Turning the Tables on the Blame Game
By Adrian Jarvis

Andrew Reese’s February 25, 2010, Breeze article, titled “Get Off Your High Horse,” takes aim at James Madison University students’ angry response to the University Program Board (UPB) decision to book Snooki from the now-famous reality show The Jersey Shore. The students wrote derogatory and hurtful comments on the UPB’s Facebook wall and submitted derogatory darts to the school paper, complaining that the school had dropped to its lowest point by booking Snooki as an entertainer. Although I can imagine most readers weren’t pleased to have their complaints thrown back in their faces, Reese’s article holds its own as a rhetorically sound argument. There’s enough support in Reese’s article to back up his claim and allow him the freedom to make his disappointment clear with his colorful word choice.

Reese assures readers that he is not defending Snooki as a good source of entertainment for his fellow Dukes, and certainly not that she is a good role model for students. He admits without hesitation that he will not be attending the event. “I also know this event is not catered to me,” he says (par. 3). These early moves immediately defuse the idea that Reese is siding with those who want to see Snooki, and solidify his stance as a student critical of his peers.

It is worth noting that Reese’s tone is never pleading. He asks his readers to take a step back and re-evaluate their attitudes. However, he does so in a sarcastic and commanding tone, rather than a pleading or begging one. His “take no prisoners/tough love” stance makes readers see themselves as the problem, which is exactly what Reese is trying to accomplish. Reese’s disdain is clearly present in his words and never really changes throughout his piece. After acknowledging in the early stages of his essay that he does not support Snooki, Reese quickly becomes more confrontational. Phrases like “I am baffled at all this moral greatness which has suddenly flowed out of pens and mouths” (par. 7) and “if you can’t see past that [this will be a comedy show with a comedian], you really don’t understand the situation” (par. 9) establish his voice as the author and his audience as the target.

“Get Off Your High Horse” touches only lightly on the UPB, and Reese defends its actions like the lawyer for an innocent man on death row. He explains that the UPB only receives a certain amount of money every year and must make money through revenue every year. Reese argues that “the show is now sold out” (par. 3), and consequently “will be funded entirely through its own revenue” (par. 4), strategically silencing any who would say the show was a waste of money. Whereas later Reese deals with the concept of morality, here he employs a more logical argument, which strengthens his credibility as a writer.

Reese’s well-supported argument allows him the chance to throw attitude into his writing and offer a more aggressive stance on the subject, giving his readers the slap on the wrists he so desperately wishes to give them. “More so, who are we to instantly become the judges of JMU’s moral standard?” (par. 7), he asks readers. Here Reese targets each reader’s ethical self-image, and does it with a pointed finger, letting his audience know that he is criticizing them directly, and not just entertaining them.

Along with this expression of disdain toward the actions of his fellow students, Reese invites his readers to literally take the place of those who work at the UPB. He extinguishes all points of an opposing view. And by that, I mean if students were to argue the point that the students of the UPB
were doing a poor job, they have a perfect response waiting for them in Reese’s article. He insists that joining the UPB would “be more effective than just criticizing it from behind a page of pixelated words” (par. 5). Here Reese neither defends nor attacks the UPB’s students in regards to their job performance, but instead offers those with strong opinions against the organization the chance to do something about it. He shifts the readers’ perspectives to see that they are in part responsible for what they are so fervently outspoken against.

The UPB had to take down its Facebook wall due to all of the derogatory comments that were being posted by angry JMU students. And of course, critics of the article would jump for the Constitution and argue that the UPB was blocking the right to free speech. Reese insightfully foresees this argument and takes care of it in just a few sentences. Reese argues that hate speech is “both a clear violation of the U.S. Constitution and JMU policy” (par. 6). Although he fails to give examples of the comments that may have resembled hate speech, his point that the UPB may have been right in taking down the comment wall is clear. This short paragraph is particularly effective because once he uses this strategy he not only has the ethical support he needs, but the Constitutional support as well.

Although Reese’s article is well-written and in most respects effective in persuading his audience members to question their rush to judgment, there is a point in which he risks taking his “pointed finger” technique too far, to the point that he may insult his readers. He notes the hypocritical nature of the JMU student body for speaking out against the UPB’s choice in entertainment because they think JMU’s image is at stake, when it is alcohol that is causing the real image problems with the school. Reese sarcastically asks if his audience has forgotten this fact and answers with “you probably just don’t remember last night” (par. 7). Here Reese seems to assert a sort of dominance over his readers, a superiority he earns by having good support for his complaints. Reese’s article is all about the attitude; this quote perfectly exemplifies what that attitude sounds like.

It is easy to recognize that Reese is appalled by the mob-like actions of his peers and is obviously not afraid to let his audience know. While this kind of tone won’t win Reese an award for popularity, his argument is strong and effective. As Reese makes clear early on in his article, his wish isn’t to change readers’ minds about Snooki; whether or not she would be good entertainment was completely irrelevant. What Reese wants is to make his readers realize that they had no right or reason to judge the UPB. And whether that judgment came in the form of writing something crude on the UPB wall, sending in a critical opinion dart, or simply putting sole responsibility for their displeasure on others, Reese’s article succeeds in shedding new light on the topic for his audience. His argument clearly establishes that there are more important things to worry about than questionable entertainment.

Works Cited