

RHETORIC

A class on public speaking is essentially a class in rhetoric. The word rhetoric is often used to indicate that the speaker is lying (“his record doesn’t match his rhetoric”) or that the speaker is filling air with meaningless talk (“let’s get past the rhetoric and get down to business”). It is true that term has gotten a lot of bad press over the past 2000 years or so, but the study of rhetoric is the study of what is persuasive. We are certainly not the first group to study what goes into a dynamic and persuasive speech. The ancient Greeks and Romans gave a great deal of thought to what good speaking required. Throughout history, thinkers and charlatans alike have devoted a considerable amount of effort to figuring out what sounds good, looks good, and works to motivate various audiences.

DEFINITIONS OF RHETORIC

Since the study of rhetoric has been around for so many years, there are a number of different definitions for the word. Aristotle defined rhetoric as “the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion.” Plato held that rhetoric is “the art of winning the soul by discourse.” The Roman thinker Quintilian suggested simply that rhetoric is the art of speaking well.” John Locke however held a dimmer view of the art and wrote that rhetoric was a “powerful instrument of error and deceit.” Gerard Hauser, more contemporary thinker (one who is still alive), suggests “Rhetoric is communication that attempts to coordinate social action. For this reason, rhetorical communication is explicitly pragmatic. Its goal is to influence human choices on specific matters that require immediate attention.”

For the purposes of this class, we will define rhetoric as “the study and art of clear and persuasive speaking.” This doesn’t begin to capture all the ways in which rhetoric could be (and has been) defined, but it does focus our study on the aspects of rhetoric most relevant to our present concern.

Earlier thinkers argued that the study and practice of rhetoric involved five main parts. We can think of these parts as steps in preparing a good speech:

5 PARTS OF RHETORIC

1. **INVENTION:** The first thing that must go into a good speech is good material. Invention means finding or thinking up good speech content. Basically, a good speaker knows what s/he is speaking about. There are a number of different strategies that we will study to help prime the mental pump. Our focus in this class is on good arguments (solid claims rooted in valid evidence). So, the inventional focus for us is coming up with good arguments for

our audience. Aristotle suggested that the material that went into a speech was either artistic (you had to think it up) or inartistic (it already existed). Proving your claims relies on inartistic proofs (hard evidence like verifiable facts, statistical evidence, and the like) and artistic proofs. We all know that good arguments require inartistic evidence, so let's look at the artistic proofs. By artistic, we means simply that it requires you to think and create. Aristotle saw three main ways in which you created an artistic proof for an argument

A. LOGOS: We convince people through our use of logic. So, I can argue that it rained last night by pointing to the puddles on the ground. I use the evidence of rain puddles to make a claim about something that I didn't see, relying on the basic logical premise that "puddles generally indicate recent rain." This isn't the most contentious of arguments, you say. Very true, but the principle is the same. We use appeals to logic to help support our arguments. Economists make logical arguments all the time. They have evidence about current trends, but they argue about where to invest money based on logic—they don't know 100% what the market will do, but they can try to figure out where to invest based on historical precedent, prevailing wisdom, and informal logic.

B. PATHOS: We persuade people by appealing to their emotions. Of course, we are not simply logical animals, we have emotions, and these often shape how we see and understand the world. Now an appeal to pathos doesn't mean that we simply tug at people's heart strings or we try to scare them into acting our way. Of course this happens, but you would be hard pressed to call it good argumentation. Aristotle saw pathos as "putting the audience in the right frame of mind." So, if you are arguing for something that might seem unfamiliar to your audience, you would be well advised to tell some personal stories that helped people understand the human element. The commercials you see asking for help in funding starving populations rely a lot on pathos. They are trying to evoke your compassion by showing you what the living conditions are like for many in need.

C. ETHOS: We can persuade people by virtue of good character. Aristotle suggested that of the three artistic proofs, ethos was potentially the most persuasive. Why? Because it was a matter of trust. Do we trust the speaker's

credibility as a person and her/his credibility on the topic? Do we trust that the speaker has our interests at heart? We can gain ethos by doing all the research that a good speech needs and then demonstrating that ethos by being able to talk about the topic intelligently. We can “borrow” ethos by citing the best research available. Ultimately, though ethos must be earned by showing the audience that you are a credible source on this topic. Modern advertising abounds with arguments based on ethos (many of them flawed). Beer ads: “This beer must be yummy because look at all the attractive men and women who seem to enjoy it.” The famous example of a weird appeal to ethos was the aspirin ad that used the reasoning “I’m not a doctor, but a play one on TV, and I think this aspirin is good at relieving headaches.” Basically, you are receiving an actor’s credibility for a medical product. Of course, there are many valid appeals to ethos. An argument about the need to renovate the state’s highway system is more convincing when made by the Secretary of Transportation than by an employee at McDonald’s.

A good speech requires you to think about a host of different issues ranging from possible arguments, oppositional arguments, and all the different types of evidence you can use. A good speech also includes a good mix of logos, pathos, and ethos. The process of sorting through all this material and deciding on the best for you case is the process of invention.

2. ARRANGEMENT: Once you determine what your speech will be about and what types of artistic and inartistic proofs you will use, then you need to think about the best possible way to arrange your speech. How much background information do you need to give? How should you arrange your main points? How long or short should the introduction be? Arranging a speech is in many ways more difficult than arranging an essay because a reader can jump around in an essay (look at the section headings, jump back and revisit something they were unclear on, etc.), but an audience member must listen to the speaker’s flow of information. It then becomes important to think about how your audience will hear and understand your speech. We will focus on a number of different ways of arranging a speech so that it is easy for an audience to understand and remember.

3. STYLE: Once you know *what* you will say and the *order* in which you will say it, then you can begin to focus more on the details of exactly *how* you will say it. Some speeches are

stylistically rich (Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is a famous example) while others are more stylistically plain (say, a business presentation), yet both have a type of style. The rhetorician Cicero talked about high, middle, and low styles in public speaking. We are probably familiar with the high style; many political orators use it for famous speeches. In the U.S. the State of the Union Address is usually delivered in a high style. We are also probably familiar with the low style. If not, watch a television talk show. Here the style is very casual. Ultimately, style is governed by the topic and the audience that you are addressing. We are most concerned with the middle and middle-high style. You should think strategically about your style and how you audience will hear and understand your words, but you should also speak conversationally. Too low of a style and you hurt your ethos; too high of a style and you might sound phony.

4. MEMORY: This part of rhetoric was really important for speakers in classical Greece and Rome because they delivered really long speeches (often in very high style). It remains important for us because a speech is spoken not read. If you don't practice your speech, you won't be familiar with it. If you aren't familiar with your speech, you will probably read it to us. This is not a class in public reading, but in public speaking. You should not try to memorize your speeches word for word. This will only exacerbate any fear you have of public speaking. However, you should know what the main parts of your speech are. This comes down to a matter of knowledge and practice. You need to know your material well enough that you can talk about the topic intelligently (invention). You also need to practice enough so that you know how best to explain this topic to the audience (arrangement and style).

5. DELIVERY: The final part of a study of rhetoric is the one that most of us fear the most. That is the standing up in front of an audience and actually delivering the speech. Of course, if you have the invention, arrangement, style, and memory parts down pat, the delivery part shouldn't give you too many headaches. That said, there are a number of delivery issues that can help or hurt your speech. We will study some of those delivery issues that are most distracting and those techniques that are most beneficial. However, the basic delivery approach we will focus on in this class is natural delivery. That is, we will focus on how to speak in a comfortable and conversational way in front of an audience. This doesn't mean simply speaking as you would with your friends about any subject, but finding a style that looks good, sounds good, and helps your ethos.