

Rhetoric and Close Reading

The Greek philosopher Aristotle defined **rhetoric** as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” At its best, rhetoric is a thoughtful, reflective activity leading to effective communication, including rational exchange of opposing viewpoints.



Classical rhetoric—coming from ancient Greece and Rome—is composed of five categories:

- Invention
- Arrangement
- Style
- Memory
- Delivery

Memory and delivery are concerned primarily with oral or spoken rhetoric and will not be addressed in this handout.

Invention

Invention is the process of coming up (i.e. “inventing”) with ideas for speaking or writing. According to Aristotle, the great rhetorician of ancient Greece, under the heading of invention are three “proofs” or appeals: *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*.

Ethos

- Is an appeal based on the character or credibility of the speaker/writer
- *Ethos* is Greek for “character,” and refers to one’s credibility, trustworthiness, and believability
- Another way to achieve credibility is for the readers to believe the author is someone they can trust
- This kind of appeal is established by the way the argument sounds (i.e. voice, tone), and helps convince the audience that the author and his/her ideas should be taken seriously

Logos

- Is an appeal based on the logic of the written or spoken message
- *Logos* is Greek for “word,” the content of the argument
- This appeal refers to the logical thinking and reasoning of the argument
- Its main concern is the idea and the supporting evidence that proves the author’s stance or claim

Pathos

- Is an emotional appeal to the audience by the speaker or writer
- *Pathos* is Greek for “emotion” and is the appeal that the argument makes to the audience’s feelings
- One can advance one’s arguments by appealing to the audience’s emotions because people are swayed not only by ideas, but by what their emotions or feelings tell them

Aristotle calls these proofs “artistic” because they are under the control of the speaker or writer, who creates them in the minds of the audience.

Aristotle points out that these three *artistic proofs* need to work together in balance for the speaker or writer to achieve maximum persuasive effect. People use their hearts as well as their minds in making decisions, and these three proofs are tools for both analyzing and creating effective arguments.

Arrangement

Invention, or the process of coming up with ideas to speak or write about, is the first step in forming an argument. Once you know what you are going to say, you must next decide in what order to present your ideas. This process is known as *arrangement*.

These are the parts of a strongly organized piece of writing (or speaking);

- *Exordium*: Introduction. The writer gains the audience's attention. Whether it is a single paragraph or several, the introduction draws the readers into the text by piquing their interest, challenging them, or otherwise getting their attention.
- *Narratio*: Background information. The information gives the facts of the case, thus establishing why the subject is a problem that needs addressing.
- *Propositio*: The proposition. The writer presents his or her thesis, or main idea.
- *Confirmatio*: Arguments supporting the proposition. The writer gives evidence to support the thesis or main idea. This is the nuts and bolts of the essay, containing the most specific and concrete details from the text.
- *Refutatio*: The anticipation and refutation of counter-arguments. The writer answers any objections that opponents may raise. This serves as a bridge between the writer's proof and conclusion.
- *Peroratio*: Conclusion. Whether it is one paragraph or several, the peroratio brings the essay to a satisfying close. The writer summarizes the chief arguments, calls for a specific response, and makes a final emotional appeal.

Although you may wish to create your own organizational pattern, rhetoricians seem to agree that this one is the most effective.

Style

Invention is the process of coming up with ideas, and arrangement is putting those ideas in order. In using *style*, a writer must decide how to express those ideas. Stylistic choices can contribute to the writer's ethos, or character, make the content, or logos, of the message more memorable and artistic, and enhance pathos, or the emotional appeal of the writer's message.

Style choices fall into two categories:

- *Diction*: the choice of words (includes rhetoric devices such a metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, etc). When analyzing diction, ask
 - Which of the important words in the passage are general and abstract? Which are specific and concrete?
 - Are the important words formal, informal, colloquial, or slang?

- Are some words nonliteral or figurative, creating figures of speech such as metaphors?
- *Syntax*: how those words are arranged (includes arrangement choices such as parallelisms, repetition, juxtapositions, antithesis, etc). When analyzing syntax, ask:
 - What is the order of the parts of the sentence? Is it the usual or is it inverted?
 - What kind of sentences are used? (declarative, imperative, interrogative, exclamatory, etc)
 - How does the sentence connect its words, phrases, and clauses?

The Rhetorical Triangle

The modern rhetorical triangle consists of five elements:

- Writer
- Audience
- Message
- Purpose
- Rhetorical context

Writer

The writer must ask the question “What can I do to build my credibility and make the audience trust my message?” The writer must establish common ground with the reader and give a reason that he or she can be trusted. You can build your ethos through the choices you make in terms of tone, style, and dealing with counter-arguments.

Audience

To have a message accepted by an audience, the writer should try to appeal to their emotions, which is why the audience is often linked with pathos in the rhetorical triangle.

The writer must ask, “What values and beliefs do I appeal to in the audience? How can I engage both the audience’s heart and mind?” The more you know about your audience, the better you will be to find what will appeal to their emotions.

Message

In the rhetorical triangle, message is often linked with *logos*, the content of the communication. People sometimes confuse *logos* with logic. The logical argument is certainly an important component of *logos*; however, *logos* involves the entire content of the message, which goes well beyond the limits of logic.

As you construct and analyze arguments, ask, “What assumptions support the reasoning? What is the evidence?”

Balancing Writer, Audience, and Message

The writer must emphasize the importance of *all three* of these elements:

- If you put too much emphasis on message, you risk forgetting about the audience or establishing yourself insufficiently.
- If your emphasis is too much on the emotional appeal or the audience, then the content of your message might suffer, or the audience might not trust you.
- If you focus too much on yourself as the writers, then you might be dismissed as an egotist or a blowhard.

Purpose

The purpose of your communication is your rhetorical goal. What are you trying to achieve with your message?

To identify the purpose of your communication, ask “What is my goal? What do I hope to achieve?” It is important that the goals be clear and specific. Unclear goals lead to unclear communication.

Rhetorical Context

The background or situation to which a persuasive message is addressed is considered *rhetorical context*. As the rhetorical situation changes, so should the response. Aristotle refers to the rhetorical context as those proofs that are *inartistic* or *extrinsic* because they are not under the control of the writer and do not emerge from the writer’s creative efforts.

As a writer, consider how you can best tailor a response to the specific demands of a given situation. How should your response change as the rhetorical context changes?

Closing Reading: the Art and Craft of Analysis

All of this might be summarized by what is referred to as **close reading**. A close reading is a careful reading that is attentive to organization, figurative language, sentence structure, vocabulary, and other literary and structural elements of a text.

When reading—and to read well—we must move beyond simply understanding what the text says. As close readers of the text, we must actively engage in a dialogue with the writer. You must actively seek his or her purpose in writing. Your goal is to develop a deeper understanding and insights that are not visible to the less observant reader.