

## Rhetorical Concepts

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**Analysis of Audience and Purpose:** Rhetors compose for a variety of purposes and audiences. When we ask students to analyze the rhetoric of a text, whether written, spoken, visual, or multimodal, they should begin by asking, “What audience is the rhetor addressing?” and “For what purpose(s) is the rhetor addressing that audience?” Describing texts in terms of the traditional modes (narration, description, explanation, persuasion) elides the purposes rhetors pursue, but students can generate a wide-ranging list of purposes for which rhetors compose. Such purposes may include self-expression, entertainment, persuasion intended to encourage an audience to embrace particular beliefs or attitudes or to act in certain ways, and communication of new knowledge, with further variation both within and across these purposes. By generating lists of rhetors’ purposes and learning to identify the clues within texts that reveal those purposes, student writers develop greater flexibility and control of their own choices as rhetors. The critical thinking questions in the modules, which focus on text structure, the use of evidence, word choice, syntax, and writers’ assumptions, give clues about both the audiences rhetors address and the purposes they pursue.

**Analysis of Technique:** The critical thinking questions throughout the modules guide students in thinking about the techniques with which rhetors accomplish their purposes. Discussing specifically the relationships among rhetors’ choices of tone, content, elaboration, evidence, reference, diction, and sentence structure and their purposes can help students think more critically as readers and make more thoughtful choices as composers of a wide variety of texts.

**Aristotelian Appeals:** The approach to Aristotelian appeals featured in these modules focuses students on three fundamental, interwoven means of arguing: rhetorical reasoning or the logically based elements of the argument (logos); the credibility or image of the rhetor as created through the text (ethos); and the emotions the rhetor kindles in the audience through the text (pathos). It is important to note that the Aristotelian appeals—or *pisteis*, to use his plural term—are not isolated strategies or tropes, as they are often compartmentalized by beginning students of rhetoric, but interrelated kinds of proof or means (ways) of persuasion. Thus, rhetors engage readers in these three ways using a variety of rhetorical tools—one brief passage may integrate all three means of persuasion. In most sophisticated texts, in fact, the three appeals are ultimately inextricable.

**Backing:** In Toulmin’s model of argument, backing refers to support for a warrant. Because not all warrants will be convincing to an audience on face value, backing is “proof that the warranting principle itself is acceptable, should it be challenged” (Fulkerson, “Toulmin” 727). Backing may take the form of evidence (research, statistics), legal statutes, or reasoning. It could also comprise axioms or beliefs. For example, in the *Declaration of Independence*, the main claim—that the colonies should sever their ties with Britain—has as its warrant the principle that people have the right to reject tyranny. This warrant is backed by well-known

Enlightenment philosophic ideals explicitly expressed in the Declaration as “self-evident” “truths”: that all people are created equal and endowed with “unalienable rights.” Consistent with other elements of Toulmin’s model, backing is field-dependent. As Toulmin puts it, “the moment we start asking about the *backing* which a warrant relies on in each [different] field, great differences begin to appear: the kind of backing we must point to if we want to establish its authority will change greatly as we move from one field of argument to another” (104).

**Ceremonial (Epideictic) Rhetoric:** This Aristotelian category or genre of rhetoric, which traditionally addresses the present moment, focuses on assessing the character, reputation, or value of a person or people, event, institution, action, or particular moment. This assessment is often characterized as honor, dishonor, praise, or blame. For example, we might use ceremonial rhetoric to praise someone in a speech at a retirement party or in a eulogy at a funeral. According to Aristotle, honor or praise can be deserved for being the first, the last, the only, the best, and the most consistent. He tells us we can praise something or someone by generating examples and by making positive and negative comparisons. Ceremonial rhetoric is often used to constitute or reinforce community, national, or cultural values, as we witness in Abraham Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*, Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union,” or virtually any graduation speech.

**Claim:** For Toulmin, the claim in an argument is virtually any conclusion or assertion that the rhetor wishes the audience to accept. However, in much academic writing in the U.S, the claim is equated with the principal conclusion or thesis statement of an entire argument, with other subclaims supporting or developing that claim throughout the argument. For example, in the *Declaration of Independence*, the main claim is that the colonies should sever their ties with Britain.

**Conditions of Rebuttal:** In Toulmin’s model of argument, conditions of rebuttal refer to specific situations in which the claim would not be true or would be less compelling, thus restricting its reach, scope, or domain. Toulmin defines the term, rather tersely, as “the exceptional conditions which might be capable of defeating or rebutting the warranted conclusion” (101). For example, with the *Declaration of Independence*, the colonists would probably have had less of a case to sever ties with Britain if their declaration were based on hypothetical “light and transient causes,” since “mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable.” Under such conditions, their central claim would have carried much less weight.

**Context:** An argument’s context—an essential subset of the broader concept of rhetorical situation—could be thought of as the stage on which it is performed. Located in space and time, context includes the argument’s historical and cultural antecedents, particularly the specific circumstance that comprise its exigence. Because arguments do not exist in a rhetorical vacuum, their contexts inevitably include previous debates and texts—the ongoing conversations the rhetors of the moment join. Thus, context is one way to approach the Burkean Parlor at the moment the rhetor enters it.

**Ends of Rhetoric:** Aristotle divides rhetoric into three audience-based categories or genres: the political (or deliberative), the legal (or forensic), and the ceremonial (or epideictic) forms of speech. Each of these contexts, in turn, has a distinct purpose: the forensic speech seeks justice and exposes injustice; the political speech aims to determine the expediency or harmfulness of proposed courses of action; and the ceremonial speech seeks to establish the quality of a person or people, institution, person, event, institution, action, or particular moment, typically expressed

as honor, dishonor, praise, or blame. In actual practice, these genres are often blended. Many ceremonial speeches, for example, also include distinctly deliberative purposes, as we see in Lincoln’s “Second Inaugural Address.” Understanding these three different “ends” of rhetoric can help students generate thesis statements and focus their writing because they each target specific occasions and outcomes. Aristotle’s genres, with their corresponding ends, should not be understood as static, eternal entities. Like all genres, they have evolved over time to meet changing needs, and other genres (such as the research article, the sermon, and the grant proposal, to name a few) have developed alongside them that are worthy of rhetorical study. Nonetheless, Aristotle’s genres and ends continue to have considerable explanatory power for students.

**Ethos:** Aristotle’s term ethos, or “persuasion through the character of the speaker” (Johnson 243), refers to the rhetor’s character, image, or credibility as crafted within the text itself for particular rhetorical situations and intentions. An effectively constructed ethos helps a particular audience trust and identify with the rhetor. Historian of rhetoric Thomas Sloane describes ethos in distinctly dramatic terms as “a variable thing,” an “appearance” to be donned or “role” to be played “for the sake of [their] argument” (94). Traditionally, the components of an effective ethos include practical wisdom, good (moral) character, and goodwill toward the audience, but other elements can be important as well, including specialized expertise and even prophetic characteristics, as speeches by rhetors such as Frederick Douglass and Audre Lorde demonstrate.

**Exigence:** Exigence is typically conceived of as the urgency, necessity, need, or potential for intervention that motivates a rhetor to communicate to a particular audience a given moment. It’s the explicit reason for the argument, the answer to the “so what?” question implicitly asked by any audience. If kairos is the more general idea of rhetorical opportunity or timing, exigence is a specific concern, often embedded within a kairotic moment, that needs to be addressed. Traditionally, exigence has been viewed reactively as a kind of found thing. Foreign aggression stimulates national leaders to advocate for a military draft; a multitude of traffic accidents in a particular intersection fuel an argument by neighborhood residents for a stoplight; a deadly pandemic pushes health authorities to implore citizens to stay home and to “mask up” if they have to venture out; and a Supreme Court ruling eliminating the constitutional right to abortion inspires activists of all sorts to advocate for new legislation. Exigence, in this sense, is what’s out there—what’s yelling at us. In a more sophisticated sense, however, exigence isn’t merely found, inherited, or thrust upon us—it’s made. Since social realities are to a large extent—but of course not entirely—socially constructed, rhetors can formulate exigence for their own purposes where others may not initially see it. No one in River City, Iowa, the imaginary setting of Meredith Willson’s *The Music Man*, is particularly concerned about the new pool table at the local billiard parlor until hustler Harold Hill ingeniously transforms its presence into moral “trouble,” the very exigence required for the town to fund a marching band. Hill’s skill is not in locating some objective urgency that everyone would immediately recognize, but in kairotically crafting need from the scene he surveys (see Fletcher 59). Similarly, political activists in the early twenty-first century made the case that the prospect of gay marriage imperiled heterosexual marriages in an effort to create exigence to block the legalization of the former, an exigence that was ultimately disregarded by the Supreme Court in the landmark 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision that legalized gay marriage nationwide. Notably, Chief Justice John Roberts, author of the decision, shaped exigence not in terms of protecting imperiled heterosexual marriage, but with respect to the critical need to guarantee the rights granted by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, particularly the freedom to marry whom one chooses. The key point is that on each side of the ideological spectrum, exigence was fashioned as a function of specific beliefs and priorities,

rather than from universally agreed upon, objective data identifiable beyond the debate itself.

**Genre:** A genre can be thought of as “a distinctive class” (Miller 23) or form of communication. Composition scholar Charles Bazerman says that “genres are ways of doing things” (24). A resumé, for instance, is a way of highlighting an applicant’s qualifications for a job. Rhetoricians view genres as forms of social action. In other words, genres are responses to shared social needs. As key aspects of rhetorical situations, genres document the communication practices people repeatedly use with each other in particular contexts for particular purposes. In the ERWC, genre awareness and genre analysis skills are privileged over the teaching of “facts” or conventions related to specific genres since genre forms can and do evolve in response to social change. Drawing on linguist John Swales’s concept of “living genres” (110), ERWC modules prepare students to notice and adapt to changing genre conventions and to analyze the ways rhetorical purposes and audience expectations shape forms of communication. The ERWC also situates genre study within particular contexts using a range of authentic mentor texts. As rhetorician Elizabeth Wardle notes, “genres are context-specific and complex and cannot be easily or meaningfully mimicked outside their naturally occurring rhetorical situations and exigencies” (767). Through ERWC’s focus on genre awareness as an important component of rhetorical knowledge, students learn to analyze a mentor text in preparation for writing in that genre and situation themselves.

**Grounds or data:** Toulmin’s term for the evidence, support, or “the facts we appeal to as a foundation for the claim” (Toulmin 97), grounds can be comprised of data, statistics, examples, reasons or reasoning, or the like, and vary according to discipline or discourse community. In Aristotelian terms, the grounds approximate the role of the minor premise of a syllogism or the “because clause” of an enthymeme.

**Kairos:** Kairos is a concept from classical rhetoric that can be defined as “the right words at the right time” or “the opportune moment.” The ancient Greeks had two conceptions of time: *chronos* and *kairos*. While *chronos* refers to quantitative or measurable time, *kairos* represents a sense of relational or situational time. This includes the immediate social situation in which acts of persuasion take place, both in terms of what is possible (the opportunity) and appropriate (the decorum). In *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, rhetoricians Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee explain how certain cultural experiences or historical events “open a *kairotic* moment” (48). A mass shooting, they note, intensifies discussion of gun control while making the topic especially urgent (48). An understanding of kairos thus heightens awareness of the relative position and timeliness of an issue, event, or opportunity in a specific context. Although we often think of kairos as an objective opportunity beyond the rhetor, ultimately the concept is socially constructed. Thus, rhetors do not merely discover kairos—the invent or seize it. To the ancients, kairos was not so much a strategy or trick, but a way of conceptualizing effective speech in a changing, dynamic world. Patricia Bizzell, Bruce Herzberg, and Robin Reames write of “the sophistic doctrine of **kairos**, that is, the idea that the timely aspects of a situation, its cultural and political contexts rather than transcendent unchanging laws, will produce both the best solutions to problems and the best verbal mean of presenting them persuasively” (24). In this sense, kairos is rhetoric itself.

**Legal (Forensic) Rhetoric:** This category of rhetoric comprises arguments related to law. In Aristotelian terms, the domain of this genre of rhetoric is the past, and its primary concerns are establishing guilt or innocence, as well as justice or injustice. The arguments lawyers make in criminal and civil trials are examples of legal rhetoric, as are arguments *about* laws, including

opinions published by the U. S. Supreme Court such as *Brown v. Board of Education* or *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

**Logos:** Aristotle’s term ethos for rhetorical reasoning or the logically based elements of an argument. Logos is often characterized by constructs such as Aristotle’s concepts of the enthymeme (a dialogical syllogism in which the audience supplies the missing elements) and the example or Toulmin’s model of argument, which features claims, grounds, warrants, backing, and so forth (and the relationships among these components). Logos also includes various forms of rebuttal, argument structure, as well as stasis theory, the rhetorical reasoning that identifies the central issue of an argument.

**Pathos:** Aristotle’s term for the emotions (such as anger, pity, or fear) the rhetor kindles in the audience through the text in order to further the aims of the argument. While logos is important to persuade audiences of the probable truth of an argument, emotion can be required to dispose the audience toward the rhetor’s case and move them to action. Thus, despite the criticism and disparagement leveled at it by theorists of rhetoric across the millennia, pathos has remained a vital component of rhetoric since the ancients. As historian of rhetoric George Kennedy argues in his authoritative edition of the *Rhetoric*, “Aristotle’s inclusion of emotion as a mode of persuasion . . . is a recognition that among human beings judgment is not entirely a rational act. There are morally valid emotions in every situation, and it is part of the orator’s duty to clarify these in the minds of the audience” (39). Composition scholar Laura Micciche writes that “emotion has always been present in meaning-making activities. I am not talking about emotion as additive—which assumes that reason, logic, and rationality are normative—but emotion as integral to communication, persuasion, attachments of all sorts, and to notions of self and other” (24).

**Political (Deliberative) Rhetoric:** This category of rhetoric comprises arguments related to civic policy, legislation, and corporate action. In Aristotelian terms, the domain of this genre of rhetoric is the future, and its primary concerns are persuading audiences to support expedient or advantageous courses of action and to reject inexpedient or disadvantageous proposals. The kinds of arguments legislators make (arguing about the merits of various approaches to concerns such as managing greenhouse gasses) are typical of deliberative rhetoric, as are the kinds of persuasion practiced in student and city councils and even faculty meetings.

**Qualifier:** Part of the Toulmin model of argument, the qualifier refers to the strategies rhetors use for “indicating the relative degree of confidence one can have in the conclusion” of an argument (Fulkerson, “Model” 727). In effect, qualifiers are hedges, often expressed with adverbs such as “probably,” “possibly,” “usually,” and “likely.” The frequent presence of qualifiers in real-world argumentation is evidence that rhetoric—unlike traditional formal logic—is the art making probable, not certain, cases.

**Rhetoric:** This ancient Greek term has meant many different things to many different scholars over the millennia. Aristotle famously (and rather narrowly) defines rhetoric as “an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion” (27). Moreover, Aristotle posits that rhetoric is a meta-faculty that is not confined within one specific area of knowledge, discipline, or discourse community. Rather, rhetoric’s concern with probable truths makes it a relevant art for all manner of rhetors and texts. In contrast, contemporary rhetorician Andrea Lunsford defines rhetoric in very broad terms as “the art, practice, and study of human communication,” thus decentering the notion of persuasion. Complementing Lunsford’s

definition, rhetorical theorist Thomas B. Farrell memorably characterized the term this way: “Rhetoric is the art, the fine and useful art, of making things matter” (470). For Farrell, rhetoric is an art of emphasis. Finally, Michael MacDonald, editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, provides an excellent contemporary definition of the notoriously slippery in these catholic terms: “I shall define rhetoric (nebulously enough) as the art of effective composition and persuasion in speech, writing, and other media” (5). Although none of these definitions provides an entirely complete or satisfactory account of rhetoric, together they move us closer to its characteristics and domain.

**Rhetorical Situation:** A rhetorical situation is the complex setting of an act of persuasion, comprising context, which includes the historical and cultural antecedents of the argument (including previous arguments and texts) and its exigency, urgent need, or motivation; actor, the role the rhetor is taking in the particular situation (as a student, a sibling, a friend, a son or daughter, an employee); purpose or intention of the rhetorical act; audience; and medium (the generic and modal form the argument takes). Rhetorical situations are not truly objective phenomena, but constructions of the rhetors and audiences that populate them. In recent years, rhetorical situations have been productively conceived of by scholars such as Jenny Rice as environments or ecologies in which ideas, arguments, and texts circulate, develop, and influence one another. This approach helps to account for the ways rhetorical situations are dynamic and evolving, as well as the complex interrelatedness of various components of a given situation. Crucially, texts are the products of rhetorical situations, but they also influence these various situations for subsequent rhetors, often to the point of creating new settings for future rhetoric.

**Stasis Theory:** In the ancient world, teachers of rhetoric developed elaborate heuristic systems for determining the central issue, controversy, or bone of contention to be argued in a given rhetorical situation and for generating persuasive lines of reasoning on either side of the issue, particularly in legal disputes. These systems, which are now grouped under the heading of stasis theory, have evolved to fit the needs of twenty-first-century rhetoric and composition pedagogy. Applying a stasis scheme or heuristic in order to determine what aspect of an issue is salient in a given rhetorical situation can be a productive step in prewriting that helps writers focus their arguments appropriately. In a typical stasis system, locating and developing the central issue or area of disagreement at hand begins by determining which of the four questions below best frames the argument:

- Question of Fact or Conjecture: Did or does the act, event, or phenomenon exist? (Did Lee Harvey Oswald kill JFK?)
- Question of Definition: How can the act, event, or phenomenon be defined? What should it be called? (What shall we call the event that took place in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021? An insurrection? An assault on the government? An act of over-enthusiastic protest or patriotic concern?)
- Question of Quality: What is the character or quality of the act, event, or phenomenon? Is it good or bad? (Is football a good sport for high school students to play?)
- Question of Policy: What should we do about the act, event or phenomenon? (Should the Federal Reserve raise interest rates to reduce inflation?)

**Toulmin Model of Argument:** In addition to Aristotelian rhetoric—with its emphasis on the tripartite appeals or proofs ethos, pathos, and logos and its generic classifications—and stasis theory, other systems and theories enrich analysis and invention of argument, including the

model developed by twentieth-century philosopher Stephen Toulmin. Pushing back against formal logic, which he found inadequate for describing the real-life arguments that people made, he proposed a system based on legal discourse. Many scholars, including George Hillocks and Richard Fulkerson, have adapted the Toulmin system for analyzing arguments to direct attention to teachable and learn-able components of arguments. For Toulmin, arguments begin with inquiry into data and include three major and three deeper components. Three “basic” components of arguments are as follows:

Claims—conclusions or theses (most arguments have a main claim and sub-claims or reasons);

Grounds—also called evidence, the “facts,” data, support, or reason behind the claim. Grounds can be seen as the part of the argument that directly follows the “because”;

Warrants—the explanations that connect the grounds to the claims. Said another way, warrants authorize the logical movement from the grounds to the claim.

Three “deeper” components are as follows:

Backing—additional support of the warrant;

Conditions of Rebuttal—exceptional circumstances in which the claim isn’t true or its scope is limited;

Qualifier—expression of the degree of certainty (or limits thereof) of the claim.

As Fulkerson writes, “By forcing the analyst to go beyond claims and evidence, the Toulmin model sometimes reveals important but not obvious features of an argument (in the same way that teasing out the often unstated premise of a complex enthymeme does” (Fulkerson, “Model” 54). Toulmin emphasized the significant variation in what “counts” as an effective argument in different communities. That is, discourse communities differ in terms of the kinds of grounds or evidence they value, the kinds of claims that matter, and the ways such grounds and claims can legitimately be connected through warrants. Said another way, argument is field-dependent, relying on discipline-, cultural-, and community-specific ways of knowing. Finally, it is important to note that applying Toulmin’s model of argument to specific cases is not necessarily a cut-and-dried process; scholars and teachers of rhetoric have provided different readings of “what Toulmin meant” and how his model elucidates given passages of text. Once again, Fulkerson is useful here: “Applying the model at a discourse level is not a routine or algorithmic procedure in which various analysts would produce the same layout. Such an application is instead a complex interpretive act” (“Model” 55).

**Warrant:** Part of the Toulmin model of argument, the warrant is the assumption, rule, principle, or statement that justifies the link between grounds and claim. Toulmin suggests, “[Warrants] may normally be written very briefly (in the form ‘If D [data], then C [claim]’); but, for candour’s sake, they can profitably be expanded and made more explicit: ‘Data such as D entitle one to draw conclusions, or make claims, such as C,’ or alternatively ‘Given data D, one may take it that C’ ” (98). Part of teaching students to create effective warrants, however, involves teaching them to identify the key elements of the data to which to refer in such statements. In Aristotelian terms, the warrant approximates the major premise of a logical syllogism (which is typically suppressed in the enthymeme in the context of rhetoric).

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