Among the many crises ravaging the American nation today, the opioid crisis stands as one of it’s longest running, a silent killer that has existed for decades in our society. The following is a rhetorical analysis of four separate articles that speak on this ongoing drug plague, each from differing news sites and with different perspectives.

The first article I analyzed was “Family Doctors In Rural America Tackle Crisis Of Addiction And Pain” (https://khn.org/news/family-doctors-in-rural-america-tackle-crisis-of-addiction-and-pain/) This article was written by Bram Sable-Smith, in collaboration with the Wisconsin Watch, Wisconsin Public Radio, NPR and Kaiser Health News. This would make it fall under the medium of a traditional online publication, and a similar status as the genre of a news article. The piece focuses on the opioid epidemic from the perspective of small towns, both the side of the few local physicians treating the outbreaks of addiction, as well as the patients who had befallen illness. The lead “character,” if you will, is Dr. Angela Gatzke-Plamann, the lone physician in both her small Wisconsin town, Necedah, as well as the entirety of Juneau County, which encompasses a similar territory of rural area. The story then follows her accounts of treating citizens, dealing with multiple patients of hers who, one way or another, ended up with varying levels of reliance on drugs like oxycontin, percocets or even just heroin. Sprinkled through all of these accounts of her patients are information on the many ways these addictions might have been fostered, ranging from lack of certain medications in rural regions to an older demography making up the majority of small rural towns. Given these facts and accounts, you could infer the intended audience of this piece are people within the actual state of Wisconsin, based upon the
fact that the story is written as a partnership between different Wisconsin media outlets. On the other hand, it being published in Kaiser Health News, an outlet that tends to draw attention to more nationwide issues, signifies that targeted readers are not just locals but also people in all regions of the country. This also ties in with the purpose and language of the article, since it appears to have been written with the intention of informing the reader about the crisis, from its rural roots. The language is itself very basic, not choosing to use words that may elicit any outrage or anger over the very real tragedy at hand, but instead relaying the information as if it were a cold and objective report, exemplified in the excerpt, “For rural physicians, the burden of responding to the opioid epidemic falls squarely on their already loaded shoulders.” (Sable-Smith) This further ties in with the tone, as it’s more calculated and objective sense seems to fit with the fact that the article itself is not trying to report with any possible underlying motive or policy proposal to alleviate this crisis. Any sort of partisan solution is offered not through the author but by experts interviewed, demonstrated in the quote, “Doctors like Gatzke-Plamann have an important role to play in the opioid crisis by treating patients where they live, said Erin Krebs of the University of Minnesota. But, she added, funding models don’t always encourage this kind of work.” (Sable-Smith) Furthermore, this also exemplifies the stance of the piece, in accordance with the fact that the previously mentioned Kaiser Health News tends to have a centrist lean to most news on the national stage, this article does not skew anywhere, simply remaining focused on factual analysis, with the occasional mention of how you’d go about solving the opioid crisis problems.

“Ending the Opioid Crisis,” (https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/08/trump-opioids-heroin-epidemic) is the second article I chose to analyze, written by Jonah Walters on the Jacobin website. The article details a situation
of epidemic first from a national perspective, providing base context for drug use and prevention policies over the past 20 years, as well as the actions taken by the recent Trump administration. It then goes into the subject on a more personal tone, as the author talks about the crisis in the context of his own life, detailing the similar small town he grew up in in Pennsylvania, tending to focus on the politicians of the area rather than just the accounts of those on the frontlines of the opioid issue. Turning to the medium and genre of Walter’s piece, the publisher Jacobin is a new age media outlet born out of the internet, and one that takes an explicitly leftist perspective on all matters, this work, another general article reporting on present times, being no different. This feeds into the stance on display here best represented by the quote, “members of the Trump coalition sit in positions of power in local governments — as well as in state houses and congressional chambers — selling snake oil to their constituents and standing in the way of a comprehensive, reparative solution to the drug epidemic” (Walters). This clearly indicates a purpose by the author to not just inform but persuade readers that this political party and the current president are corrupt, incompetent and almost evil, which further speaks to the inherent left wing stance of the article. Another rhetorical aspect of note is tone, as the Jacobin article frames the issue as pressing, almost apocalyptic, through it’s comparison of the current epidemic to a novel that describes a similar world in which a blinding disease quickly ravages an entire society. By extension, the language on display can be similarly cataclysmic, for instance, “People in my hometown, and in communities across the United States, are dying at alarming rates.” (Walters) Drawing on the intended audience, Kaiser and Jacobin have a somewhat similar coalition in mind. Despite the fact that Jacobin readers would certainly skew younger and more left wing, the bulk population of both readers of the articles are those of the middle class, urban
or suburban, that really don’t get an exact look at this specific opioid crisis plaguing rural America.


Before continuing, it’s important to note that again the intended audience of this writing is essentially the same as in the previous two articles, perhaps an even more wealthy or middle class of people, as the New York Times even exists behind a paywall, skewing readers along with the inherent east coast bias. Furthermore, the genre and medium fits along with the previous pieces of a news published informative article for a mostly online publication. The contents of the article take a slightly different approach, focusing on the role and proclaimed failure of the FDA to respond to the crisis proficiently. It documents a timeline of enacted policies and studies conducted by the agency, starting from the late 2000’s. Unlike preceding articles, the New York Time’s piece focuses only on the bureaucratic and political actions of government institutions and academic statistics of overdoses, which stands in stark contrast to the former pieces that offered first hand perspectives from physicians or citizens of the towns racked hardest by the opioid epidemic. However, the writing does align with Jacobin’s piece by means of a watered down stance. While not lambasting the drug war, the Times does make it clear it is at least against the current heads of the FDA and its policy makers, reading, “The researchers also found that the F.D.A. did nothing to sharpen the safety program for the drugs, known as transmucosal immediate release fentanyl, even though it was aware of the broader prescribing.” (Goodnought; Sanger-Katz) This is matched with a tone and language similar to the Kaiser article, though, one
that takes a step away from the situation personally to assess the problem plaguing the nation, with word choices that aren’t too harsh or emotional. This would appear even more evident in that both authors of the Kaiser and NYT’s piece don’t personally live in these older, rural places, unlike in the Jacobin piece. Lastly, the article, while not in favor of the FDA’s current actions, seems to intend to inform the reader of the problem instead of persuade them of any apparent government corruption.

The final article that will be studied is the study written by doctors of varying specialties Marcelina Jasmine Silva and Zakary Kelly, titled “The Escalation of the Opioid Epidemic Due to COVID-19 and Resulting Lessons About Treatment Alternatives.” (https://www.ajmc.com/view/the-escalation-of-the-opioid-epidemic-due-to-covid19-and-resulting-lessons-about-treatment-alternatives) In the AJMC website, a forum that aligns with all previous rhetorical mediums noted, the internet. The contents of this write up differ from all preceding articles, primarily due to the fact that it is a more analytic genre, one that also takes into account the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the opioid epidemic in a scientific report fashion, rather than a news article. The piece goes through multiple statistics, ranging from life expectancy to state tax revenue, all of which serve to bolster the understanding that the opioid crisis is not only a loss of human life but also a crippling force to the economy. Unlike preceding articles, the piece tends to write for an audience of researchers or academics who already know the basics on the subject of this crisis, as opposed to the other three articles that write for an audience possibly unfamiliar with the topic at hand. The intended audience also explains the authors' purpose for writing, as it is not simply just to inform but to persuade the reader of what newer policies might be more effective at tackling the matter at hand, as the text reads, “To obtain different outcomes, a novel treatment approach is needed: one that invests an
early and robust bolus of health care resources to help patients address the factors that made them susceptible to opioid reliance and dependency in the first place.” (Jasmine Silva; Kelly) However, this is still coupled with an objective language similar to the Kaiser Health article, as the text states, “Like other epidemics throughout history, causational loss and disability can be seen in public and private economies, as well as in our collective societal cache.” (Jasmine Silva; Kelly) This also demonstrates a levelled and impersonal tone that ties in with a genre such as a report. Finally, the stance of the paper is similar to the Jacobin piece, however without really naming the politics put on display, just by the similarity between both of their suggested solutions to the current epidemic we face.

Among these four pieces, there are notable similarities as well as differences when comparing aspects such as medium, tone and intended audience, among other aspects. For starters, almost all of the analyzed pieces have the same exact medium, published through online media sources. Given AJMC and Jacobin’s founding occurred during the internet age, this is no surprise. However, even New York Times has mostly transferred from providing physical papers to being an online media outlet, as the vast majority of it’s subscriptions are digital-only. Kaiser Health News stands out partially because the piece was written in association with local Wisconsin media outlets, however even this is dwarfed by the general trend of large scale new sources generally shifting to the internet sphere, and Kaiser Health News is no different. Adding to this, Kaiser’s article is further the only piece with the most differentiable audience, similarly due to the fact that it was co-published by more localized institutions, and will therefore be read by people in the more rural regions of America. Contrast this with the fact that the other three articles fall under the umbrella of traditional media audiences, the middle to upper class of America’s population, with the AJMC and Jacobin pieces specifically standing out for the
academic and leftist niches of this class, respectively. Jacobin further stands out for having the most overt bias, as the openly socialist publication indicates a writing that would more boldly condemn politicians, corporations and government policy than the rest of the papers, which range from the New York Times less ill-tempered documenting of government oversight failure, to the AJMC and Kaiser’s more objective view of the opioid crisis. This somewhat extends into the sphere of tone and language, as the Jacobin article also displays the most alarmed perspective on the crisis, going so far as to compare it to dystopian literature. The rest of the pieces fall on varying degrees of this outlook, with the AJMC and New York Time’s tending to flatly state the gigantic scale of the crisis, without the flashier language of outrage or metaphors. Given Kaiser Health’s local angle of the crisis, it prefers to dwell on a less extravagant situation altogether, the struggles of one rural doctor. In terms of purpose, AJMC would fit with Jacobin more, as both appear to lean more towards persuading the reader of specific political solutions, whether by framework of a left activist or a doctor. Kaiser and the New York Times, on the other hand, tend to more inform the reader of the problems, solutions may be sprinkled in both articles but the main focus is still the objective spreading of information. Finally, the genre’s of the writings are in all but one case the same, general articles written for publications. The outlier, AJMC, stands out in a reflection of it’s academic outlook, as the writing comes off more as a scientific report by use of statistics or the wealth of past studies referenced and cited. This also applies to the authorization category, as AJMC stands out as the only piece written by doctors, the rest being penned by various correspondents and those who hold the usual journalist profession. Overall, these four articles help to present an accurate portrayal of the opioid crisis, with critical rhetorical differences to help emphasize the multitude of dimensions and roots to this issue. They all stand united in one fact: the devastating toll this drug pandemic has had on Americans.