The Puzzle/Solution Style of Rhetorical Analysis

A Step by step process:

First, before writing the paper, do an analysis and interpretation as follows:

1. TEXT: Attend a live speech taking notes as you observe and participate in the audience.
2. CONTEXT: Gather information about the rhetorical situation faced by the speaker and observe and note the reception of the audience.
3. PUZZLE: Identify a puzzle that you have discovered as a critical observer. This must be something that a critic who is seeking to understand the rhetorical strategy of the speech will see as odd. It can be a contradiction you see in the speech itself, a disjunction between the speech and its reception, a disjunction between the speech and its professed or presumed purpose, etc.
4. SOLUTION: Come up with some answers to that puzzle. These answers must be found through your close observation of the speech. Your solution should be a new way of seeing the speech that solves the puzzle you identified. In your paper, the new perspective you develop will help your readers see the speech in a different way from the norm.
5. THESIS: Compose a thesis statement that includes a broad description of both the puzzle and the solution. It should exist as three sentences: a statement of the puzzle, a question that highlights what it is about the puzzle that is odd, and a statement of the solution.

Then, write your paper. The organization of your paper should be as follows:

1. Begin by describing the setting and the speech and explaining the puzzle. (1-2 pages)
   a. Identify the "puzzle."
   b. Provide evidence of it from the speech, and if necessary, the context.
   c. Make a persuasive argument that this really is "puzzling" or "odd."
2. Offer your thesis statement. (3 sentences) Please note that your thesis comes after your description of what puzzles you about the speech, in the middle of your paper, not at the beginning, and there is no preview of your argument in the first paragraph of your paper.
3. Then explain the reasonable "solution" to the puzzle that you discovered. (2 +/- pages)
   a. Identify the "solution."
   b. Provide evidence from the speech to support your solution. Supporting evidence from your research into the context may be used as supplemental evidence.
   c. Make a persuasive argument that this clearly "solves" the puzzle that you identified in the first half of your paper.
4. Conclude with a summary of what you’ve discovered about the speech. This conclusion should encapsulate what you’ve contributed to our understanding of this text. (1-2 paragraphs)

Adapted from the University of Washington, Department of Speech Communication, 425 American Public Address Course, “How to Write a Rhetorical Criticism Paper.”
A Note on Citations:

This paper should be written in MLA style. See Gibaldi, Joseph. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 5th edition. New York : Modern Language Association of America, 1999. This book is available at the reference desk in most libraries and can be purchased at most bookstores. A useful introduction to this style is also available on-line at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/research/r_mla.html.

Please remember that any material you use to support your claims in the paper must be cited in your paper. MLA style uses parenthetical citations in the paper itself, also called the "author-page" method, and a "works cited" bibliography at the end of the paper.

How I will read this particular kind of analysis:

Your paper must be written in a way that allows me to answer all of the following questions with a resounding YES:

1. Did the student say something significant, interesting, and relevant about the speech?
2. Did s/he identify a puzzle with the speech and convince me that the puzzle articulated was really puzzling? (Note: a student who convinces me that the puzzle s/he found is something really odd about the speech is more likely to convince me that her paper has something significant, interesting, and relevant to say.)
3. Did s/he provide a solution in a new or different way of looking at the speech, and did his/her solution reasonably solve the puzzle?
4. Did s/he use the evidence of the speech and its context appropriately and effectively to support his/her claims (about both the puzzle and the solution)?
5. Did the paper flow well, with good grammar, organization, and style?
6. Did the paper follow the basic guidelines set out for length, citation practices, etc.?

What NOT to do with this paper:

- You are not to write a report paper. Most of your paper should be a rhetorical analysis of the speech.
- You are not to simply summarize the speech or your feelings about it.
- You are not to simply summarize all the rhetorical strategies you found in the speech. The strategies you choose to describe should contribute to your description of puzzle and solution.
- Please remember that a puzzle is an interpretive problem. It is something odd about the strategy taken by the rhetor, or something odd about the response of the audience, or something odd about a normal or common interpretation, etc. It is not simply the exigence faced by the rhetor or the problem described by the rhetor.