



## You Keep Using that Meme; I Don't Think it Means What you Think it Means: Using Memes to Teach Rhetorical Analysis

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**Recommended Courses:** first-year composition, speech, rhetoric, social media

**Rationale:** Since memes surround us every day and play an increasingly important role in rhetorical strategies used to influence people, this is a great entry point to help students think analytically and critically about the memes that bombard them on social media every day. As a means of entering into visual and verbal analysis, memes can be a really great way to introduce analysis and rhetorical analysis to students.

### Goals and Objectives:

By completing this activity, students should be able to:

- 1) Analyze a meme image without words.
- 2) Analyze the verbal messages on memes with the same image.
- 3) Think about how the verbal and visual unity of memes work together rhetorically to send a message.

### Instructions:

This activity can be completed in 50 minutes

### Preparation and Materials Needed:

- Find some memes (knowyourmeme.com is a great resource)
- Three different colors of paper with one small (about 1/5 to 1/6 of a page), one medium (about 1/4 of a page), and one large size (about 1/3 of a page)
  - alternatively, have students draw a shape at the top of each and make their own smaller pieces of paper from a single sheet of paper, instead of colored paper.
- Students, writing utensils

### Implementing the Activity:

I like to run through this whole sequence together as a class, before splitting students into groups to have them work on a different set of memes and meme images.

1. I often start this discussion by pulling up Google Trends (trends.google.com) and typing in the word *memes* and setting the date range for 2004-present. This is a good time to talk about the rise of memes in social media.
2. Break students into smaller groups and hand them a meme image without text.

3. Have students begin by looking at a meme image without any words. Ask the students to think about what this image means to them. Have them read and analyze elements of the image.
  - What is present in the image?
  - What colors are used in the image?
  - If people are involved, what do their body language and facial expressions say to you?
  - What does this image say to you?
  - How does it send this message?

Please note that if you are using popular memes, there is the possibility that students may already be familiar with the image and how it is used, they can still participate in this session, just ask them not to say the things that are typically printed on the image yet.

4. Have students record their answers to the above questions.
5. Now, hand them a meme that matches their image. And one set of the three different sizes and colors of paper.
6. On the first and smallest piece of paper, have them write down briefly what the meme says and shows in the image in their own words. This should be a very brief description of the meme.
7. Then on the second piece of paper, the middle size, have them write down details for the image and explain what details contribute to the message. This is the brief summary of their meme.
8. On the third and largest piece of paper, students will need to analyze and explain how these elements come together to pass on a message and what their thoughts are about how that original image has been coopted for the meme's intended message. Remind students that this is the biggest part of their job. They need to delve deep into the image to figure out how it sends its message and really analyze the verbal and visual rhetoric.

#### **Discussion Questions/Other Information:**

- I often have students share their memes and what they wrote with the rest of the class.
- Afterwards, ask students to think about the memes they looked at in class today and to try to think about the following.
  - What role do memes really play in society?
  - How do memes spread compared to simple verbal posts?
  - Do they help people? Hinder them?
  - Can memes with hate rhetoric potentially cause harm?
  - Can memes bring people together? Separate people from each other?

#### **Debriefing:**

- If I am doing this just before an essay, I make sure to talk about how these three pieces of paper could form the beginning to a body paragraph. And I remind them that analysis is the big part of their work, so it needs the most room in their essays.
- If I am introducing rhetorical analysis, I will talk with them more about visual rhetoric and verbal rhetoric and how the two are combined in the memes.

#### **Adding a Twist: Ways to Adapt this Teaching Activity:**

- I've also used a similar activity with political cartoons using the three pieces of paper with students.
- I find this especially helpful before an analytical essay assignment so students can practice analysis.

- You could also extend this activity to talk about the role of social media in our society. The references I've listed below are great for an extension of this into social media and memes and their impact on society.
- I've also used the following video to extend the discussion of memes and copyright law and intellectual property
  - Wagner, Amy. "Article 13: Banning Memes & Cultural Expression (9.1)." *Article 13: Banning Memes & Cultural Expression (9.1)*, 6 Sept. 2019, [jumpplus.net/issue-9-1/article-13-banning-memes-cultural-expression-9-1/](http://jumpplus.net/issue-9-1/article-13-banning-memes-cultural-expression-9-1/).

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### Sources for hateful memes

One shadowy person or a group using the name "Matthew Desmond Kerry" controls all these meme web sites—and probably more...

This is a link to an article about this one person's name who is used for all of these sites.  
<http://whiskeyandthemorningafter.blogspot.com/2012/10/the-truth-about-matthew-desmond-and.html>

Known websites:

[www.beingliberal.org](http://www.beingliberal.org)  
[www.addictinginfo.org](http://www.addictinginfo.org)  
[www.freewoodpost.com](http://www.freewoodpost.com)  
[www.ifyouonlynews.com](http://www.ifyouonlynews.com)  
[www.reverbpress.com](http://www.reverbpress.com)  
[www.liberalamerica.org](http://www.liberalamerica.org)  
[www.occupydemocrats.com](http://www.occupydemocrats.com)  
[www.leftwingnation.rocks](http://www.leftwingnation.rocks)  
[www.egbertowillies.com](http://www.egbertowillies.com)  
[www.americannewsx.com](http://www.americannewsx.com)

These are several Facebook pages filled with Memes targeting a group of people. And often the comments on these memes have interesting discussion points if you want to expand the discussion in class about memes.

<https://www.facebook.com/GirlDuJour>  
<https://www.facebook.com/OccupyDemocrats>  
<https://www.facebook.com/republicansareidiots>  
<https://www.facebook.com/Republicansareidiots1>  
<https://www.facebook.com/beingliberal.org>  
<https://www.facebook.com/LiberalAndProudOfIt>  
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Americans-Against-Bobby-Franklin-By-AddictingInfoORG>  
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Americans-Against-Martin-Harty-By-AddictingInfoOrg>  
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Michele-Bachmann-Needs-To-Read-A-History-Book-By-AddictingInfoorg>  
<https://www.facebook.com/opinionatedlib>  
<https://www.facebook.com/LiberalAndProudOfIt>  
<https://www.facebook.com/AmericansAgainstMittRomney>  
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Proud-to-be-a-Filthy-Liberal-Scum>  
<https://www.facebook.com/LiberalAndProudOfIt>