

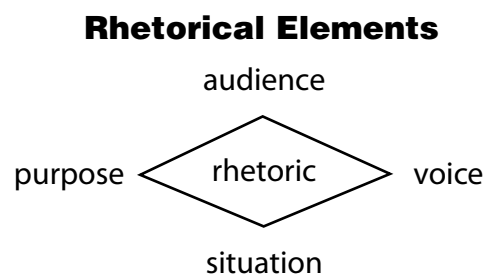
Rhetorical Overview

The Elements of Rhetoric

From the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans to our present day, someone has always attempted to alter the lives of others through words; witness the eloquent phrases in the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” “Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address, even the demagoguery of Adolph Hitler and Saddam Hussein. The major power of their words is the power of rhetoric, the art or discipline of writing effectively and persuasively, used to inform or motivate an audience. While Aristotle defined rhetoric as discovering the best means of persuasion in any given situation, this definition might include not only the argumentative but the expository or informative mode of discourse as well. In fact, rhetoric operates in almost every form of writing we find. For this reason, rhetoric is still an important concern of each of us today, primarily because none of us can escape it—not the lawyer, the teacher, the politician, the computer analyst, or the student. We all indulge in and are exposed to rhetoric daily. Therefore, the goal of the class in which you are enrolled and the goal of this text are to raise your awareness of the rhetorical components all around you so you might be more effective in expressing your own ideas as well as more alert to others’ use and misuse of rhetoric. This text, through its instructions and exercises, can serve as a guide for you in your move toward communicating your thoughts and feelings through words.

Your tasks as a writer can range from giving the directions for planting a garden to persuading an audience that capital punishment should or should not be abolished. Whether you choose to use the expository or persuasive method, you should understand and be able to use certain rhetorical elements in order to make your ideas more convincing or persuasive. These elements include the writer’s purpose, audience, voice, and the situation. While all four elements play a role in every composition, they do not always have equal roles. For example, audience would obviously assume a greater place in process analysis and persuasive essays than in a comparison and contrast essay, and voice might play a minimal role in definition and a major role in narration and description. Nevertheless, each principle must be present for you to achieve your goal of communicating your ideas. However varying their presence in an essay, all four elements must be included.

FIGURE 1-A



PURPOSE

Writing always has a purpose. Every writer must have a reason for writing, and that reason, or purpose, determines which of the other three elements of rhetoric will be emphasized. The general purpose of various writing methods is to know what we think and how best to communicate those thoughts. Therefore, we must always determine what particular message we want to convey and what method would likely be most effective. Do we wish simply to report or inform, to explain, or to persuade? During your college career and afterwards, you might be required to report on a given project or to inform your audience as to the progress of a particular project. In addition, you might be expected to explain to a co-worker the step-by-step procedure for seeking advancement in the company, or you may wish to persuade your supervisor that your particular ideas warrant attention over the proposals of a co-worker. Whichever rhetorical mode you select to write your essay, it must have a purpose, and the purpose must be clearly evident to the reader. The rhetorical purpose is sometimes determined by the specific assignment. If a topic is assigned, your task of deciding on a purpose may already have been done for you. However, often you will have to determine the purpose yourself. If it cannot be discovered immediately, the purpose can emerge from your preliminary brainstorming of the assigned general topic and from the early stages of organizing your random thoughts. Until a purpose is clearly in your mind, though, it is best not to begin writing the essay, else you will likely waste time and effort. Time spent in determining your purpose is far better used than time spent in wandering from point to point without direction. Knowing your purpose helps you sharpen your focus. Make certain, too, that your goals are reasonable and that you can manage what you tell your audience you will accomplish in your statement of purpose, or your thesis. Then you can decide which method of presentation is the most efficient and can best accomplish your purpose.

AUDIENCE

Your audience is your intended listener or reader. Every word we utter is directed toward something or someone, even if we are only talking to ourselves. When we speak to someone, we have the advantage of immediate feedback, of noting the reaction, either verbal or nonverbal, and so we are able to determine whether or not he understands us. When speaking, therefore, we can adjust our voice, gestures, or language to accommodate our listener, thus increasing our chances of being understood. In writing, however, the advantages of instant feedback and subsequent adjustments are not available to us. Therefore we must be more aware of who our audience is and what he or she knows. If we want to achieve an intended effect (purpose), we must be able to make certain assumptions about our audience. In adapting your ideas to meet your particular audience, you must bear in mind the interests and values of those you want to reach. Estimate what their backgrounds are, their education, age, sex, political and religious inclinations, and experiences. What can they expect to gain by reading your ideas? These concerns help you establish which approach to use in presenting your ideas and what to stress or to omit in your essay. Identifying the audience will assist you in anticipating questions and in being prepared to address those questions in your essays. This procedure is not unlike a job applicant's research into a company with whom he intends to interview. Students are correct in assuming their audience is their instructor. But most writing instructors will want you to specify a variety of audiences, real or imagined, in order to sharpen your rhetorical skills to meet the demands of different situations. This task is not always easy. Addressing a variety of audiences in a variety of essays places restraints on students, but these situations more than likely reflect the situations you may encounter in life. You will always be confronted with different audiences, different situations, and different subjects. It is best, then, to keep in mind that you will likely have more

than one audience for your essay—your instructor and some other designated audience. This dual audience requires you to adapt to each one's needs and expectations, just as a newspaper reporter must write a news item with his editor as well as the general reading public in mind. Knowing your audience and writing to them does not mean you have to sacrifice your own beliefs in order to accommodate those of your audience. You must not feel you have to choose between your integrity and reader appeal. If you are skillful in the use of rhetoric, you can maintain an honest and authentic voice and at the same time still be a successful strategist.

VOICE

Having defined your audience, you must now determine the role that you want to assume with your audience. This stance, or voice, that you must assume is much like the different masks you prepare daily. You present yourself one way when attending class, and you present yourself quite differently when you are on a date or visiting your in-laws. While these masks are different, your identity is still the same. Each role is sincere, but each allows you the flexibility to select the appropriate demeanor and words for a specific occasion and audience. This role-playing is similar to the role you assume in presenting your ideas in your essay to a given audience. Consider how you would express yourself in a personal letter to a friend as compared to how you would express yourself in a letter of application for scholarship funds. Authenticity and sincerity are imperative. They guide the voice in its attempt to demonstrate you are serious about your subject and respectful of your audience. Be genuine in whatever voice you assume. You can be sympathetic, neutral, angry, or humorous, but most of all be yourself. What you say and how you say it, therefore, are determined by your purpose, audience, and subject matter.

SITUATION

The fourth element of the rhetorical process is the situation. It is the most important of all four elements because without it you would have no basis for an essay. The remainder of this text is concerned with the steps in putting together your ideas and deciding on the appropriate method of presenting those ideas to a designated audience in a given situation. Which arrangement to use in presenting your essay depends upon the situation, your audience, your voice or the stance you take in offering your ideas, and your purpose. The rules for the art and craft of rhetoric are not written in stone, nor are they "writ in water." A great deal of rhetorical flexibility in regard to these rules is available to writers of compositions, but sometimes the refusal to concern yourself with these rules can have disastrous consequences. In the classroom the results can be an inferior grade, while in the marketplace they can mean unemployment. The rules that are discussed in the following pages represent the methods of writing that are time-proven, that have served people in almost every endeavor— mostly, but not always, for good purposes. We can only hope that you use your rhetorical skills for the general good, never to be abused or misused.

So now we arrive at our starting place; through language and the expression of ideas we begin to understand our world and ourselves.

ON THE NET

How Audience and Purpose Affect Focus. Colorado State University. <<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/processes/focus/list4.cfm>>

Audience and Purpose. State University of New York at Geneseo. <<http://writingguide.geneseo.edu/?pg=topics/audiencepurpose.html>>

A Word About Style, Voice, and Tone. Online Guide to Writing and Research. University of Maryland University College. <<http://www.umuc.edu/ewc/onlineguide/chapter3/chapter3-21.shtml>>

Tone: A Matter of Attitude. Capital Community College. <<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/composition/tone.htm>>

Tone in Business Writing. The OWL at Purdue. <<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/652/01/>>

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