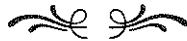


From Embracing Writing



## Writing Rhetorically

Michelle Cox and Anne Doyle

What does it mean to write rhetorically? It means to write with an awareness of your readers, of your intentions as a writer, and of how your writing may be interpreted.

Some may interpret “rhetoric” only to apply to persuasive writing. Indeed, rhetoric is most visibly at work when the writer is trying to persuade the reader to agree with a specific stance or move the reader to take a specific action.

And yet *all* writing that is meant to be read by another is rhetorical. Consider the ways in which a writer when writing a memoir uses language to create a persona and to convince the readers that the slices of life presented in the work are true, really happened, in just the way they have been told in the memoir. All of these moves rely on rhetoric. Consider the ways in which a fiction writer persuades the reader to suspend his/her disbelief and be taken in by the world unfolding in the pages, so taken in that the characters’ lives and emotions touch the reader. These moves too are rhetorical. Whenever we write, we unconsciously consider rhetoric, but when we use knowledge of rhetoric to guide the choices we make as writers, our writing becomes more effective, more powerful, more likely to move our readers in the ways we intend.

An awareness of rhetoric also helps us write into unfamiliar rhetorical situations. College writing is full of unfamiliar situations. Emphasizing this point, Lucille Parkinson McCarthy entitled her article detailing a college student’s experiences writing in courses across the curriculum “A Stranger in Strange Lands.” An awareness of rhetoric can help new terrain feel less “strange,” as it provides approaches for navigating new rhetorical spaces. Rhetoric can even provide heuristics—guiding questions—for figuring out approaches to unfamiliar writing situations. Who is the target audience? What does the reader already know about this topic? What does the reader care about? What voice would be most effective for establishing my credibility (ethos) with this reader? What genre is the reader expecting? What does this genre typically look like? How can I most effectively use the conventions of this genre to communicate effectively to the reader? For what purpose would the reader be reading my text? What do I most want the reader to know, think about, or do? How can I emphasize this focus through the organization of my text?

Here are a few concepts useful for developing rhetorical awareness:

**Rhetorical situation:** The rhetorical situation is the coming together of the writer, the audience, the topic, and the writer's purpose for addressing that audience. Rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer speaks of the situation as arising out of **exigency**, that is, out of the writer's need to address that audience on that topic for that purpose. According to Bitzer, it is this exigency which drives the act of writing. For example, when my elderly aunt sends me a Christmas present, I know I need to send her a thank you note. My exigency is my awareness that my aunt (audience) expects me (the writer) to say thanks (my purpose) for the present (my topic); if I don't write that note, her feelings will be hurt.

**Primary audience/target audience:** This is the group of readers you are most focused on when writing, the group that you most want to hear your message, read and take in your words. They are the group who will be affected by your words, which may stir them to action, provide them with information, entertain or enlighten them, etc.

**Secondary audience:** This is the additional group of readers who may also read your piece of writing (for example, a recommendation report you wrote for your employer may also be read by the employer's assistants). Though not your intended audience, the secondary audience is still an important group of readers to consider. In fact, sometimes a writer will mask the primary audience as the secondary audience. You may have noticed this rhetorical move in advertisements for food products marketed to children. The commercial shows happy children eating the food and asking the parent for more food, while the overlaid voice, though using a sappy tone meant to grab children's attention, spells out the food's health benefits and reasonable cost. Though ostensibly aimed at children, the commercial's real audience is the parents, who have the means to go to the grocery store and purchase the food.

**Message:** What we see in this example of the child-centered food commercial is an instance of adapting the message to the ostensible secondary audience. The message is the heart of a text: it is what we are trying to convey to the readers. When we consider the parents as the real audience of the food commercial, we can see how the message (this food is nutritious and inexpensive) is adapted—through a high, sappy voice—to appeal to the ostensible primary audience, the children. Notice how the message is linked to the purpose of the discourse: the purpose of the commercial is to convince listeners to buy the food product, while the message about nutrition and cost is intended to be the persuasive mechanism of the discourse.

**Genre:** At its simplest, we can think of genre as "kind of writing": fiction, poetry, report, memoir, essay, letter, text message, web page, blog entry, caption, manual, etc. Of course, when we look more closely at any of these "kinds of writing," we realize they can be further narrowed down into short story, novel, flash fiction (fiction); sonnet,

epic, haiku, etc. (poetry); thank you, sales letter, bad news letter, good news letter (letter), sales report, recommendation report, lab report, book report, etc. (report), and so on. Although these genres often appear to be empty forms into which the writer pours words, genres are more dynamic and more interesting than that. Many researchers today speak of genre as a type of social action (Miller; Devitt). By doing so, they recognize that the genre in which you choose to convey your message to your audience is itself a part of the persuasion; in that sense, it is a social action because it has a real affect on the audience. Choice of genre can let your audience know if you are an “insider” or an “outsider”—that is, whether you know what sort of genre is usually used for such a message to this particular audience. Think about your own experiences: You would probably write a letter to the dean requesting a waiver of a particular school requirement, but you might simply write an email note to a professor indicating that you needed another copy of the class assignment. But if you are a salesperson letting your boss know how much you’ve sold in the past month, you would write a sales report. A writer’s ability to choose the right genre for the audience and the situation is crucial.

**Context:** The context of any argument is a combination of circumstances: the audience, the writer’s intentions or purpose, and the surrounding situation—that is, the location and the time of the argument. Context may also include what has been said already on the subject. For example, for anyone in the United States writing on the subject of abortion, the lengthy dispute between the concepts of Right to Life and Right to Choose forms part of the context for writing. Context can also include differences in power between audience and writer. For example, a teenager writing an email to convince parents to allow the teenager to spend the night at a friend’s is in a very different power position from an employer writing a set of guidelines for the office staff regarding filing practices in the office. The teen knows the audience for the email has the power to say “No,” while the employer knows that the employees in the office will have a hard time refusing to implement the guidelines being suggested.

**Appeal to ethos:** This and the following two appeals were identified by Aristotle in his influential work on rhetoric and speech, which we also apply to writing. Ethos refers to a writer’s character or persona as represented in a piece of writing. With this move, the writer is implying, *trust me, because I’m the one making the argument*. An appeal to ethos is most evident when a writer names his/her credentials in a piece. For instance, in the student essay on euthanasia in animal shelters included in this book, “To Kill or Not to Kill,” Meagan Gardiner tells us of her own experience volunteering in such shelters, a move that persuades the reader of the credibility of this writer. Ethos may also be established through the use of secondary sources (a move that tells the reader to trust the writer as the writer has done a great deal of research), but only if the sources themselves are credible. An uncritical citation of *Wikipedia*, *About.com*, or *Dictionary.com* may hurt a writer’s ethos. Ethos may also be established through voice, which is discussed in detail below.

**Appeal to logos:** This appeal refers to moves a writer makes to persuade readers based on fact or soundness of reason. With this move, the writer is implying, *trust me, because the facts speak for themselves*. An appeal to logos is most evident when the writer cites statistics or other types of numerical information. Of course, facts never speak for themselves, so the writer must make connections for readers between the facts and the claims. If you took Foundations in Logic and Reasoning, this is the appeal that you learned about in the course. As explained in this course, logos refers not only to facts, but to the ways that arguments are organized, methods of organization that have been endlessly classified and analyzed. More important than the names of different types of arguments is the readers' response to your argument—whether readers find the argument well-reasoned and credible. Readers tend to find arguments well-reasoned when the thesis (main point being argued) is clear and makes sense, and each claim (statement supporting the argument) is backed by credible evidence.

**Appeal to pathos:** This appeal refers to moves a writer makes to pull on the readers' emotions in relation to the argument. With this move, the writer is implying, *trust me, because the argument affects you in some way*. In 2008, when the question to close greyhound race tracks was on the Massachusetts ballot, proponents of the question handed out flyers that listed the animal advocacy groups endorsing the flyer (ethos), and statistics displaying the number of dogs endangered by racing (logos), but I'm willing to bet that it was the photograph of a sad-eyed greyhound featured prominently at the top of the flyer that won over voters' hearts, ultimately persuading them to support the bill, thus ending greyhound racing in Massachusetts. As much as we are persuaded by a writer's credibility and the soundness of an argument, feelings are eminently persuasive, so much so that many commercials (arguments to persuade consumers to spend money on their products) make heavy use of appeals to pathos: buy this product and feel younger, buy this product and be more attractive to others.

**Kairos:** Timing is particularly significant in argument. The ancient Greek rhetoricians spoke about two different kinds of time: **chronos**, which is just the passage of time, and **kairos**, which is the acknowledgement that there are more and less appropriate times for some arguments. A writer who understands the significance of kairos knows that sometimes a specific audience is more or less prepared to consider a specific argument. For example, in the 1990s, few Americans were ready to listen to arguments about a need for stricter investment controls on brokerages, mortgage companies, or banks. But by 2009, after the implosion of the stock market, the collapse of the housing bubble, and the need to bail out several major banks, many Americans became willing to consider arguments for investment reform.

Of course, knowing that the time is not ripe for a particular argument should not stop you from making the argument, but you would probably seek to get your audience to see that there are flaws in the current situation. For example, given the recent election

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of Barack Obama as the first Black U.S. president, many Americans currently claim that there is no longer a real problem with racism in this country. Someone wishing to argue for the maintenance or extension of affirmative action programs in this climate would need to prove that there still is a significant problem, perhaps by demonstrating how few Black Americans, proportionately, receive the education and have the career opportunities of a Michelle or Barack Obama.

**Register:** Register is a social concept, having to do with degree of formality in language choice. For example, you could choose a very breezy, informal kind of language or a more formal, or “frozen,” style. (Linguist Martin Joos calls language “frozen” when it is highly formal and attempts to freeze meaning into place. For example, laws are usually written in “frozen” language, as was the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. You might say that the most formal language is used when the writer(s) believe they are formally writing for posterity.) For most undergraduate college writing, your readers will expect you to use a middle register: not too casual, but not stuffy, either. Consider the following:

Informal: My buds and I heard our prof was out sick and the test was deep-sixed. We chilled.

Middle: When my classmates and I heard our teacher was ill and the test was cancelled, we relaxed.

Formal: When the members of my class became aware that our teacher was ill and the test would not be administered to us, we were greatly relieved.

You may be asked to keep readers’ journals, response journals, or do other first-person reflective writing. The instructor assigning this writing should let you know how informal (or formal) the reflections should be.

**Voice:** A complex concept, voice involves both tone and style. Readers respond strongly to voice, deciding whether a writer is someone to trust, someone entertaining, someone worth listening to. A writer’s voice is conveyed to the readers by means of *all* the stylistic, register and word choices the author has made. Generally, a writer wants to be perceived by the readers as a person of good sense, sound information, and of good will toward the reader (in other words, a person of good **ethos**.) Voice goes beyond these basics: for example, through careful pronoun selection, the writer can establish a common identity with the reader (using *we*) or establish the writer as an expert giving advice to less experienced readers (using *you*). The writer’s word choice can establish the writer as a discerning individual (for example, by describing a building as “leaning its cracked concrete walls against its neighbors in sheer exhaustion” instead of “being old and run-down.”) The writer’s voice can be pompous, friendly, angry, humorous, etc.

## Using Rhetorical Awareness during the Writing Process

Some writers find that thinking about rhetoric too early in the writing process may cause them to experience writer's block. The reader hovers too long over that blank page, threatening to critique each turn of phrase, each idea, each word. Compositionist Peter Elbow tells us to "close our eyes and write" when this happens—force ourselves to freewrite, writing so quickly, without concern for sentence structure, style, soundness of idea, that we learn to ignore that internalized critic. And compositionist and journalist Donald Murray would tell us to "lower your expectations"—sage advice that helps many writers move past our feelings of incompetence in the face of what we think our readers expect of us. On the other hand, an awareness of readers does not always stop us from writing, but can rather ignite our writing, providing that muse that pushes us to write. In fact, I would not be writing these words now—and thereby sorting out my own ideas of what it means to write rhetorically and why rhetorical awareness matters—if I did not feel compelled to do so by your imagined presence.

Rhetorical awareness is particularly useful during the revision process. How can we know how to revise to improve the effectiveness of our writing without reader feedback? Some instructors will build opportunities for reader feedback into a course, by providing their own feedback to your writing to early drafts and holding workshops during class to provide peer review. If not, seek out feedback at the Writing Studio, a place on campus where all students may receive feedback from trained peer readers on writing in any stage of the writing process. You may also find it helpful to receive feedback from family and friends, but be aware that those who are close to us may only provide "comfort readings"—positive but uncritical feedback that doesn't push our writing along.

Knowledge of rhetoric can determine your success in writing assignments. A low grade on a writing assignment often indicates that the writer misread the assignment's rhetorical situation—selected a genre, register, style of argument that the instructor was not anticipating. If a writing assignment description does not include information about the rhetorical situation, be sure to ask the instructor about what she/he is envisioning in terms of genre conventions, target audience, evidence, and register. Asking the instructor for examples of successful student papers written from the same assignment or published work exemplifying the moves the instructor is expecting would also be helpful to you in reading the rhetorical situation of the assignment.

Writing is a complex interchange between writer and readers, an interchange that takes place within a specific rhetorical situation, time, and place. It is rhetoric that moves writing from being formulaic to being responsive to the dynamic situation it is a part of. And it is rhetorical awareness that moves a writer from being merely competent to being adept in the face of the many challenging demands of writing across courses,

audiences, genres, situations, registers, and disciplines. To write well is, in the end, to write with rhetorical savvy.

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