Has artist/photographer Chris Jordan gotten your attention with his work entitled Cans Seurat (see Item 1.1)? You might recognize it is an adaptation of a famous painting by Georges Seurat entitled A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte (1884-86), one of the most celebrated works in the Art Institute of Chicago. Like Seurat’s masterpiece, Jordan’s photograph is huge, five feet tall and almost eight feet wide. But whereas Seurat painted with oil, using a remarkable technique called pointillism to create an image entirely from dots of color, Chris Jordan worked in a wholly different medium. As the close-ups show, Cans Seurat is built from aluminum cans.

What is Jordan’s point? A caption explains all: “Depicts 106,000 aluminum cans, the number used in the US every thirty seconds.” And this item is part of an ongoing series of photographs by Jordan graphically depicting the awesome maw of American culture—from the two million plastic bottles we use every five minutes to the eight million trees harvested every month to make mail order catalogs. Jordan uses his startling photographs to break through the media clutter, to get us to pause for a moment and reflect in a world that numbs our responses by the sheer volume of messages it sends.

Just in moving from a classroom to your dorm or apartment, you encounter so many texts that you may not notice any of them—not the posters on the classroom walls, EXIT signs above doors, headlines in the campus paper, logos on T-shirts, shouts from activists on the mall, banners strung across the street, and on and on. To gain attention, a text practically has to bully its way into our minds. Think of that endlessly repeated ad for a headache treatment: HeadOn—Apply directly to the forehead.
But even less aggressive (and perhaps more worthy) texts regularly invite us to take the initiative as readers, to look more closely at them, and to figure out what they have to offer. Throughout this book, we define text very broadly to include anything deliberately fashioned by human beings to convey an idea, a message, or even a feeling. By our definition, then, a forest isn’t a text, but a photograph of one could be. A city in itself might be too vast and random to be a coherent text, but it contains many messages worth reading and writing about. Movies, paintings, posters, murals, songs, symphonies, sculptures, advertisements, bumper stickers, T-shirts, video games, and e-mails are all texts. Most important for our purposes, words and images are texts that carry messages and make meaning. We read and explore these works by looking at them closely, and by seeing how they connect with and illuminate other texts.

You may already have training in what is called critical reading and might want to review some of the general techniques careful readers use—such as pre-reading, annotating, summarizing, and paraphrasing. But we’d also like you to begin reading texts rhetorically (see the Introduction) to appreciate how exactly they inform, influence, and persuade you. In this chapter, we present seven rhetorical dimensions for you to consider whenever you encounter works you find especially intriguing, challenging, or puzzling—including, we hope, the readings and images you’ll find in Chapters 3–8. Those rhetorical elements are subject, audience, purpose, genre, medium, context, and structure and composition.

**Identifying subject or focus**

If someone handed you a slide rule today to figure out your taxes or do the calculations for a math test, you might feel confused and disoriented. What is this contraption, with its tiny numbers and parallel scales? How does it operate? What’s it for? The moving ruler and clear plastic slides might tempt you to experiment with it, but you’d need plenty of assistance before you’d know how to use this unfamiliar object, which was common in American high schools prior to the invention of the pocket calculator.

Such a feeling of disorientation (or wonder) is actually a good place to begin your encounter with any new text—verbal, visual, aural, tactile. An intriguing text should attract your attention and provoke specific questions.

- What is it about? The question seems so basic because it is the one most of us ask when we encounter a new and unfamiliar text. Sometimes the answer is obvious; on other occasions you’ll have to work to discover a clear-cut answer.
- What do you focus on in the work? Your reading of a text usually begins with a spark of interest. Can you identify what caused it—what the focal point of the work might be?

**IDENTIFY THE SUBJECT**

Books, articles, movies, images, and even ads must offer a subject worthy of your attention, one that gets you thinking. The subject matter of a text can be signaled in an almost
infinite number of ways. A topic may be simply and clearly announced—as is the case in reference works, textbooks, and research reports. Titles, too, can help to define subject matter, even though they can also be mysterious, deliberately elusive, or provocative (see Item 1.2).

Often, the subject matter of a work such as a painting, novel, or film has to be inferred or interpreted. A book or movie may just seem to tell a story. What is the subject matter of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy? In some ways, it's the tale of a Hobbit with a mission to destroy a sinister ring. But on other levels, it may be a reiteration of the heroic myths of Western culture or a retelling of the Second World War or yet another unfurling of a good-versus-evil saga. The effort to understand the subject matter of a complex text is one of the pleasures of reading. Great works tempt us to return to them often to discover new, different, and sometimes contradictory meanings.

Of course, you also need to be able to explain *how* you found those meanings in a text. A text should provide evidence for the interpretations you offer.

**FIND FOCAL POINTS**

One way to identify the subject of a text is to locate and examine its focal points. Writers, artists, designers, architects, and musicians know how important it is that their works converge on some thesis or theme. To be a good reader, you need to pay attention to their signals. If you’ve ever written a paper with a thesis statement or a paragraph with a topic sentence, you are familiar with one simple device for focusing with words: a sentence or two that clearly announces what the writer intends to discuss.

But there are dozens of other techniques for focusing attention. On a printed page, a big headline, an underscored heading, boldfaced or italicized type, or a four-color photo might entice your eye. In a photograph, an artist might use light and shadow to seduce your gaze or manipulate depth of focus (see Item 1.3), whereas a painter might align objects to direct your eyes (and thoughts) in a specific direction. On a Web page, you might first encounter a striking graphic or a tempting menu of options to focus your attention.

You can begin your encounters with texts by noting where you look first and then asking *why*. But be prepared, too, to be puzzled or deliberately thrown off balance. Many texts will resist your efforts to understand them at a glance, to pluck out the heart of their mysteries.

**EXAMINE AND INTERPRET THE DETAILS**

Sometimes details will reveal the subject and scope of a work. Successful texts get you thinking beyond your first impressions by offering up rich details. You may not notice these items initially because they are deliberately secondary—like the separate stones that make up an arch. But remove one stone and watch what happens. In written texts, it’s often the details that provide support for a claim or make a story plausible. In music, the backbeat may be what defines a song and makes it memorable or tuneful. In visual texts, the details enrich or complicate our initial experience and encourage us to look again and again—like those aluminum cans in the Chris Jordan photograph.

But because of the sheer variety of texts, it’s hard to provide general directions for paying attention to details beyond the obvious: read, look, and listen carefully. Still, some guide-
lines might be useful in helping you to assemble the numerous fine points of a text into a coherent statement about its subject matter or theme.

- Don’t trust first impressions. They may very well be wrong or misleading, especially when something you are reading is truly new or moves contrary to your expectations.
- Assume that more may be going on than you initially surmise. Read any text imaginatively and creatively to appreciate how a writer or artist is developing a subject. Take for granted that someone has paid careful attention while creating it and that all its elements develop an idea or theme. In particular, look for connections between the primary subject or thesis of the work and all the supporting details.
- Approach every text, especially a familiar or conventional one, as if you were encountering it for the first time. Sometimes we stop paying attention when the terrain we are covering seems familiar—like driving the same road every day.
- Examine how the finer details help to define the subject of a work. Study the lighting technique used by the photographer, the brushstrokes of a painter, the similes and metaphors of a writer, and so on. Learn as much as you can about any texts you encounter often.

**NOTICE WHAT’S MISSING**

Sometimes what’s not in a text is a key to its meaning—to appreciating its success, failure, or appeal. Perhaps the artistic movement *Minimalism* is the best expression of exclusion as a subject matter. Minimalists sought to reduce their art, architecture, literature, or music to core and necessary elements—and nothing more. An absence or empty space in such a work could be an important element (see Item 1.4).

But there are other kinds of omissions worth noticing when examining the subject matters of texts. Studying portraits of Renaissance men and women in a museum, you might see lots of aristocrats and churchmen, but very few commoners or laborers. American cinema for many decades rarely included native or minority groups, except as stereotypical figures: the subject matter of these films clearly represented the world of a majority culture. We notice such omissions today because of our greater focus on diversity. But we are probably overlooking other kinds of absences in texts currently being produced.

So think about what a text has excluded or left out. Pay attention to the framing or cropping of an image, the topics not covered in an article or newspaper, the people whose names or faces aren’t represented in a work. These omissions may prove to be more than a matter of missing details. They may be clues to what’s really going on in a text.

**ITEM 1.2** - *Pere Borrell del Caso, Escaping Criticism, 1874*

Pere Borrell del Caso entitled this 1874 painting in the popular trompe l’oeil (fool the eye) style *Escaping Criticism*. How does the title shape your perception of its subject matter? Would your reading of the work change if its title were *Playing Hooky*?
ITEM 1.3  •  James Evans, *Halle’s Hands*, 1996

The title of this photograph by James Evans seems almost superfluous given the way he has manipulated its depth of field to identify his subject so clearly. What stories might those hands tell? Where do you look next after gazing at them? Use the Web to learn more about Evans’s subject: Halle Stillwell.
ITEM 1.4  
Donald Judd, *Fifteen Untitled Works in Concrete*, 1980–84

Artist Donald Judd (1929–94) was a key figure in an art movement called *Minimalism*, which sought to create works stripped down to their fundamental elements. One of Judd’s works is this installation of concrete shapes along a remote highway. How might you define its subject matter? Is it significant that the individual works are untitled?

**CONSIDER**

1. Working in a group, imagine some thoughtful alternative titles for Pere Borrell del Caso’s *Escaping Criticism* (Item 1.2). How do your new titles change the subject matter of the piece or the way viewers might encounter it?

2. We’re accustomed to seeing titles on papers, books, paintings, and poems. But where else do you find titles or “subject lines” that help you understand what a text might be about? Describe several of these items and how they function. Be open-minded, considering a wide variety of media.

3. Describe a time when you found yourself completely unable to figure out the subject of some text you encountered. It might have been a puzzling object like a slide rule, spork, or quirt, or perhaps a puzzling sculpture or film. How did you figure out what it was you were dealing with?

4. Using the Web, find a copy of Vermeer’s painting entitled *Woman Holding a Balance*. Its title probably tells you what to examine first in the painting: the woman’s delicate fingers holding a balance in the very center of the work. But what else in the painting moves you to look there? What devices does the artist employ to direct your attention to that spot? Consider elements such as light, shadow, gestures, and other objects in the painting. Then examine a painting or photograph by an artist of your choosing, preferably a more contemporary work. How does it focus your attention and help you to identify its subject?

5. What devices do radio and television programs use to signal their content or subject matters? How long do you have to attend to a program to know what you are hearing or watching?