**I. What is a Rhetoric?**

Rhetoric is the ancient art of persuasion. It’s a way of presenting and making your views convincing and attractive to your readers or audience. In the classical world, rhetoric was considered one of the most important school subjects, and no gentleman was raised without extensive formal training in the skill. That’s why the politicians of, say, the 19th century were so eloquent and well-spoken in [comparison](https://literaryterms.net/comparison/)with modern politicians.

Today, people sometimes use the word “rhetoric” in a negative light. For example, they might say that a politician is “all rhetoric and no substance,” meaning the politician makes good speeches but doesn’t have good ideas. This is an important point – a person can be good at rhetoric without actually having good ideas! To use an extreme example, John C. Calhoun was an extremely talented *rhetorician* who used his skills to argue in defense of slavery!

Although rhetoric is often connected with making speeches, it applies just as well to writing.

**II. Examples of Rhetoric**

***Example 1***

*The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us.*

Abraham Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* is widely praised as one of history’s greatest speeches. Though the speech took less than two minutes to deliver, the country was deeply moved by it. In those two minutes, Lincoln summarized all the pain and suffering that had been brought by the Civil War and looked forward to the good that might someday come from a Union victory. Although Lincoln wasn’t trying to persuade his audience of anything in particular, he was presenting an overall view or understanding of the war, which he wanted his listeners to accept as their own.

***Example 2***

Advertisements are a very subtle form of rhetoric. Every advertisement you see is an attempt to persuade you that you should take a certain action – usually buying a product or supporting a political candidate. Knowing this, you can analyze the various techniques that advertisements use. Are they stimulating your appetites, such as your desire for food or companionship? Are they using the emotions? Are they presenting logical [arguments](https://literaryterms.net/argument/)?

**III. The Importance of Rhetoric**

Rhetoric matters because arguments matter. If you can persuade people to come around to your point of view, you can be more successful in all sorts of subjects. And it’s not just an academic skill! Think about the job process: when you write a cover letter, your job is to convince the employer that you are the best person for the job. How will you do this? By using effective rhetoric in the letter. Similarly, your success at the interview stage will depend largely on the way you use rhetoric to present yourself.

**IV. Examples of Rhetoric in Literature and Scholarship**

***Example 1***

Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* was only published a few years ago (2010), but already it’s become highly influential in the world of politics. In the book, Alexander uses a combination of logical arguments, historical context, and emotional human stories to show the harm caused by the modern criminal justice system. Her book has proved highly persuasive to outside activists and mainstream politicians alike, which demonstrates the power of her rhetoric.

***Example 1***

*Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;*

*I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.*

*The evil that men do lives after them;*

*The good is oft interred with their bones;*

*So let it be with Caesar.*

*(William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar)*

Shakespeare’s plays, especially his histories, are full of high rhetoric. The most famous example is probably Marc Antony’s funeral oration from *Julius Caesar*. In the speech, Marc Antony faces a hostile crowd, most of whom are celebrating Caesar’s death. But, through careful rhetoric, Marc Antony convinces them that they should not be too quick to celebrate, and that Caesar may not have been such a bad man after all. The speech is a brilliant synthesis of pathos and logos, since it appeals both to the audience’s logical minds and to their emotional hearts.