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Advanced Writing in The Disciplines

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Credibility, Confidence, and Creativity:

My Experience as an Album Critic

The term, rhetoric, refers to the art of being persuasive. Aristotle describes three concise approaches to writing eloquently. These include the proper exhibition of ethos (displaying one's credibility as an author), logos (reason to support an opinion), and pathos (emotive appeals to the audience). I found that Aristotle's definition was germane to my rhetorical situation as a music reviewer. In composing my review of *Little Earthquakes*, it was necessary that I be persuasive by displaying my reliability as an author, using logic to back up my opinion, and also including claims with emotional relevance. While the format of a genre may be fixed (there is a set length, the inclusion or lack of visuals, etc.), the author has the authority to use rhetorical skills to be effective.

In studying a variety of samples for Project Four, I noticed that there is a unique amount of flexibility in terms of album review formatting. The majority of these documents are fairly brief, but there are feature articles both online and in print that exceed the common review length of about 300 words. In these longer pieces, the author is more liberal with other aspects of the genre as well. There may be more visuals, a subtitle, featured quotes in the margins, and so forth. Considering this, I chose to write a

longer piece modeled after an article in *Rolling Stone Magazine*. I found that writing a longer review allowed me to be more persuasive than I could be in one to two paragraphs. Based on what is practiced in reviews that appear in magazines, I was also able to use a vibrant photograph of Tori Amos at the start of my piece. Moving away from format specifications, the most important component to my rhetorical situation was sounding credible.

In terms of my authority as an author, it was important for me to make very confident statements. This is the main component of a credible tone because readers respect self-assuredness. Regarding album reviews, these documents feature writers with extremely confident tones, even to the extent that authors seem patronizing. However, readers expect this writing style because it is essential that a critic be dogmatic. This motivates the audience to view the author as a legitimate judge of creative work. In my review, I did not write phrases such as “Amos can be candid at times.” Instead, I wrote that, “Amos *is* remarkably candid.” Here, I expressed my opinion as if it were fact. I borrowed this approach from professional review writers who emphasize their confidence and reliability through this technique. Also, when an author uses opinionated adjectives or adverbs such as “remarkably,” this encourages the reader to view the album through the author’s lens. A writer also appears reputable if she understands her audience. The author achieves this impression by providing appropriate context for her reader and using language that is fitting to her demographic as well. This comes into play with album reviews when a writer supplies details about an artist’s career, the genre of the musician(s), and relevant history and cultural background information. Because a reviewer usually has a very limited word allowance, she might choose to sacrifice

context. This is, however, a poor choice because in not providing a frame of reference for the reader, the author will lose her audience's attention and the review's content becomes irrelevant. I was deliberate in choosing which background details to provide my audience with in my review. I knew that my readers are music fans in general making it necessary that I provide context that is aimed at a broad readership. I explained how Amos's musical training began at a very young age and noted her religious upbringing and struggle with her faith. I also stated how she progressed independently and moved away from her classical roots. In terms of language, I did not use Amos-specific terms to discuss her career. If I incorporated, for example, the fan-dubbed expression for Amos's linguistic style or "tori-speak," into my review, it would alienate some readers who are not familiar with this 90's singer-songwriter. In my review, I also employed reason to emphasize my very positive stance on the album.

It was important in my piece that I used rational means instead of emotion alone to discuss the value of Amos's debut release. I referenced the famous solo artist's lyrical content along with her musical decisions. In researching this genre, I studied multiple reviews where the author used an artist's lyrics alone to support her claim. I also read many articles where the writer focuses for the majority on the album's music. I believe the strongest approach is finding a balance in one's discussion of a musician's lyrics as well as music so that as a writer, one's scope does not appear limited. I also had to use logic to express what made Amos rise above her competition at the time. I mentioned that Amos was admitted to a conservatory at a very young age to emphasize that she is indisputably talented. I also explained how the frankness of her lyrics and her avant-garde musical ventures made her stand out amongst her competition. I researched other famous

female soloists from the 90's by watching live performances, listening to interviews, and reading artist biographies to gather information I could use as support founded on reason. I could not use my gut emotions alone to describe what made Amos unique at the risk of appearing too biased, a fate of some music reviewers. I organized my writing based on songs of Amos's *Earthquakes* which allowed me to refer to her poetry along with her musical prowess in the same section. Using reason was a challenge for me because I come from a very biased viewpoint. I am a huge Amos fan and it is tempting to solely draw on my emotional reactions to her work. To me, using logic felt like a dry approach to such vivid music, but it was necessary in helping my reader understand my perspective. The most enjoyable task in completing this review was my inclusion of emotional appeals to strengthen my persuasive voice.

Through my use of emotive pleas, I was able to explore my creativity as a writer. I incorporated quotes of Amos's lyrics with my descriptions of her music to suggest how these two components of her art mesh very well. Imagery and colorful descriptions contribute to supporting an argument through emotional means. I used phrases such as "Amos's music and lyrics simply bleed passion" to convey the emotive depth to this artist's debut release. I used words such as "punchy" and "heavy" to describe moments in the music of *Earthquakes* as a means of emphasizing the tangible power of Amos's first record. I also used words such as "vulnerable," "victimized," and "weakened" to convey the poignancy of a number of songs on the album.

Writing in this genre challenged me because I was aware of the concept of rhetoric but only how it applied to academic papers. In formal English writing, I display my credibility by avoiding the use of words that suggest insecurity in my stance such as

“maybe” or “I think.” This translated very well to writing as a critic. I am also experienced in using reason in academic writing. However, the use of logic in a review must be incorporated in such a way that it fits the casual style of an album critique. This is something I achieved by writing many drafts. I began by writing in an academic fashion with sentences that read for example, “This emphasizes Amos’s feminist stance.” I realized how awkward this sounded in the context of an album review. I then modified my language to present my logical means of argument, but in a way that fit the genre. This meant me using style conventions such as contractions and avoiding language that pointed directly to the support I used for my argument such as phrases that read “this conveys” or “this suggests.” Overall, it was an enriching experience to adopt the position of a music critic and learn the intricacies of this rhetorical situation.

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Reflection

I have taken many English classes in my school career, but Advanced Writing in The Disciplines was unique because of the class's focused nature. Staying true to the course's title, there was a concentration on writing for specific genres relating to one's major. We looked closely at conventions of writing normally found in the classroom and how these differ from the professional world. Interestingly, there was also an emphasis on how English instructors in America teach the subject and the discussion of strengths and flaws in traditional curriculum. I found this component to the Advanced Writing course fascinating. Until this class, I never had a professor who provided this level of transparency about the standards of a course of study. I was motivated to feel more authority as a student writer because of this.

One of Northeastern's Writing Program goals reads, "students negotiate their own writing goals and audience expectations regarding conventions of genre, medium, and situation." This to me defines the title of the course, Advanced Writing in The Disciplines. It was a specialized and progressive course of study because of the way in which, for the first time, I was encouraged to truly assess my audience, study the standards of multiple genres, and become passionate about growing as a writer. In my

research for Project 1, I interviewed my Composition Seminar professor, Tony De Ritis. I learned that De Ritis wrote a tremendous amount of documents in formal English. I assumed the practice of music notation was the more dominate composition language in his career as a professor and professional in the field, but learned that there is more of a balance. This discovery influenced me to think differently in my music courses. I began to take any standard English writing that I composed in these classes seriously because I noted that each short answer on an exam, 5-sentence reflection on a song we listened to for homework, and so forth were all opportunities for me to grow as a writer.

Next to the influence of my professor, I realized my passion for writing through this course by discovering the complexity of English across the disciplines. For this reason, this course was one of the most influential classes of my college career.

Song: *Alice* by The Cocteau Twins
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sy2o6dzE9w8>