

ANALYZING ARGUMENTS

# CRITICAL READING



To the right is a short argumentative essay about zero-tolerance policies in schools.

Read it through once, trying to ignore the questions we've put next to it. Come to your own understanding of the purpose, audience, and context for this text.

Then use the questions from the preceding pages that we've attached to the text to help you shape a critical reading of it.

### The beginning: Pathos and an example as evidence

The first sentences give an example and encourage readers to sympathize with for the student before knowing anything else about him. Why might Gladwell start with an introduction dependent on pathos?

### Naming

Why might Gladwell tell us the name of the tutor but not the student?

### Evidence: A second example

What attitude does Gladwell want readers to have toward Bomar? Toward students now? How has Gladwell prepared his readers to have those attitudes?

## ANNOTATING WHAT YOU READ

The comments we've added to this article suggest how you can mark up readings on your own, to keep track of your own questions and comments. By making such annotations, you'll see patterns in what you read, patterns that can help you determine purpose and other strategies. By making such annotations, you'll also see patterns in your responses—which will help you develop a focused analysis.

### Pathos: How readers are addressed

Why do you think Gladwell addresses readers directly here? How might a reader respond to these questions?

"No Mercy"  
Malcolm Gladwell

→ In 1925, a young American physicist was doing graduate work at Cambridge University, in England. He was depressed. He was fighting with his mother and had just broken up with his girlfriend. His strength was in theoretical physics, but he was being forced to sit in a laboratory making thin films of beryllium. In the fall of that year, he dosed an apple with noxious chemicals from the lab and put it on the desk of his tutor, Patrick Blackett. Blackett, luckily, didn't eat the apple. But school officials found out what had happened, and arrived at a punishment: the student was to be put on probation and ordered to go to London for regular sessions with a psychiatrist.

→ *Probation?* These days, we routinely suspend or expel high-school students for doing infinitely less harmful things, like fighting or drinking or taking drugs—that is, for doing the kinds of things that teenagers do. This past summer, Rhett Bomar, the starting quarterback for the University of Oklahoma Sooners, was cut from the team when he was found to have been "overpaid" (receiving wages for more hours than he worked, with the apparent complicity of his boss) at his car dealership. Even in Oklahoma, people seemed to think that kicking someone off a football team for having cut a few corners on his job made perfect sense. This is the age of zero tolerance. Rules are rules. Students have to be held accountable for their actions. Institutions must signal their expectations firmly and unambiguously: every school principal and every college president, these days, reads from exactly the same script. What, then, of a student who gives his teacher a poisoned apple? Surely he ought to be expelled from school and sent before a judge.

→ Suppose you cared about the student, though, and had some idea of his situation and his potential. Would you feel the same way? You might. Trying to poison your tutor is no small infraction. Then again, you might decide, as the dons at Cambridge clearly did, that what had happened called for a measure of leniency. They knew that the student had never done anything like this before, and that he wasn't well. And they knew that to file charges would almost

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**Evidence: Examples**

How do we know anyone is *incorrigible* or a *decent kid*? Gladwell seems to believe that these are obvious characteristics of people, but who gets to make these decisions, and based on what evidence?

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**Evidence: Research**

How might readers respond to this move from the made-up stories of Jimmy and Bobby to the *Tennessee study*? Is there enough evidence given in this essay for us to check on the Tennessee study ourselves, to see if we agree with how it was conducted or with Gladwell's characterization of it?

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**Pathos: How readers are addressed**

Gladwell now refers to himself and the audience together as *we*. By assuming we are all in agreement with what he writes, what might he be trying to achieve?

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**Evidence: Examples**

Because of the temporal context surrounding the publication of this essay, Gladwell assumes that his readers know that he is referring in this parenthetical remark to events in Iraq and at Guantanamo; he is also assuming that his readers share his interpretation of the events. Why would he insert such a serious example in parentheses here, when all his preceding examples have involved students?

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**Evidence: Analogy**

Gladwell takes someone else's analogy and turns it around. This analogy involves an event that many take extremely seriously and would not want to see used in a lighthearted way. Do you think Gladwell's overall purpose so far justifies his use of this analogy? What sort of reader, holding what sort of beliefs, would be likely to accept this analogy and find it appropriate? (And why might Gladwell use such a serious analogy here?)

certainly ruin his career. Cambridge wasn't sure that the benefits of enforcing the law, in this case, were greater than the benefits of allowing the offender an unimpeded future.

Schools, historically, have been home to this kind of discretionary justice. You let the principal or the teacher decide what to do about cheating because you know that every case of cheating is different—and, more to the point, that every cheater is different. Jimmy is incorrigible, and needs the shock of expulsion. But Bobby just needs a talking to, because he's a decent kid, and Mary and Jane cheated because the teacher foolishly stepped out of the classroom in the middle of the test and the temptation was just too much. A Tennessee study found that after zero-tolerance programs were adopted by the state's public schools, the frequency of targeted offences soared: the firm and unambiguous punishments weren't deterring bad behavior at all. Is that really a surprise? If you're a teenager, the announcement that an act will be sternly punished doesn't always sink in, and it isn't always obvious when you're doing the thing you aren't supposed to be doing. Why? Because you're a teenager.

Somewhere along the way—perhaps in response to Columbine—we forgot the value of discretion in disciplining the young. “Ultimately, they have to make the right decisions,” the Oklahoma football coach, Bob Stoops, said of his players, after jettisoning his quarterback. “When they do not, the consequences are serious.” Open and shut: he sounded as if he were talking about a senior executive of Enron, rather than a college sophomore whose primary obligation to Oklahoma was to throw a football in the direction of young men in helmets. You might think that the University of Oklahoma was so touchy about its quarterback being “overpaid” it ought to have kept closer track of his work habits with an on-campus job. But making a fetish of personal accountability conveniently removes the need for institutional accountability. (We court-marshal the grunts who abuse prisoners, not the commanding officers who let the abuse happen.) To acknowledge that the causes of our actions are complex and muddy seems permissive, and permissiveness is the hallmark of an ideology now firmly in disgrace. That conservative patron saint Whittaker Chambers once defined liberalism as Christ without the Crucifixion. But

**The end**

Why might Gladwell have waited until the end of his essay to mention the name of the student whose actions he described back at the very beginning of the essay? (In case you didn't know, Robert Oppenheimer was one of the people responsible for the atom bomb.)

**Context and ethos**

What does this essay's being published in the *New Yorker* tell you about Malcolm Gladwell and how others think of his writing? If you know nothing about this magazine, what might that tell you about how Gladwell was viewing his audience while he was writing?

punishment without the possibility of redemption is even worse: it is the Crucifixion without Christ.

As for the student whose career Cambridge saved? He left at the end of the academic year and went to study at the University of Göttingen, where he made important contributions to quantum theory. Later, after a brilliant academic career, he was entrusted with leading one of the most critical and morally charged projects in the history of science. His name was Robert Oppenheimer.

→ *New Yorker*, September 4, 2006, pp. 37–38.

Below is one possible way of analyzing Gladwell's claim, reason, warrant, and evidence in the above essay. By separating these elements, you can have a better sense of whether you agree with these elements, whether you think they really do fit together logically, and whether you think the evidence works.

**CLAIM:** We should apply discretion rather than *zero-tolerance* policies when responding to the bad behavior of youth.

**REASON:** *Zero-tolerance* policies potentially prevent good people from developing to their full productive potential.

**WARRANT:** Discretion in response to the bad behavior of youth will help good people develop to their full productive potential.

**EVIDENCE: Facts:** The people who apply zero tolerance apply the policy outside their rightful realm, as the University of Oklahoma case shows. **Shared values:** Zero tolerance does not take into account the differences in people, as the Bobby and Jimmy examples show. Zero tolerance does not take into account the moral development of youth. Zero tolerance removes the need for institutional responsibility. **Appealing to readers' experiences:** Readers are likely to agree, based on their own experiences, that Robert Oppenheimer would perhaps not have gone on to do his important work if zero tolerance had been in use in 1925.

#### ANALYZING ARGUMENTS

# A SAMPLE RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

On the opposite page, we show a written rhetorical analysis—a critical analysis—of Malcolm Gladwell’s article “No Mercy,” which we examined on the previous pages. You should be able to see how this essay grows out of the work of responding to the questions asked of the essay in the previous pages—as well as how this essay cuts to the heart of Gladwell’s argument by questioning his warrant.

This rhetorical analysis is one example of how you can write such an analysis.

## The beginning: Ethos

This writer gives a quick summary of the Gladwell article, to show that she has done the work of understanding the article. This builds her ethos positively, so her questioning of the article will thus be more persuasive to her readers.

## The beginning

Now this writer helps her readers have a sense of what is to come by summarizing—quickly—her main concern about the Gladwell article; she will give evidence for this concern in the paragraphs to follow.

## Analyzing ethos

The writer analyzes Gladwell’s ethos: He is “confident...but not bullying” and wants to inspire others to think critically.

## Logos: Evidence

Here the writer uses direct quotations from the Gladwell article to show that she has read carefully and is responding to specific Gladwell arguments.

➔ See pages 316–321 for help with including direct quotations in your writing.

## Ethos and pathos: The writer asks questions

After showing her readers the specific parts of Gladwell’s writing that concern her, this writer can then raise the questions that motivate her concern.

How would her ethos be different if she had instead phrased these questions as statements? How does asking these questions engage readers (a pathos strategy)?

## “No Justice, No Mercy? Responding to Malcolm Gladwell”

In his essay “No Mercy,” published in the September 4, 2006, issue of the *New Yorker*, Malcolm Gladwell argues implicitly that current “zero-tolerance” policies hurt people more than we realize. For example, Gladwell tells about the brilliant physicist Robert Oppenheimer, who under today’s policies probably would have been expelled from college and denied his important career because of dangerous actions he took as a graduate student. With this example Gladwell suggests that current students who are expelled for lesser offenses are losing future careers in which they might contribute to society. While there is much in Gladwell’s argument with which I agree, his examples raise for me the question of who is to judge others, and how.

I appreciate the tone of Gladwell’s writing. He is a confident writer, but not bullying. There is nothing in his writing to suggest that he thinks anyone who disagrees is somehow stupid or unthoughtful. Instead, Gladwell’s writing seems more of a provocation, asking us to think on these matters because they have consequences. I appreciate being drawn into this issue by the range of examples and ideas Gladwell brings into his writing—but those examples lead me to my concerns.

As a possibility for how we might treat the poorly considered actions of the young, Gladwell uses the notion of “discretion,” which he describes as being based in an awareness that “every cheater is different” (119). Therefore, Gladwell argues, we need to approach each case with an awareness of who has done the action, and why, in order to decide consequences: “Jimmy is incorrigible, and needs the shock of expulsion,” Gladwell writes, but “Bobby just needs a talking to, because he’s a decent kid” (119). But how does anyone know these things? What would someone have to do to get to know Jimmy or Bobby well enough to make these decisions with any certainty? And what sort of person would we want to make such decisions that have so much effect on the lives of others? To live together using the discretion that Gladwell asks us to have, we would need to find people who have the time and sensitivity to look carefully into the lives of others, and who have considerable training in understanding the patterns of someone’s life so as to make valid decisions.

### **Ethos: Adding authority by using other sources**

After some online searching, this writer found a published report that helps demonstrate that her worry is concrete and real. This source ought to have authority with readers because it is published by a government source—and also because the writer describes the detailed research on which the report is based.

### **Ethos: Adding authority by quoting the words of others**

This writer could have summarized the findings of the report she is citing, but by quoting from it she is able to let the report speak for itself, which tends to be more persuasive to readers.

### **Concluding**

After having given her own evidence in the preceding paragraphs, the writer now summarizes her position so that her readers can leave her writing with a clear idea of her argument. (→ See pages 292–293 on writing conclusions.)

Notice, too, how she shapes her words here: She neither dismisses Gladwell nor insists that she knows it all. How does this shape her ethos? What sort of emotional room does this leave for readers to respond?

### **Citing sources**

→ See Part 8 (pages 307–462) for help with citing sources.

### **THIS WRITER'S USE OF LOGOS...**

To the right is one possible analysis of this writer's use of a claim, a reason, a warrant, and evidence. If you think that this writer has written a persuasive short essay, consider the following:

- 1 In what order are the claim, reason, and evidence presented in the writing? Why might they be presented in that order?
- 2 Notice that many other strategies weave into the writing, in support of both the logic of the claim, reason, and evidence, but also to persuade readers to have a sympathetic lean toward the writer's position: Logos matters tremendously, but it cannot stand alone.

**EVIDENCE:** This writer appeals to the reader's own experiences by asking questions about how we make decisions. The writer also uses the expert testimony of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and facts supported by that testimony.

**WARFRANT:** Young people deserve fair and equal treatment.

**REASON:** Discretion can be biased.

**CLAIM:** Discretion is not enough for making decisions about the lives of young people.

Works Cited  
Gladwell, Malcolm. "No Mercy." *New Yorker* (September 4, 2006): 37-38.  
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. "Minorities and the Juvenile Justice System: Research Summary." Washington, DC: United States Department of Justice, 1995.

I may sound as though I disagree with Gladwell. I do not. I think zero-tolerance policies in high schools harm the futures of people who are still too young to make certain decisions. But until an argument addresses how discretion can be applied knowledgeably and justly, without bias, I will sit uneasily with my beliefs.

how do we keep it fair?  
discretion as the basis for responding to youth behavior, as Gladwell argues, from people who are supposed to be professionals in deciding whether a young person committed an offense and how it should be treated. Other kinds of bias—based on class or gender, for example—also seem possible. If we do want 1995, what the report shows is that racial bias can enter the system—even whether or not the juvenile justice system is the same now as it was in State and local juvenile justice systems are not racially neutral" (7).

Delinquency Prevention published a report in 1995 in which the Office analyzed the available literature on the treatment of minority youth in the juvenile justice system; after analyzing 250 published articles, with 47 being particularly relevant, the report argues that "processing decisions in many State and local juvenile justice systems are not racially neutral" (7).

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## ANALYZING ARGUMENTS

# QUESTIONS TO GUIDE CRITICAL LOOKING

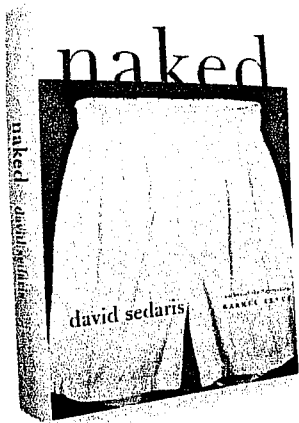
In the previous pages, we have been focusing primarily on alphabetic texts—but questioning photographs, graphic novels, advertisements, films and videos, and similar texts is equally important.

In our earlier discussions of how to understand what some book covers are doing rhetorically (→ see pages 90–97), we analyzed the covers in terms of the rhetorical choices made by their designers. You can analyze any visual text that way—and then can ask **the same questions on pages 114–115** to help you consider whether you think the text has been designed ethically.

Because visual texts often function differently in society than print texts, you can also ask questions like the following.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT AUDIENCE

- Who can see this text? How does the placement of the text (in a museum, on the Internet, in a magazine) shape who can see it? Who won't be able to see it?
- What knowledge is required for an audience to understand the text? Does a viewer have to know something about the history of art, about consumer culture, or about celebrities?



→ The analysis of the book cover on pages 98–99 is one example of critical looking; another example is on pages 128–129.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT PURPOSE

- Is the primary purpose of the piece to encourage people to buy or to enjoy? Keep in mind that in either case, you need to say more: If the purpose were simply to sell or to delight for all advertisements or cartoons (for example), then there would be no variety among these texts because they could all achieve their purposes in the same way. If the primary purpose is to encourage people to buy, then there will be secondary purposes such as making people feel they lack something, or that they too can have endless fun, or....
- Why might the text's composers have used a visual text instead of an alphabetic text to achieve their purposes?

### QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT

- Are you seeing the text in the context for which it was designed? Where was it designed to be seen?
- How would the text be different if you saw it someplace else? If you are analyzing a painting in a museum, how would it be different in your bedroom? If you are analyzing a comic book, how would the pages be different if you saw them in a formal newspaper like the *New York Times*?
- How would seeing this text change if the number of people around you changed?

### QUESTIONS ABOUT ETHOS

- Was this text made by one person or by many? Is it attributed to an organization?
- What knowledge and abilities did the maker(s) of this text need in order to design or produce the text?

### QUESTIONS ABOUT PATHOS

- Would you describe this text as simple or complex? Is it cheery or morbid? Active or calm? What features of the text encourage these responses?
- Does this text use pathos as its primary appeal to your attention?
- Where does this piece require you to stand or sit to see it well? Do you need to be close or far away?
- Do you feel that this piece is inviting you to come closer or do you feel as though it is yelling at you to move away? Why?
- How would this piece be different if the colors were different?

### QUESTIONS ABOUT LOGOS

- What is made visible in this text? On what people, objects, or processes does this text ask you to focus your eyes?
- What arguments are made by the text?
- What are the parts of this text? Name every element you can visually differentiate.
- What elements of this text do you see first? Which second, which third? Why?

## A SAMPLE ANALYSIS OF A VISUAL TEXT

The poster to the right was produced by the Mayor's Office of the City of New York as part of a campaign against domestic violence.

### Pathos

This text is simple, composed of one photograph of a woman and a few lines of text. If we were looking at the original poster, the woman would seem almost life-size; as viewers, we are situated as though we were standing close to her, right behind her, as though we could touch her. What emotional relationship might this physical closeness encourage viewers to have with the woman and so the poster?

### Pathos

The woman's body is bruised, and she is wearing a hospital gown. How might a viewer's attitude toward the woman and so toward the poster be different if she were wearing a low-cut dress instead?

### Logos: Evidence

The poster gives one fact. What evidence is offered in its support? Whose authority is offered in support? Do we know if the fact refers just to high school students in New York City or to those in the entire United States? (Does that matter?) Why might the makers of this poster have chosen to present this fact written on this woman's bruised back instead of on a poster containing only words?

### Audience

Who would be interested in this fact about high school students? Notice that the poster's composers have chosen to call attention to "high school students" and not "high school girls." Why might they have made this word choice?

### Context

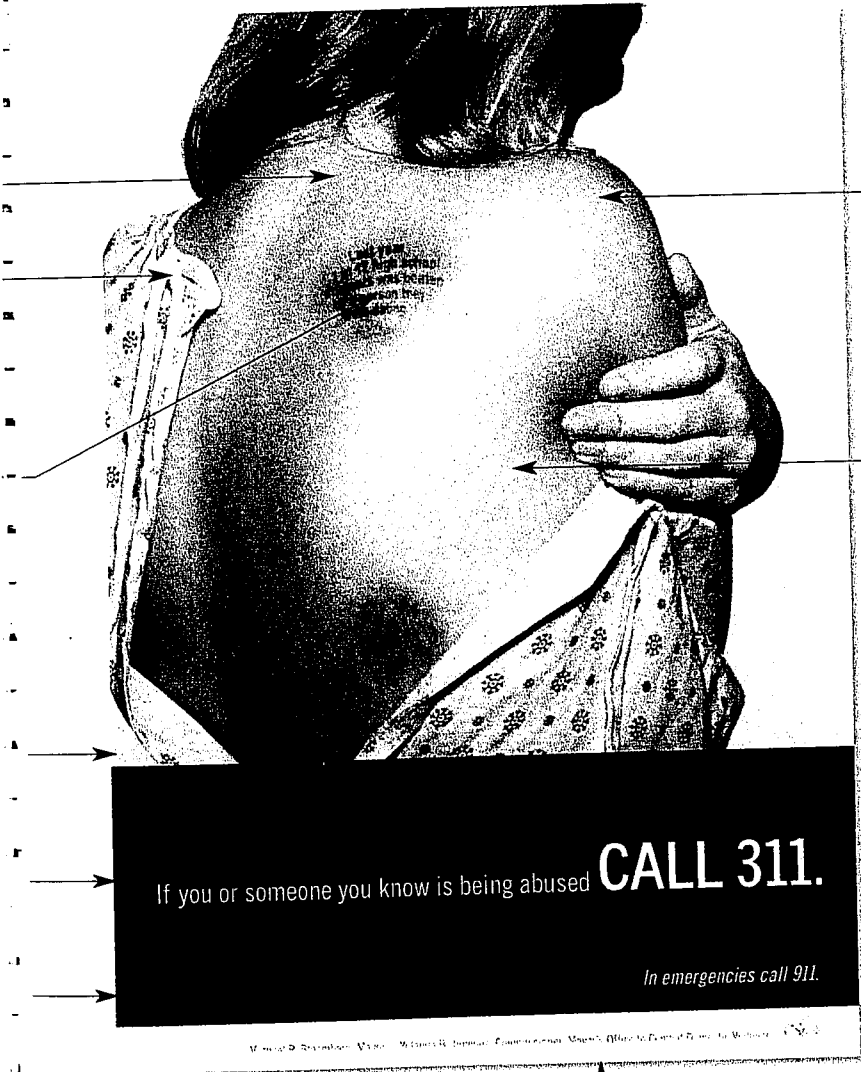
If the audience includes people in high school, then it is likely that the people running the campaign decided to make a poster because schools have many places where posters are easily seen. In addition, the particular visibility of posters says something about why the poster uses pathos as its major strategy: A poster has to catch the eye—quickly—of someone walking by.

### Logos: Argument

This poster is encouraging viewers to make phone calls to stop abuse. Does it offer reasons to encourage this action? If so, what are they?

### Logos: Arrangement

Why might the words be at the bottom of the poster rather than at the top?



**Pathos**

Why do you think we are shown the woman from the back? What emotional connections does this ask the audience to make with the poster?

**Pathos**

Why do you think the woman is white? What does this suggest about how the poster's makers conceived of their audience?

If you or someone you know is being abused **CALL 311.**

*In emergencies call 911.*

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**Logos: Evidence?**

Does the support of the mayor of New York City for this poster serve as expert evidence?

**ANALYZING ARGUMENTS**