

Description of Objective

This activity aims to help students think critically about how objects acts as methods for communication, have a rhetorical purposes, and generate meaning within particular cultural contexts. This activity also helps students start recognizing how the medium of a message determines many of its affordances and constraints.

Details on How Students Engage with Activity

Total time: I have used this activity in a 75-minute class. It usually takes about 50-60 minutes, but depending on the level of detail, this can be adapted for any length class.

Part I: The Theory of Reading Objects

We refresh reading rhetorically, I show them a picture of a plain, plastic water bottle. I ask them if THIS object can be read rhetorically. This one is a bit harder, so we work through it with some questions:

- How is this an object of communication?
- What does it communicate?
- What is its purpose? What audience(s) is this oriented toward? And in what context(s)?
- (To help them think further about the context and purposes of a plastic bottle) Where did the water bottle (plastic AND water) come from? How might it arrive in the store? And where will it go when it is no longer needed?

Time permitted, I let them do a bit of research on their phones or laptops just to get a sense for the sheer complexity of these answers. If not, you do not have time to do this, might briefly provide an example of the kind of complex research they would find.

Part II: Practice Reading

Bring out a bag of pre-selected items (anything works—I choose books in languages other than English, random articles of clothing, vases and jars, parts of small machines, and anything else that seems interesting to hold or think about). Before breaking them up, I explain the assignment.

In groups (I am partial to 3-4) students select one person from each group to come up and choose an object for their group to analyze. In their groups, students read the objects they have selected rhetorically by answering the following questions. Depending on the engagement arrangement of the class, this can be done in both written and/or verbal form:

- Purpose: What is/are this object for? Or what is it trying to do? And how do you know?
- Audience: Who is this object for? Or, who is this object trying to reach? And how do you know?
- Context: In what context(s) might you find this object? In what context(s) is it relevant or useful?
- Bonus question: List all the materials that make up your object? Where do these materials come from? (Beginning with the raw materials and as building blocks.)

Note: I always encourage students to research what they don't know and note the source for discussion.

Post-Activity Notes & Reflection

This activity puts unexpected items into student's hands and asks them to think about objects as a form of rhetoric and communication. They learn how to identify aesthetic features and base materials as parts of the rhetorical situation. This provides a different way of reading rhetorical messages (as opposed to words being the meaning maker). My students often reflect that in their writing, this activity helped them recognize rhetoric as something they can construct and manipulate. They also reflect that that this activity showed

them that humans can read anything (whether its digital or material content) and that when we are “reading” things we are engaging with its rhetorical message.