Topoi for Writing about Literature

Research Says:

Topoi is a Greek term related to rhetorical analysis that originates with Aristotle. Simply put, a topos is a specific theme or formula that embodies warrants and assumptions particular to a specific audience. For example, when making a speech for Virginia coal miners, politicians are likely to use formulas that would not work as well with Harvard academics. Topoi can also be used as a “heuristic” to reformulate an argument you are already making that might seem incoherent or unorganized.

Research has shown that literature professors value certain kinds of topoi, but rarely teach them explicitly to students (and this is most likely true in other fields, as well). Below is a list of common topoi that literature scholars use, and research has shown that papers using these tend to get better grades. Examine these and see if any of them fit into your own theme or argument and what criteria might be used to judge the effectiveness of your essay. Oftentimes, writers will use more than one to make their argument more complex. Are there any additional topoi that you could use to make your argument more complex?

Topoi Definitions and Criteria:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topoi</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Appearance/reality | The writer points out a perception of two entities: one more immediate, the other latent; one on the surface, the other deep; one obvious, the other the object of search. | • Plausible claim about author’s conscious (or unconscious) meaning or purpose (i.e. bigger picture)  
• Plausible reasons for why something is a symbol/meaning explained Some frequency of different a/r claims  
• Surprising, original, non-obvious |
| Ubiquity        | The writer points out a form (a device, an image, a linguistic feature, a pattern) repeated throughout a work. Either many examples of the same thing are pointed out, or one thing is noted in many forms, up and down a scale of grandeur and abstraction. | • Multiple examples of an image, pattern, word  
• Provides an organizing concept  
• Frequent textual evidence  
• Found in surprising places |
| Paradox         | The writer points out the unification of apparently irreconcilable opposites in a single startling dualism. | • Relevant to interpretation  
• Explains significance  
• Surprising  
• Plays a central role in the |

| Paradigm | The writer fits a kind of template over the details of a literary text to endow them with order, elucidate a structure. Often in this fitting the writer seeks to modify understandings of the template as well as the text. | • Lens being used is explicitly named and summarized in sufficient detail and with sufficient complexity  
• Agency in application of the lens is located in critic/student and not the literary text’s author  
• Sophisticated interaction with the lens text  
• Application provides an overarching structure |
|---|---|---|
| Context | In a variant of the paradigm topos, the critic assumes historical and contextual detail should be brought to bear on textual interpretation and that accuracy and anachronism are invalidating concerns. | • Specific and appropriate citation  
• Advances interpretive argument  
• Quantity  
• Elucidates something not obvious |
| Social justice | The critic, in an assumed connection between literature and our present condition, seeks avenues toward social change. | • Attention to gender, race, class, or other power issue  
• Talks about problem as a system  
• Details how problem functions in text  
• Non-obvious problem or the sophisticated way a problem might function  
• Explains relevance for our culture/society |

**Applications**

You can use these ideas to reflect on your writing for the portfolio, or you could even reflect on what kinds of topoi are used in another field. Though other fields may not use these specific topoi, it is a common feature of all discourse in academia.