

SOAPSTone Rhetorical Analysis: Shirley Chisholm's 'Equal Rights for Women' (1969)

SITUATE · ANALYSE · COMPRESS

WHY THIS MATTERS Analyzing historic speeches allows you to see how language can disrupt systemic power. By dissecting Chisholm's rhetoric, you learn to spot how leaders craft arguments to challenge laws and shift cultural norms.

DIRECTIONS Before diving into the rhetorical mechanics, read Shirley Chisholm's landmark address to the House of Representatives carefully. Situate her arguments within the social upheavals of the late 1960s to understand how her rhetorical choices targeted both lawmakers and the broader American public.

Text Title: 'Equal Rights for Women' (Address to the United States House of Representatives) _____

Author: Representative Shirley Chisholm (D-NY) _____

Date & Context: May 21, 1969 — Washington, D.C., during the height of the Civil Rights and Second-Wave Feminist movements _____

SOAPSTONE ANALYSIS

4 PTS EACH

S — SPEAKER / RHETOR

Who is the rhetor delivering this address? Beyond her basic identity as a congresswoman, what aspects of her personal background, ethos, and political standing shape her authority and credibility on this issue?

O — OCCASION / EXIGENCE

What is the immediate exigence prompting this speech? Distinguish between the micro-context (the congressional session) and the macro-context (the historical, cultural, and political climate of 1969).

A — AUDIENCE

Who is the primary audience Chisholm addresses in the House chamber, and who is her secondary, broader audience? How does she adapt her rhetorical appeals to navigate these distinct groups?

P — PURPOSE

What is Chisholm's ultimate objective? What specific legislative action, shift in public consciousness, or systemic reform is she seeking to catalyze through this address?

S — SUBJECT

What is the core focus of her speech? How does she define and frame the issue of women's rights in relation to other civil rights struggles of the era?

T — TONE

What is the prevailing attitude of the rhetor? Identify at least two distinct tone shifts, citing specific examples of loaded diction, parallel syntax, or rhetorical questions that reveal her stance.

TONE WORD BANK

Urgent

Indignant

Pragmatic

Uncompromising

Analytical

Subversive

Empathetic

Measured

RHETORICAL STRATEGY SYNTHESIS

8 PTS

How does Chisholm strategically align the struggle for women's rights with the broader Civil Rights movement, and how does this intersectional approach strengthen her appeal to a divided Congress?

RHETORICAL PRECIS

8 PTS

Complete each frame, then combine the four into one polished paragraph.

In her address 'Equal Rights for Women' (1969), Representative Shirley Chisholm asserts that [insert claim] by [insert active verb].

She supports and develops this assertion by first [insert method 1], then [insert method 2], and finally [insert method 3].

Chisholm's primary purpose is to [insert purpose] in order to [insert desired outcome/action].

She adopts a(n) [insert tone word] tone to engage her audience of [insert primary/secondary audience] and compel them to [insert response].

COMBINED PRECIS PARAGRAPH

SOAPSTone Analysis — Facilitator Guide

GRADES 11-12 · CROSS-SUBJECT · READING COMPREHENSION

Students use the SOAPSTone framework to analyze the rhetorical situation and tone of Shirley Chisholm's 1969 address 'Equal Rights for Women' before synthesizing their analysis into a four-sentence rhetorical precis.

QUICK START

WHY THIS MATTERS · Learning target: what students should know or be able to do by the end of this activity.

TIME	GROUPING	MATERIALS
45 minutes	Individual reading, paired analysis, whole-class synthesis	SOAPSTone Rhetorical Analysis worksheet

KEY VOCABULARY Exigence Ethos Rhetor Diction Syntax

GUIDING QUESTIONS

How does Chisholm's position as both a legislative insider and a double-minority outsider shape her ethos in front of a predominantly white, male Congress?

In what ways does Chisholm adjust her rhetorical appeals to simultaneously address her primary audience in the House chamber and her secondary audience in the broader American public?

FACILITATION SEQUENCE

1 LAUNCH · 10 MINUTES

Students read the historical context of May 21, 1969, and listen to or read the opening of Chisholm's address, focusing on her initial stance.

Watch for: Watch for whether students are grounding their initial reactions in the 1969 civil rights and feminist movements rather than modern contexts.

WHY THIS MATTERS · A useful prompt here is: "A useful prompt here is: 'What immediate legislative event in Congress prompted Chisholm to speak on this specific day?'"

ANSWER KEY & HOW TO APPROACH

FOR THE TEACHER

Expected answers for this worksheet, with guidance on evaluating student responses.

ITEM	EXPECTED ANSWER	HOW TO APPROACH / ACCEPT
The six elements	Each element answered from the text and its context — inferences	Speaker and audience are the usual weak spots: push past the name to position,

	flagged as inferences	persona, and what the audience values.
Tone + synthesis	Tone words anchored in cited language; a synthesis that connects situation to strategy	A tone word without a quoted phrase behind it is a mood guess — require the diction.

LIKELY STUDENT RESPONSES, MISCONCEPTIONS, AND HELPFUL TEACHER MOVES

Anticipate these — and the response that moves thinking forward.

STUDENTS MAY...	WHAT THAT MIGHT MEAN...	A HELPFUL NEXT MOVE...
Identify the audience solely as 'the people in the room' or 'Congress.'	They are overlooking how televised or printed speeches in the mass media era of the late 1960s were designed to mobilize the public to pressure lawmakers.	Ask students to find a line where Chisholm speaks to the economic realities of women nationwide, and ask who would feel validated or motivated by those words.
Describe the tone as simply 'angry' or 'aggressive' without recognizing its controlled, analytical nature.	They are reacting to the conflict of the topic rather than analyzing her specific choices in syntax and diction.	Direct students to her parallel syntax ('It is obvious... It is calculated...') and ask how this structured phrasing makes her indignation sound measured and undeniable.

UDL, DIFFERENTIATION, AND LANGUAGE SUPPORTS

IF STUDENTS NEED MORE SUPPORT

Scaffolds for the same core thinking: oral rehearsal first, sketch or sort before writing, a worked example, chunked steps.

Have students verbally explain the difference between Chisholm's primary and secondary audiences to a partner before they begin writing it down on the worksheet.

Chunk the precis writing by having students complete and check sentences 1 and 2 before moving on to sentences 3 and 4.

IF STUDENTS ARE READY FOR MORE

Extensions that add complexity, not busywork: compare two approaches, justify a choice, transfer to a new context.

Challenge students to write an additional paragraph explaining how Chisholm's rhetorical strategy would have to change if she were delivering this exact speech to a crowd of civil rights activists instead of the House of Representatives.

LANGUAGE SUPPORTS

Name the language function (explain, compare, argue, justify) with sentence frames and oral rehearsal.

Name the language function: Analyzing and justifying rhetorical choices.

Provide the worksheet's structured sentence stems to scaffold the synthesis, and offer a list of active analytical verbs (e.g., 'asserts,' 'exposes,' 'refutes,' 'demands') to help students complete the second sentence of the precis.

ASSESSMENT LOOK-FORS AND NEXT STEPS

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

CRITERION	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE HERE	POSSIBLE EVIDENCE	HELPFUL NEXT STEP
Tone Analysis	Identifying shifts in tone using specific textual evidence of diction or syntax.	Student identifies at least two tone words (such as 'pragmatic' and 'indignant') and pairs them with words like 'prejudice' or parallel structures.	Prompt the student to explain how the chosen diction directly supports that specific tone word.

Reteach signal: If more than half the class struggles to write the second sentence of the precis (detailing her methods), pause and model how to turn two of Chisholm's SOAPStone points (such as her comparison to racial prejudice and her refutation of objections) into active 'by [doing X]' phrases.