

The basic questions to ask when reading rhetorical theory  
OR  
How to prepare an abstract of a text

1. What is this text? Minimally, start your abstract with the author's name and the title and date of the text. To prepare yourself for reading, you may also want to find out a bit more about the text, say by looking at the introductions in Bizzell & Herzberg, or doing a quick web search.
2. What is the author's main point(s) about rhetoric? In 50 words or less, state the one or two things that you think the author wants you to believe, remember, and act on. If the author makes his point explicit, quote him; if not, you'll have to formulate the main point yourself.
3. What is the author's explicit or implicit definition of rhetoric? Does he favor "big rhetoric" (e.g., including many sorts of discourse) or "small rhetoric" (e.g., limited just to political speeches)? What does he think is the goal of rhetoric—what does it accomplish? Understanding the author's basic assumptions about rhetoric will help you understand what she's getting at.
4. Why is the author's main point important or interesting? This is often the hardest question to answer, particularly for beginning theorists; you might actually save it for last. What question or issue was the author trying to address? What problem was he trying to solve? No text stands alone; the author is having a conversation—who is he arguing with? Try to give a brief sketch of the context of the text, that makes the text meaningful and significant.
5. What are the main arguments of the text? What reasons does the author give to persuade you of her main point? Sometimes, these reasons will be pretty clearly stated, and you can just summarize them one by one, as if you were making an outline of the text. At other times, though, the author's reasoning may be scattered and hidden. Then it's up to you to reconstruct what she was trying to say, putting it perhaps in a different order than she did. One way or the other, aim for a good level of detail; this is usually the longest section of the abstract. Feel free to quote the author, but don't intrude your own thoughts—you can do that later.
6. Does the way the text is written support or undermine the theory the author is arguing for? Remember, most of the authors that we're reading are sophisticated rhetoricians. They may be trying to use quite cunning means of persuasion, or quite elegant styles. How does the *way* the author is speaking correspond with *what* he is saying? Does the way that he persuades contradict his theory of persuasion? Or does it reinforce it?—is the author's rhetoric a good example of the author's theory?
7. Finally—What do you think about all this? Don't respond with just a gut reaction (although that is a good place to start). Say *why*. What's right or wrong with the author's theory or arguments? Can you think of a real-life example of rhetoric that supports or contradicts the author's theory? How does this author compare with others that you've read? Use this section of the abstract to begin to develop your *own* theory of rhetoric—make notes toward the final exam and final project.