

Reviewing Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the art of using language to sway and/or convince an audience. In Ancient Greece, rhetoric was a studied subject and paid profession. Over time, however, rhetoric has gained a negative connotation, as seen in Ezra Pound's proclamation that "[r]hetoric is the art of dressing up some unimportant matter so as to fool the audience for the time being". And while there's no denying that rhetoric has been used for negative purposes, it's the author or presenter's intention, not the tool itself, that invites moral debate. Rhetoric remains an important tool in any writer's toolbox.

Rhetoric is divided into three main components: ethos, pathos and logos.

Ethos is tied to the speaker's credibility in the eyes of his or her audience.

For example, if you know someone who has lied to you in the past, you are less likely to believe that person in the future.

Alternatively, if you are listening to a teacher explain a concept, his/her credibility will make you more likely to believe what he/she is saying.

While you may try to be noble and honest when presenting an argument, the audience might decide that your personal motives are violating your ethos, and they will not believe you. Let's imagine that you are putting forth the argument that the licensing age for drivers be lowered to fourteen. If the audience knows that a car company will give you a free car if your speech is effective, your ethos will be low.

Pathos uses emotion to influence the audience.

For example, when you receive an email message about a heart wrenching situation which ends with a request for a donation, the story's use of emotions, its pathos, is what is appealing to you as a reader to open your wallet.

Exaggeration and metaphor can often help appeal to emotion. In many cases, though, pathos is not achieved in a single story or metaphor, but through the speaker's passionate delivery. The speaker who believes passionately in his/her topic, makes clear eye contact, uses his/her voice to demonstrate conviction, and builds up the emotion throughout the delivery is using pathos effectively.

Another common use of pathos is to create a sense of community: the speaker will make the audience feel welcome and popular for believing the message of the rhetoric. Conversely, anyone in the audience who disagrees will be made to feel rejected and/or inferior. Propaganda will often use pathos to communicate its message in this way.

Logos uses reason to create a persuasive argument.

When a speaker uses logos, he/she will often rely on facts, statistics, and logic to prove an argument to the audience. The use of logos will often make the speaker appear more reliable and credible, enhancing the effect of ethos as well.

Logos will often rely upon inductive or deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning explains what is known and tries to draw conclusions, moving from the specific to the general.

For example, every computer relies on an energy source therefore all computers must require an energy source.