

## DETERMINE THE KAIROS OF THE ARGUMENT

Each time a rhetor (a writer or speaker) constructs an argument, he or she is working within a context of a certain moment, a particular time and place. This moment, which the ancient Greeks called **kairos** (a word which has no exact English translation) may include audience and culture in addition to time and place. Kairos both constrains and enables what a rhetor can say or write effectively in a context. For example, when Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his “I Have a Dream Speech,” his words were carefully crafted to take into consideration the setting in front of the Lincoln Memorial. He said, “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.” The words “five score” recall the “four score and seven years ago” of Lincoln’s words in the Gettysburg Address. And King also pointed out that he and his audience that day stood in the “symbolic shadow” of Lincoln who signed the Emancipation Proclamation. In these ways, he made use of Lincoln’s shadow to legitimize what he was saying about civil rights.

In other ways, however, the kairos of the moment limited what he could say. His audience included both the thousands of people in front of him who were dedicated to the cause of racial equality and also the audience of those millions watching on television who may or may not have agreed with his message. Thus, the tone of his message needed to be subtly measured not to antagonize those among his audience, particularly the television audience, who may have opposed aspects of the civil rights movement such as school integration. However, he spoke to let both his supporters and his opponents know, “The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.” Yes, King advocated non-violent demonstrations, but they were demonstrations nonetheless; he was putting opponents on notice that the disruptions caused by demonstrations would continue “until justice emerges.” King consistently took the high road, while maintaining the power of the kairotic moment when he spoke, one reason that his words continue to be studied decades after his death.

## CONSIDER THE ELEMENTS OF KAIROS

Not every speech is given in front of the Lincoln Memorial, but every speech or written text has a kairos, and the effective rhetor takes advantage of factors relating to the audience and the situation which could not happen just any time and any place. Following are some suggestions for maximizing the advantages of kairos.

- *Determine the kairotic moment.* What is the timeliness of the issue? Has something happened recently regarding this issue that can be emphasized in an argument? For example, if you are writing about the death penalty, focusing upon a recent case or a recent protest would emphasize the timeliness of the issue.
- *Know your audience.* What are the characteristics of the audience? Do they agree with your position on the issue or not? What is their educational level and extent of their knowledge about the subject? For example, if you are writing about immigration policy reform, does your audience believe there is a need for reform? Do they have personal experience with illegal or legal immigrants? You can judge the amount of background information you need to provide based upon the characteristics of your audience. Also, the most important members of the audience, so far as an argument is concerned, are not those who already agree with you but those who are neutral or even slightly opposed to your position but willing to listen. As King did, be careful not to phrase your argument in ways that are insulting to people who do not agree with you, for if you do so, they will stop listening to you.
- *Establish your personal ethos.* As a rhetor, do you have a personal connection to the topic? For example, if you are writing about the pros and cons of using medication to treat ADHD, do you yourself have that condition or know intimately someone who does? If so, it may be appropriate to include a mention of your story, along with other background information in your essay. If you have no personal connection to your topic, find the stories of others that do have such a connection and become their advocate.
- *Find ground to stand on.* This may not work for every essay, but is there something about the place where you stand, literally or figuratively, that adds ethos to your argument, as Martin Luther King stood at the Lincoln Memorial? If, for example, you live in a border community, you stand at an important juncture for issues such as immigration, free-trade, and

national security. In the essay that follows, “How Clean, Green Atomic Energy Can Stop Global Warming,” the authors begin with the sentence, “On a cool spring morning a quarter century ago, a place in Pennsylvania called Three Mile Island...” Thus, they place themselves figuratively at that critical place in the atomic energy debate—Three Mile Island.

## INCLUDE IMAGES TO INCREASE KAIROTIC APPEAL

Kairos is about making use of the context of an argument—a particular moment in a specific time and place. If you were, for example, writing an essay about the causes of the 2008 “mortgage meltdown” and the resulting crisis in the United States, you could give your audience a more immediate sense of the time and place by including an illustration such as the one below from the *Economist*.



This *Economist* photo vividly illustrates the reaction of one man on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange to one of the downturns in the stock market, and in one glance will make clear to your reader the seriousness of the financial crisis from the perspective of Wall Street.

Although such an image is copyrighted, you can scan and import it into your essay without formal permission because it is a class assignment for educational

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## SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES UTILIZE TEXT AND IMAGES

**Social networking** sites such as Facebook and MySpace used daily by millions of people to keep in touch with busy friends, business associates, and those who share common interests. Most social network sites allow members to create a profile for themselves and then have additional pages for contacts with friends or other topics. Some members choose to have closed or internal social networking which is members or “friends” only. Other sites allow open membership. Social scientists and rhetoricians have begun studying social networking sites because it is a new and different communication medium but, considering the millions using the sites on a daily basis, the sites seem destined to continue.



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