

## **RHETORIC: PERSUASION AND IDENTIFICATION**

### **What is Rhetoric?**

The definition of rhetoric commonly used is “the art of persuasion.” Rhetoric is everywhere and can involve any kind of text including speech, written word, images, movies, documentaries, the news, etc. So it is important to understand how to navigate the murky waters of persuasion and rhetoric.

Aristotle defined rhetoric as “an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion”. Since then, Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric has been reduced in many situations to mean simply “persuasion.” At its best, this simplification of rhetoric has led to a long tradition of people associating rhetoric with politicians, lawyers, or other occupations noted for persuasive speaking. At its worst, the simplification of rhetoric has led people to assume that rhetoric is merely something that manipulative people use to get what they want (usually regardless of moral or ethical concerns).

However, over the last century or so, the academic definition and use of “rhetoric” has evolved to include any situation in which people consciously communicate with each other. In brief, individual people tend to perceive and understand just about everything differently from one another (this difference varies to a lesser or greater degree depending on the situation, of course). This expanded perception has led a number of more contemporary rhetorical philosophers to suggest that rhetoric deals with more than just persuasion. Instead of just persuasion, rhetoric is the set of methods people use to *identify* with each other—to encourage each other to understand things from one another’s perspectives. From interpersonal relationships to international peace treaties, the capacity to understand or modify another’s perspective is one of the most vital abilities that humans have. Hence, understanding rhetoric in terms of “identification” helps us better communicate and evaluate all such situations.

## Rhetorical Strategies for Persuasion

According to Aristotle, rhetoric uses three primary modes of persuasion: ethos, logos, and pathos. A good argument will generally use a combination of all three appeals to make its case.

- **Ethos** or the ethical appeal is based on the character, credibility, or reliability of the writer stating that his or her background, credentials, or experience should convince you of the accuracy of the argument.
- **Logos** appeals to logic or reason-often citing facts, figures, and statistics.
- **Pathos** appeals to emotion, empathetic responses, or shared moral values.

## The Rhetorical Strategy of Identification

In rhetoric, the term *identification* refers to any of the wide variety of means by which a writer or speaker may establish a shared sense of values, attitudes, and interests with an audience. Kenneth Burke was the first to use the term *identification* in a rhetorical sense.

"Identification is affirmed . . . precisely because there is division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity" (Burke, 1950).

"Rhetoric . . . works its symbolic magic through identification," says R.L. Heath. "It can bring people together by emphasizing the 'margin of overlap' between the rhetorician's and the audience's experiences" (*The Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001).

[An author] persuades an audience by the use of **identifications**; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify with his interests; and the he draws on identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience. So, there is no chance of our keeping apart the meanings of persuasion, identification, and communication (Burke, 1950).

Example:

"You're an improbable person, Eve, and so am I. We have that in common. Also a contempt for humanity, an inability to love and be loved, insatiable ambition--and talent. We deserve each other . . . and you realize and you agree how completely you belong to me."

(George Sanders as Addison DeWitt in the film *All About Eve*, 1950)

### **Why Do I Need to Think Rhetorically?**

A rhetorical analysis asks you to “examine the interactions between a text, an author, and an audience.” However, before you can begin the analysis you must first understand the historical context of the text and the rhetorical situation.

To locate a text’s historical context, you must determine where in history the text is situated—was it written in the past five years? Ten? One hundred? You should think about how that might affect the information being delivered. Once you determine the background of the text, you should determine the rhetorical situation (i.e. who, what, when, where, why). The following questions may help:

- What is the topic of the text?
- Who is the author? What are the author’s credentials, what sort of experiences has he or she had? How do his or her credentials, or lack of, connect (or not) with the topic of the text?
- Who is the target audience? Who did the author have in mind when he or she created the text?
- Who is the unintended audience? Are they related in anyway to the target audience?
- What was the occasion, historical context, or setting? What was happening during the time period when the text was produced? Where was the text distributed or published?
- How does the topic relate to the author, audience, and occasion?
- What is the author’s purpose? Why did he or she create the text?
- In what medium was the text originally produced?

Meaning can change based on when, where, and why a text was produced and meaning can change depending on who reads the text. Rhetorical situations affect the meaning

of a text because it may have been written for a specific audience, in a specific place, and during a specific time. An important part of the rhetorical situation is audience and since many of the articles were not written with you in mind, the meaning you interpret or recognize might be different from the author's original target audience. For example, if you read an article about higher education written in 2019, then you, the reader, are connected with and understand the context of the topic. However, if you were asked to read a text about higher education written in 1876, you would probably have a hard time understanding and connecting to it because you are not the target audience and the text's context (or rhetorical situation) has changed.

Further, the occasion for writing might be very different, too. Articles or scholarly works that are at least five years old or older, may include out of date references and may not represent relevant or accurate information. Older works require that you investigate significant historical moments or changes that have occurred since the writing of text.