

## WHAT IS RHETORIC?

The word *rhetoric* is a good example of a word whose meaning has changed dramatically over time. You have probably heard someone say of a politician's speech, "Oh, that's just rhetoric," meaning that the politician's words are just empty verbiage or hot air. The politician was attempting to sound impressive while saying nothing that had real meaning or perhaps making promises he or she had no intention of keeping—essentially engaging in verbal deception. However, in the field of composition and writing studies, rhetoric has a much different meaning. Though definitions vary from one practitioner to another, rhetoric generally means the study and use of persuasion, a meaning that traces its roots back to the original use of the term by ancient Greeks and Romans.

During the golden age of Greece and Rome, from 500 B.C.E. to 100 C.E., art, architecture, and literature thrived. Rhetoric, in the form of oratory, was essential to both societies, as Greeks and Romans employed rhetoric to resolve disputes in the law courts and to promote political action. Philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and the Roman rhetoricians Quintilian and Cicero were aware of the possible abuses of rhetoric, but to them, rhetoric was an integral part of public life, as well as the primary means of educating young people in their future roles as citizens. Philosophers in ancient Greece and Rome wrote books about rhetoric which became the basis of the teaching of writing and other essential subjects that have influenced the educational process ever since.

Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering, in a given instance, the available means of persuasion," which we might paraphrase as the power to see the means of persuasion available in any given situation. Each part of this definition is important. Rhetoric is power; for the person who is able to speak eloquently, choosing the most suitable arguments about a topic for a specific audience in a particular situation, is the person most likely to persuade. In both Greece and Rome, the primary use of rhetoric was oratory, persuasion through public speaking. However, texts of many famous speeches were recorded and studied as models by students, and prominent rhetoricians wrote treatises and handbooks for teaching rhetoric. To Greeks and Romans, a person who could use rhetoric effectively was a person of influence and power because he could persuade his audience to action. The effective orator could win court cases; the effective orator could influence the passage or failure of laws; the effective orator could send a nation to war or negotiate peace.

Skill with rhetoric has conveyed power through the ages, though in our contemporary world, rhetoric is often displayed in written text such as a book, newspaper or magazine article, or scientific report, rather than as a speech. Persuasive communication can also be expressed visually, as an illustration that accompanies a text or a cartoon that conveys its own message. Indeed, in our high visual society with television, movies, video games, and the Internet, images can often persuade more powerfully than words alone.

Using rhetoric effectively means being able to interpret the rhetoric we are presented with in our everyday lives. Knowledge of persuasive communication or rhetoric empowers us to present our views and persuade others to modify their ideas. Through changes in ideas, rhetoric leads to action. Through changes in actions, rhetoric affects society.

#### **SELECTED DEFINITIONS OF RHETORIC**

**Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.**—*Rhetoric is “the faculty of discovering, in a given instance the available means of persuasion.”*

**Cicero, 90 C.E.**—*Rhetoric is “speech designed to persuade.” Also, “eloquence based on the rules of art.”*

**Quintilian, 95 C.E.** —*Rhetoric is “the science of speaking well.”*

**Augustine of Hippo, ca. 426 C.E.** —*Rhetoric is “the art of persuading people to accept something, whether it is true or false.”*

**Anonymous, ca. 1490–1495,**—*Rhetoric is “the science which refreshes the hungry, renders the mute articulate, makes the blind see, and teaches one to avoid every lingual ineptitude.”*

**Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, 1531**—*“To confess the truth, it is generally granted that the entire discipline of rhetoric from start to finish is nothing other than an art of flattery, adulation, and, as some say more audaciously, lying, in that, if it cannot persuade others through the truth of the case, it does so by means of deceitful speech.”*

**Hoyt Hudson, 1923**—*“In this sense, plainly, the man who speaks most persuasively*

*uses the most, or certainly the best, rhetoric; and the man whom we censure for inflation of style and strained effects is suffering not from too much rhetoric, but from a lack of it."*

**I. A. Richards, 1936**—*"Rhetoric, I shall urge, should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies."*

**Sister Miriam Joseph, 1937**—*Rhetoric is "the art of communicating thought from one mind to another, the adaptation of language to circumstance. "*

**Kenneth Burke, 1950**—*"[T]he basic function of rhetoric [is] the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents."*

**Gerard A. Hauser, 2002**—*"Rhetoric, as an area of study, is concerned with how humans use symbols, especially language, to reach agreement that permits coordinated effort of some sort."*

## **WHAT IS PRAXIS?**

The term **praxis** can be translated as "process" or "practice," or "experience." However, Aristotle used the term in a special way, to specify practical reasoning, for which the goal was action. Aristotle lists praxis among the three kinds of knowledge corresponding to different forms of human activities: contemplative (theoria), practical (praxis) and productive (poiesis). To be practical in the Aristotelian sense is a little different from what "being practical" means today. It indicates the ability to apply theory to concrete situations, to make things work in a complex circumstance as opposed to one who is impractical or unrealistic. However, praxis in the Aristotelian sense also has a creative element that raises it above the mundane or pragmatic.

With praxis there is no knowledge ahead of time of the right means by which we achieve a good outcome in a particular situation. In terms of rhetoric, this means that the rhetor, confronted with a speaking or writing situation, seeks the means appropriate to a particular situation. As a rhetor thinks about the purpose to be achieved, he or she invents, then perhaps revises, the persuasive means to achieve that purpose.

## RHETORICAL ARGUMENT

Often, in our culture, the word argument is taken to mean disagreements or even fights, with raised voices, rash words, and hurt feelings. We have the perception of an argument as something that has victory and defeat, winners and losers. Argument, in the sense of a **rhetorical argument**, however, means the carefully crafted presentation of a viewpoint or position on a topic, the giving of thoughts, ideas and opinions along with reasons for their support. The persuasive strength of the argument rests upon the rhetorical skills of the rhetor (the speaker or the writer) in utilizing the tools of language to persuade a particular audience.

Often, an argument is a dialogue—one person or group presenting one viewpoint and hearing another viewpoint in response. After the Jet Blue flight delays, citizen groups lobbied for government intervention and the establishment of a passenger bill of rights. Jet Blue responded by voluntarily issuing such a bill of rights. After the San Ysidro McDonald's shooting, a citizen group requested that the building be razed, and McDonald's responded by tearing down the building and donating the land to the city. Such rational arguments may occur in conversation, public speaking, or non-fiction prose.

However, contentious issues often are not so easily settled, even temporarily. For example, in the United States there is a spreading ban on smoking in restaurants, hospitals, and other public buildings because of evidence that even second hand smoke can cause health problems. Many smokers, though, think that forbidding smoking in public, including parking lots and other outdoor spaces, is going too far. A recent opinion piece in a Florida newspaper responding to a hospital's ban on smoking in the parking lot says,

I respect my fellow citizens and their wish to breathe clean air and have always kept my distance from others when I am smoking, out of common courtesy. However, recent policies banning cigarette smoking based on political correctness or personal bias and certainly not law are becoming far beyond reasonable....[It is] ridiculous because if these hospital administrators were so concerned about the quality of the air on their "campuses," they would also ban motor vehicles on

their premises. But no, those very administrators who target the few remaining cigarette smokers are probably driving to work in their SUVs and polluting the air far more than a stressed-out patient or visitor who smokes.

In contrast, a Massachusetts beach town banned smoking at its public beaches because of complaints about second hand smoke and cigarette butts littering the beaches. The chairman of the town's Recreation Commission, according to an article in the *Boston Globe*, said, "There were a number [of complaints] about little children playing in the beach, and next thing you know, they come back and have cigarette butts in their hands. There were a few comments about smoke and smelling, but mainly it was the disposal." A local pulmonary physician, according to the article, commented in a letter to the commission, "People seemed truly astonished that playing ball was prohibited [at the beach] but smoking within a few feet of young children or even pregnant women was permissible."

What do you think? Do smokers have rights that are violated by bans on smoking in public places?



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