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History and Rhetoric

RHETORIC: The art of discourse; skill in the use of language.

DISCOURSE: Continuous expression or exchange of ideas; formal and connected expression of thought.

Rhetoric is the art of argument. How does rhetoric operate in history papers? Here are some principles:

- C Good historical writing is always argumentative. Many historical narratives of Civil War battles published in popular magazines often do little more than relate the facts of a given action. As fascinating as such narratives may be, they neglect the basic enterprise of scholarship, for they fail to participate in discussion and debate. Instead, they merely relate (albeit perhaps with interest and verve) what they see to be a given set of facts.
- C Good historical writing is always interpretive. While historians strive to approach their subjects with objectivity, they do not strive to be without concern for a topic. The principles of truth-finding demand that we not allow our concerns to influence the conclusions we derive from our investigations. But that does not forbid us from having concerns in the first place. Such concerns provide the energy for scholarly investigation, and mean that *any* scholarship, no matter how “objective” it purports to be, will reflect a set of underlying concerns. Many scholars thus believe that there is no such thing as “Just the facts, ma’am.”
- C Good historical writing is always about creating something new. There is little point in re-hashing the work of other scholars. Historians constantly seek to add to the body of knowledge, even if in only some small way. Their enterprise is about asking questions which demand answers which have not been offered before. Sometimes they ask old questions and find new answers, or they may ask questions which never have been asked.
- C Good historical writing almost always responds to debates in the field. Sometimes, this happens explicitly, as when a historian clearly challenges the interpretations of other historians. At other times, a historian’s dialogue with others in the field is far less evident. In every case, though, good history is written with historical debates in mind.

Understanding the ways historians construct their arguments is essential to writing good history papers. Students often find it difficult to determine what their papers are really about, not because they don’t know what their subject is, but because they don’t know what their argument is trying to *do*. Draw examples from other scholars: when reading secondary sources, constantly ask yourself, what does this article or chapter *do* with respect to the existing scholarship on this topic?

Here are some rhetorical strategies for approaching *your* project. They are common to many historical arguments. All address the question of what your paper will *do*. Once you know what you want your paper to *do* (with respect to the existing scholarship), you will have a much clearer sense of what *you* have to do; you will know how you will conduct your research and write up the results.

- C No one has even begun to address this issue, and I will begin the process by developing the first interpretation of it.
- C There are gaps or deficiencies in the scholarship on this topic, and I will (help) close them.
- C There is a “traditional,” popular, or commonplace interpretation of this issue that I wish to debunk; I will offer a more accurate interpretation in its place.
- C The existing interpretation of this topic is far too simple. I will add complexity to it by examining details.
- C There is a debate on this topic, and my work will demonstrate that one side is right and the other wrong.
- C There is a debate on this topic, and my work will demonstrate that the debate must be recast, because those participating in it are asking the wrong questions, or viewing the issue in an inappropriate way.
- C Scholars have set forth a general historical argument or principle about this topic. I will use a “case study” approach (a detailed study of one “case”) to see what it says about the general principle. My results may reinforce the general principle, negate it entirely, or require its modification.
- C Scholars have set forth a broad interpretation of a large and complex topic. I will use a “test case” approach (a detailed study of one portion of the larger argument) to see what it says about the broad interpretation. My results may reinforce the broad interpretation, negate it entirely, or require its modification.

Note: These are general categories, and the lines between them often are fuzzy. Most often, historical arguments combine two or more of these elements. Finally, this list is limited. What other rhetorical approaches are possible?