaging, but they may not always think critically about the messages in, or behind, the memes they create or exchange.⁷ How can we create opportunities for students to practice reading memes more deliberately? Teacher-scholars have begun to address this question by sharing classroom approaches to reading and analyzing memes as visual and/or rhetorical texts.⁸ In this chapter, we describe how a lesson plan on rhetorical analysis that we used in a Making Memes workshop can be adapted as a librarian-led critical reading activity for college students in a range of disciplines and instructional settings.

Keywords: reading | reading (higher education) | individualized reading instruction | academic librarianship | internet memes | memes

Article:

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VOLUME TWO

Reading for Evaluation, Beyond
Scholarly Texts, and in the World

TEACHING CRITICAL READING SKILLS:

Strategies for Academic Librarians

Edited by
Hannah Gascho Rempel
and Rachel Hamelers

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Reading Memes:

Rhetorical Analysis of Memes as Multimodal Texts

Jenny Dale and Maggie Murphy

Introduction

As a mode of visual communication, internet memes carry a lot of meaning in a concise digital package.¹ While memes were originally defined by Richard Dawkins as “units of cultural transmission,”² the term *internet memes* applies to virtual artifacts in a range of media that are circulated and iterated upon by many different people.³ Many meme formats combine images with text in a slapdash or haphazard way.⁴ Mixed with the elements of humor and viral iteration, memes have a unique rhetorical impact that can both persuade and provoke.⁵ As a result, memes are popular tools of social commentary and political discourse and can be used to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and tropes as well as dismantle them.⁶ Many students make, edit, remix, and swap memes over social media and through direct messaging, but they may not always think critically about the messages in, or behind, the memes they create or exchange.⁷ How can we create opportunities for students to practice reading memes more deliberately? Teacher-scholars have begun to address this question by sharing classroom approaches to reading and analyzing memes as visual and/or rhetorical texts.⁸ In this chapter, we describe how a lesson plan on rhetorical analysis that we used in a Making Memes workshop can be adapted as a librarian-led critical reading activity for college students in a range of disciplines and instructional settings.

We are not the first educators to apply rhetorical analysis to memes in the classroom. For example, Elmore and Coleman describe an action research project in which middle school students were asked to critically read political memes as a way to develop their critical media literacy (CML) skills.⁹ The authors wanted students to engage with memes as persuasive and argumentative rhetorical texts and not “just funny or provocative pictures on their Twitter feeds.”¹⁰ Elmore engaged in this research with her own eighth-grade students, developing a scaffolded unit on political rhetoric and rhetorical analysis that culminated in analyzing political memes. The rhetorical analysis of these memes focused on “logos (appeals to logic), pathos (appeals to emotion), ethos (establishing authority), kairos (context)” and other elements related to visual composition as well as “the motives of the meme’s creator(s) and sharer(s).”¹¹ We drew on similar concepts in the analysis segment of our Making Memes workshop. We did not explicitly address kairos in our workshop, though this concept would be a useful addition in any future iterations of the lesson plan.

Critical Reading Connection

Most definitions of traditional reading focus exclusively on comprehension of text or symbols. However, in the context of critical reading practices, Thompson¹² and Elmore and Coleman¹³ explicitly address visual content as an object of analysis. Because memes are, by their nature, multimodal texts that combine written and visual information, reading memes requires the ability to both read and interpret text and images separately and in combination. Elmore and Coleman write that memes “afford students rich opportunities to examine how spoken language and visual elements can be combined and communicated via digital communication to persuade the reader.”¹⁴ Encouraging critical reading of memes can be a challenge as these texts are so frequently encountered in what Thompson refers to as “our daily internet and social media” context, where surface-level engagement is more likely than deep analysis.¹⁵ However, it is the very familiarity of the genre that makes memes excellent candidates for critical reading activities. In their discussion of critical reading for the purposes of academic success, Manarin et al. reference several scholars who address the strange space that undergraduate students have to inhabit when they are asked to read and write as if they are scholars or practitioners in a field. They quote rhetoric and composition scholar Joseph Harris’s argument that one way we can encourage students to see themselves as academics “is to ask them to look closely at how they already go about reading the many various texts they meet from day to day—both in school and outside of it.”¹⁶ “Harris’s focus here,” they write, “is acculturation into academic discourse through the familiar.”¹⁷

Manarin et al. identify four elements of critical reading, regardless of whether the reading is taking place within the context of academic purposes or social engagement: comprehension, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation.¹⁸ These indicators comprise various skills that allow a reader to summarize, understand, make meaning from, and identify assumptions apparent in a text.¹⁹ The Making Memes workshop described in the next section asked participants to demonstrate all of these abilities, with one noteworthy addition:

creation. Our focus was more on critical reading for academic purposes, as we wanted to connect reading memes with the ability to work, understand, and create new knowledge (original memes, in this case) within an academic context. We can draw on the elements of Manarin et al.'s definition of critical reading for academic success: identifying patterns of textual elements, distinguishing between main and subordinate ideas, evaluating credibility, making judgments about how a text is argued, and making relevant inferences about the text.²⁰ All of these elements and the related abilities to analyze and interpret texts are absolutely crucial when engaging with memes, especially in an academic context.

Teaching Strategies

As previously noted, the rhetorical analysis activity we describe in this section was designed to be part of a hands-on Making Memes workshop we offered as part of our Uplifting Memes programming series in fall 2019. As an information literacy coordinator and a visual art and humanities librarian, we have a common interest in visual literacy at the intersection of our professional roles that we rarely get to address in course-based library instruction. This shared interest was a driving factor in our proposal for a series of co-curricular, interdisciplinary workshops that would use memes as a lens through which students would be able to explore a range of visual literacy topics and make connections to their roles as consumers, creators, and disseminators of visual information in academic contexts. We (along with our colleague Brown Biggers, who contributed significant technical expertise to the project) proposed Uplifting Memes for our institution's Innovation and Program Enrichment Grant and were awarded this internal grant to develop the series.

One of the stated goals of our project was to "raise the level of discourse on memes" at our institution, which we planned to do through a series of programs, such as lectures by guest speakers, pop-up meme-making stations in the library and at campus events, and interactive workshops focused on creativity, visual literacy, and information ethics (including the Making Memes workshop described in this section). We planned a juried student art contest and show as the culminating event for the project, but unfortunately the quick switch to remote learning in March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated cancelation of the contest and show as well as several other planned programs. However, we have been able to adapt ideas and instructional content from both our offered and planned sessions into a range of teaching scenarios across the disciplines since the project ended.

Meme Analysis Lesson Plan

PART OF THE WORKSHOP MAKING MEMES: GRAPHIC DESIGN, VISUAL RHETORIC, DIGITAL COMMUNICATION IN NOVEMBER 2019

The Uplifting Memes program was designed with first- and second-year undergraduate students in mind, but this lesson plan is suitable for undergraduate students at all levels and can be adapted for a range of disciplinary applications. The rhetorical analysis lesson and activity outlined here served as the first portion of a Making Memes workshop that

culminated in students using digital creation tools to make new iterations of existing meme formats and to reflect on their own use of rhetorical strategies in doing so. While we offered Making Memes in an instructional lab equipped with desktop computers for this purpose, the analysis activity itself does not strictly require student use of technology. However, if you want to ask students to share examples of their favorite memes with you during Part One or to locate a meme of their choice to analyze in Part Two (or if you will be asking students to create their own memes in addition to analyzing existing ones, as we did following the rhetorical analysis activity), students will need access to mobile devices or computers. The entire lesson plan should take approximately forty minutes to teach, with twenty minutes allotted to Part One and twenty minutes allotted to Part Two.

Part One: Rhetorical Analysis of Memes

Introductory Lesson

The goal of this part of the lesson plan is to introduce and define the key concepts necessary for engaging in hands-on analysis during Part Two. This is best achieved using a slideshow presentation, as you will want to provide students with visual aids for the concepts being introduced. Table 36.1 outlines each separate step, along with a suggested script, some discussion prompts, and ideas for examples of memes to show students. The content of the script might be spoken out loud, added as bulleted text to a slide, or some combination thereof. Table 36.2 shows the definitions we used for the terms referenced on the Analyze Your Meme worksheet (see appendix) in the second part of this lesson plan.

TABLE 36.1
Step-by-step outline for Part One of the lesson plan

Introducing Memes-as-Texts and Rhetorical Concepts		
Step	Script	Action
1. Define memes.	"Shifman (2013) defines memes as 'pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale to a shared social phenomenon' (p. 18)." ²¹	Pose the question: What are some examples of memes you have seen or encountered lately?
2. Give examples of meme formats.	"A meme can be as simple as a catchphrase (like "OK Boomer" ²²) or an activity (rickrolling ²³), but the most common format is an image macro (image with superimposed text or caption)."	Show examples of image macros (see https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/image-macos).
3. Discuss memes as communication devices.	"Digital technology and social networks make it easy to create, adapt, share, and collectively interpret memes as their own form of digital communication."	Show an example of a Twitter thread in which several versions of a meme have been posted as an illustration of adaptation and iteration.

Introducing Memes-as-Texts and Rhetorical Concepts		
Step	Script	Action
4. Discuss how the multimodality of memes contributes to their meaning.	"Most memes integrate both speech-based and image-based modes of communication, and they use the combination of these modes to create meaning."	Show an example of a meme where the visual and textual elements diverge, such as a catchphrase from a television show applied to a news photo. Ask: Do this text and this image taken separately have different meanings than when they are combined?
5. Introduce the idea that memes are texts that can be analyzed.	"This also means that memes act as 'texts' that can be read, and we can interpret and analyze the messages they convey and the feelings they are intended to invoke."	Show a few different examples of memes conveying a range of messages, such as humorous, satirical, political, nostalgic, or existential.
6. Introduce rhetorical appeals and concepts.	"Like many texts, memes are often intended to persuade us to accept a point-of-view or share an interpretation of a situation."	Share slides or a printed handout with the definitions in the table below.

TABLE 36.2

Definitions for key terms on the Analyze Your Meme worksheet, which we adapted from Chapter 4 of Writers' Handbook, 2012 (CC BY-SA 3.0 US license).

Rhetorical Appeals and Concepts	
Term	Definition
Ethos	Appeals to the credibility, reputation, and reliability of the speaker or writer (most closely associated with the voice).
Pathos	Appeals to the emotions and cultural beliefs of the listeners or readers (most closely associated with the audience).
Logos	Appeals to reason, logic, and facts in the argument (most closely associated with the message).
Tone	The connection established between the voice [or ethos] and the audience [or pathos].
Attitude	The orientation of the voice toward the message it wants to convey.
Reception	The manner in which the audience receives the message conveyed.

Part Two: Rhetorical Analysis of Memes Activity

In this section of the lesson plan, students will be guided through a meme analysis activity using the terms for rhetorical appeals and concepts introduced in Step 6 of the Part One outline. You will need to select a few memes for students to choose from for Step 9 of the outline in table 36.3 (two to four memes should suffice). When we offered the workshop, we asked students to pick between a meme with a relatable message about everyday life and a meme that offered political commentary; both of these options utilized

commonplace meme formats with entries in the online meme encyclopedia, *Know Your Meme*, <https://knowyourmeme.com>. Conversely, for this step, you might ask students to locate a meme to analyze instead of providing pre-selected options.

TABLE 36.3
Step-by-step outline for Part Two of the lesson plan.

Analysis Activity		
Step	Script	Action
7. Introduce Analyze Your Meme worksheet.	“So now that we have discussed memes as texts that can be ‘read’ or analyzed, let’s put these ideas into practice with an exercise. We will be using this Analyze Your Meme worksheet.”	Distribute blank copies of the Analyze Your Meme worksheet (see appendix).
8. Analyze a meme together as a group.	“Before you get started with your own analysis, let’s work through an example together. I am going to show you a meme and give you a few moments to think about it. Then, we will fill out the worksheet together on my screen.”	Show students an example of a meme to discuss as a group, such as the sample in figure 36.1. Then, go through each concept on the worksheet and solicit suggestions from students, synthesizing or rephrasing their responses as necessary. As you do this, you can make live edits to a blank worksheet on your screen using your slideshow platform or an image-editing application so that students may see an example of a completed worksheet (see figure 36.2).
9. Invite students to analyze a meme on their own.	“Now it’s time for you to try analyzing a meme on your own. We have selected a few memes for you to pick from. Take about five minutes to ‘read’ the meme you’ve chosen and fill out the worksheet, then we will come back together and discuss what you came up with.”	Show students the memes you selected for this activity, displaying them side-by-side so that students may briefly compare them before choosing one to focus on.
10. Ask students to share their work.	“Let’s go around the room and share our observations and interpretations of these memes.”	Poll students on how many workshop participants selected each of your sample memes; depending on these numbers, you may ask each student to read one or two responses to specific elements on their worksheet or ask for volunteers to share their entire analysis. Ask students to reflect in pairs: Did you find this activity to be easy, difficult, or somewhere in between? Why?

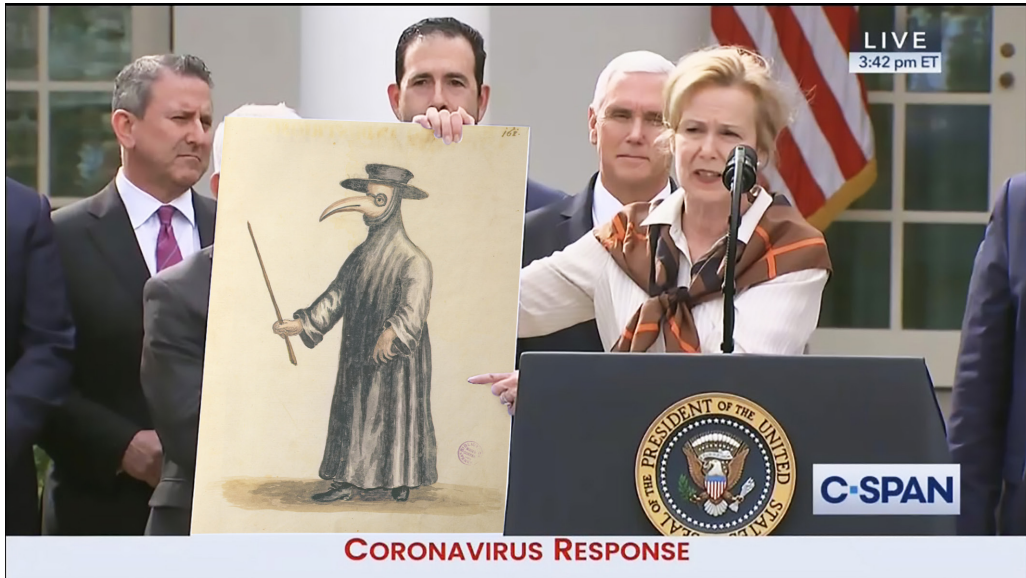


Figure 36.1

This sample meme combines a public-domain illustration of a 17th-century plague doctor with a still from an open-access C-SPAN recording of a White House press conference about its coronavirus pandemic response in March 2020.

Analyze Your Meme

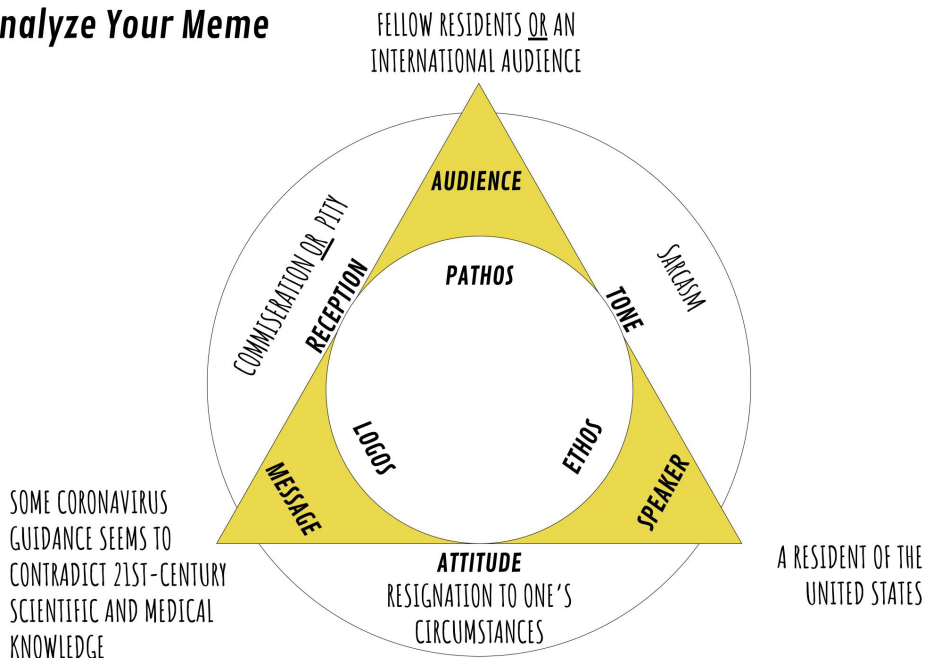


Figure 36.2

An example of a completed Analyze Your Meme worksheet using the meme from figure 36.1 as the object of analysis.

Discussion

By framing memes as multimodal works that can be read and analyzed as a traditional text would be, this activity asks students to consider the power of memes in digital communication. While students most often encounter memes in informal online spaces, by bringing memes into the classroom, we are engaging in the act of “acculturat[ing students] into academic discourse through the familiar” that Manarin et al. reference when discussing Joseph Harris’s work.²⁴

Good Practices and Recommendations

With this or any other workshop that focuses on critically reading memes, we recommend being intentional about selecting relevant memes for the instructional context. We knew that we were likely to attract students from our College Writing program because of our strong relationship with that program (and the willingness of College Writing instructors to offer extra credit opportunities for workshop attendance), so we expected mostly first- and second-year undergraduates from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds. With that in mind, we were careful to choose recent and timely memes with broad appeal and clear messaging. Course-integrated workshops would offer opportunities to choose memes tailored to curricular content and themes. While memes abound on social media platforms and Google Images, the curated database of memes available at *Know Your Meme* is an excellent resource to find new memes as well as various iterations of popular, well-known memes.

Because the idea of reading memes in an academic context may be new to students, we recommend pre-identifying at least one recent viral meme to use as an example, along with some prepared talking points to generate conversation during the analysis activity. In our workshop, we found that asking students to also share their own favorite memes for us to use as examples increased their engagement and attention. Integrating memes that students recommended themselves during the session also allowed us to build our own digital binder full of memes to draw on and use in future workshops.

The lesson plan described above can be used as a standalone meme analysis activity or used in combination with an activity focused on making basic memes. For example, we ended the workshop by asking students to make their own basic image-macro memes using Google Drawings or Adobe Photoshop that they could then analyze using the same strategies we covered on the Analyze Your Meme worksheet. This segment could also be extended to give students more time to create more complex memes, applying what they learned by critically reading memes to think through their own use of rhetorical appeals as well as how their memes might be interpreted by different audiences. Students could then swap memes and walk through the rhetorical analysis process with a peer in order to learn if the meaning they wanted to communicate was “read” by their partners.

Reflection on Critical Reading

We originally designed and taught this workshop before being introduced to critical reading as a concept. However, there are clear connections between critical reading and the

rhretorical analysis lesson plan we developed for our Making Memes workshop. As our lesson plan and activity illustrate, our workshop was designed to help students discuss key rhetorical concepts introduced to them through our College Writing program and to be able to apply those concepts in a different context, with a different kind of text. Though we did not yet have the language to name this work “critical reading” when we planned the above activity, our workshop engaged students with all four elements of critical reading as described by Manarin et al.: comprehension, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation.

As we have become more familiar with critical reading, we have brainstormed ways to integrate this framework more intentionally into future versions of our Making Memes workshop by adjusting our existing lesson plan to give specific critical reading practices greater visibility. For example, we could draw on some of the more evaluative elements of critical reading for academic purposes by asking students to explicitly evaluate the credibility of memes and their makers and to make “judgments about how [the] text is argued.”²⁵ Another opportunity within the context of academically situated critical reading would be to connect this workshop to a specific course, which would allow for more extended engagement with reading memes related to course content or broader disciplinary discourse, possibly using Elmore and Coleman’s scaffolded approach as a model. We could also ask students to use critical reading strategies to compare the way arguments are made in memes and how they are made in other multimodal genres encountered in their fields, such as advertisements, infographics, or political cartoons, as well as make inferences about possible reasons for these differences. Each of these ideas presents a different way to encourage students to practice reading memes

In addition, while we have focused on critical reading as it connects to academic success in this chapter, there are significant opportunities to reframe our meme workshop in the context of critical reading for social engagement and social change. Manarin et al. write that critical reading in this context “is built on foundations of neo-Marxist constructivism, where knowledge is always contested and ideological; reality is constructed through interpretation; meaning is continually created and recreated in the text and in the world.”²⁶ Memes offer rich opportunities to engage with ideas that frame knowledge as contested, ideological, and constructed, particularly due to their iterative nature and their frequent use for political commentary and protest. Many of our students are interested and engaged in social justice work, and a workshop that combines an accessible visual genre with a focus on reading to understand, empathize, and create change has the potential to be very popular. For instance, such a workshop could focus on case studies like the #Jeff-CoSchoolBoardHistory case described by Foust and Weathers²⁷ as an example of the role memes can play in social movements, or could draw on Paul Mihailidis’s suite of digital tools, *Emerging Citizens*, <https://emergingcitizens.org>, and his research on the potential of memes for civic engagement among young people.²⁸

Conclusion

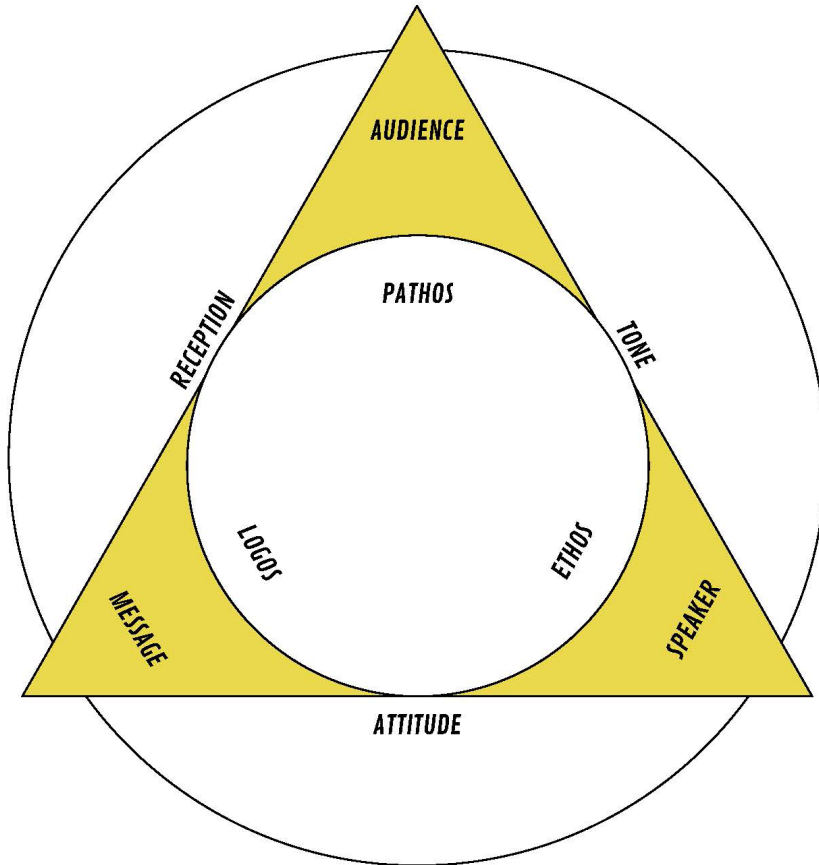
Memes as a genre are familiar, comfortable, and accessible for students. This familiarity, paired with the multimodal nature of memes, makes them excellent sites for visual

analysis. The Analyze Your Meme activity described in this chapter provides an example of an activity that asks students to critically read memes, drawing on their abilities of comprehension, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. While our activity deployed critical reading specifically within the domain of rhetoric, we also see significant potential for this meme analysis activity to be adapted to a wide range of curricular and co-curricular contexts, as a way to help students develop their visual and information literacy skills and to consider applications of those skills within and beyond the academic setting. Ultimately, the very nature of memes as easily iterated and even more easily shared makes grappling with this medium imperative for students to be able to develop practices and dispositions for engaging in creative and ethical information creation and communication in our increasingly digital culture. We hope that critical reading serves as an effective framework for instructors across the disciplines to be able to bring memes into the classroom alongside more traditional texts.

APPENDIX

A blank Analyze Your Meme worksheet.

Analyze Your Meme



Notes

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