

Ethos/Credibility

Can the audience trust you when you speak to them? An effective speaker has a high level of trustworthiness which the politicians call credibility and Aristotle called ethos. To earn credibility, the speaker has to build a speech with excellent sources that is tailored to meet the specific needs of the audience, and then deliver that speech with confidence and excellent presentation skills. Quintilian (CE 35-95), a famous Roman orator, distilled the essence of credibility to this: "A Good Man Speaking Well." Keeping in mind that even in Rome the idea of *polis* (the city state as it evolved in ancient Greece) was still in effect, it was

possible for an audience to know just about everything about the speaker. His reputation, achievements, family, and service in government and military would be an open book. Listeners would know exactly what “good” meant – and whether the speaker fit the description.

Contemporary speakers must work harder to establish their ethos. Credibility in contemporary times is any combination of impressions or perceptual factors with which the audience invests the speaker. In other words, the speaker cannot insist that the audience find them credible. Members of the audience are going to make up their own minds about whether they believe the speaker to be truthful. The speaker has to create an image as a person worthy of trust by doing solid research, developing a presentation that clearly meets audience expectations, and is emotionally engaging. If all goes well, the audience will endow the speaker with positive ethos.

Some elements of credibility that were important from Aristotle’s time and continue to be important today include goodwill, intelligence, competence, dynamism, and honesty. These elements are all equally important. Notice how all of these words are emotion-laden and subjective. They all describe the reaction of an audience member to the speaker, and that means no speaker will be perceived the

same way by each member of the audience. And while this list is certainly not complete, it's important to remember that anything synonymous with these positive ideas should promote some sympathy among audience members for the speaker.

Goodwill is how the audience perceives the speaker's concern for their well-being. A topic of no obvious interest to the audience, even if the speaker thinks it vitally important, will be ignored by those in attendance. However, if a speaker is careful to identify early in the speech why the audience is affected by the topic, then the speaker stands a much better chance of being perceived as credible and worth listening to. Politicians running for office promising to lower taxes obviously care about their constituents' financial problems, right? The point is to make the audience understand that the speech is not about the speaker; that it is about the audience, regardless of the topic.

A speaker perceived as intelligent doesn't present a transcript full of "A"s or the results of an I.Q. test. Intelligence is a measure of whether the audience thinks the speaker sounds "smart." Carefully choosing appropriate language, using proper and formal grammar, pronouncing words correctly are all individual elements of appearing intelligent. In addition, a speaker will want to use a wider

variety of language choices than in casual conversation and deliver the speech fluently. A halting delivery or frequent pauses coupled with “ums” and “uhs” gets in the way of how a speaker is perceived no matter how many “A”s are on the transcript. Remember, it’s subjective!

Competence is quite often a cultural judgment having to do with the authority or authenticity of the speaker. Deciding whether someone is really capable of doing a good job or worthy of our trust is often a matter of stereotyping. Will a woman do a job as well as a man on the Supreme Court? Can a woman serve as Commander-in-Chief if elected President? Logically, we come to one conclusion. But culturally, our reaction – and therefore our conclusion -- may be different. In the classroom, can an older woman speak with authority about football? Culturally, we may be hesitant to award that stereotype – an older woman – any authority to speak on a topic that is the province of males. Logically, we know that women follow football. Logically, we can prove that women can learn as much about football as men. Logically, we know that many men who have never set foot on a football field are perceived as experts in analysis and broadcasting. But logic and credibility are often miles apart. A speaker wishing to address a topic that seems to be odds with their appearance can side-step the question of

authority by addressing the issue early in the speech. A speaker might ask her audience, “Why would a 48-year-old mother of six be interested in football?” By raising exactly the question that the audience may be pondering, she can define her area of competence, acknowledge the potential for a credibility gap, and move into the speech.

So if a speaker is perceived as having goodwill towards the audience, having intelligence, and seems competent, will they be successful at building positive ethos? Maybe. But credibility can wax and wane throughout the speech depending upon whether the audience continues to remain engaged in the topic. As we’ll learn later, an attentive audience is an audience that is actively listening to the presentation, working with the speaker to make sense of the message. Therefore, another element of ethos, dynamism, is a key to keeping the audience involved in that message. Dynamism is the level of energy with which the speech is delivered. Appearing involved with the topic, moving around the “platform” area, using lots of eye contact, employing a variety of vocal skills, and appropriate hand gestures all draw the audience into the performance and heighten their levels of involvement. Conversely, a speaker without dynamism may appear to be bored with their own speech. A speaker who doesn’t appear to care about the

message that they are sharing certainly would have difficulty eliciting any energy or emotion in the audience members.

Why should the audience care if the speaker doesn't seem to?

Finally, the audience must believe that the speaker is not lying to them. Perceived honesty is a measure of how truthful the speaker seems to be about their sources of information and their use of testimony, the conclusions they reach and their concern for the audience. Honesty, like all human values, is determined by a complicated matrix of emotions, experiences, and cultural expectations. A speaker who is unable to arouse empathy for their remarks may be perceived as *dis*-honest, so a thorough analysis of audience needs plus excellent, credible sources are the best plan to elicit the impression of honesty for your presentation.

Remember, there are many more words that can describe *ethos*; these are just some representative terms to give you an idea of the general concept.

Shifting Ethos

The audience members will change their opinions repeatedly of how credible you are as a speaker throughout the presentation. The good news is that even if you forget a part of your speech or stumble through a phrase or drop your

notecards on the floor, you still have lots of opportunities to end your speech with heightened ethos.

Initial ethos marks the beginning of your speech. This can also be described as first impressions. What you wear, how you arrange your hair, which jewelry you've chosen for the day, whether there is something left from lunch stuck on the side of your mouth – all of these elements contribute to “what” the audience sees when you leave your seat to move to the front of the room. How you walk to the podium, what you say on your way up to the front of the room, how you stand before the speech begins, the expression on your face before you open your mouth - all of these elements contribute to “what” the audience sees before you begin your prepared speech. Absolutely everything that you do or say prior to pronouncing the first prepared words of your speech contribute to initial ethos – the credibility with which you begin your presentation.

A speaker who looks confident, is stunningly dressed, wears an open, friendly expression, and strides with mastery to the podium will already have a positive ethos before saying a word. If that same speaker then says to the audience, “I’m so nervous”, all of that positive credibility could be wiped out. Ironically, you may not even look a bit nervous; if your performance is recorded, you may be

pleasantly surprised to see how confident you appear! If you give a fabulous presentation after telling the audience how nervous you feel, the audience has lowered expectations and a lack of confidence in your ability to get through the performance, let alone finish with any credibility!

There is a realistic difference between a solid, competent performance and a speaker's own expectation of perfection. There is no such animal as a perfect speech. During the course of the presentation, each speaker will have moments of brilliance and moments where memory fails. That's OK. The audience will be forming an impression of the speaker's overall ethos which is usually quite accurate. When we do assessment, we find that most listeners can agree on the general level of a speaker's competency by the end of the presentation. A couple of missteps in a speech that is delivered with confidence and that is meaningful to the audience will be no problem. In fact, without the occasional misstep, a speaker might seem to be uncaring or emotionally disengaged. A speech that is too good – too slick – can be uninteresting or even distracting.

At the end of the speech, when the speaker has concluded and is finished pronouncing words, the audience will be left with an impression of terminal ethos. The audience now has a measure of credibility for the speaker

based on the overall performance, and that impression will last until the next time this speaker gives a presentation.

There are other sources of ethos that can help a speaker be perceived as credible by the audience. Borrowed ethos refers to any awards or titles or achievements that a speaker brings to the podium. The student body president who gives a speech on issues in front of the student senate will have a lot more credibility (initial ethos) simply because of being president. Note that the President of the United States usually speaks from behind a podium with the Great Seal of the United States prominently displayed on the front.

When a famous person is introduced at a testimonial dinner, the speaker doing the introduction goes on at great length with a list of achievements that contributed to the fame of the special guest. No matter how inept the presentation given by the famous person, they will continue to be famous, but members of that particular audience might not want to attend any future speeches that they might be asked to give!

For most students, the only source of initial ethos in the speech classroom is what one wears and does on the way up to the front of the classroom. With a little thought and preparation, any student can make an excellent first impression.