



Coming to Terms: Rhetoric

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Kum' in tōō Turmz COMING TO TERMS

Rhetoric

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Those who subscribe to the Socratic teaching method recognize the need to help writing students tap into inherent knowledge and abilities as a means to bring forth ideas in writing. To use Socrates' analogy, we perform the function of midwife as we assist our students in giving birth to new ideas (cited in Lunsford and Ede, 1984). In so doing, writing teachers teach methods of discovery, organization of ideas, and cohesive presentation of thoughts; literature teachers hope to convey some understanding of such stylistic techniques as irony, analogy, and climax; and most educators attempt to foster the development of enthusiasm, virtue, and logical analysis. These are all elements of **rhetoric** as applied in education.

CONTEMPORARY MEANINGS

The first entry in *Webster's New World Dictionary of American English* (1984) defines **rhetoric** as "the art of using words effectively in speaking or writing." The following entry describes **rhetoric** as "artificial eloquence; language that is showy and elaborate but largely empty of clear ideas or sincere emotion." This second entry reflects the current negative connotations which are often the first meanings brought to mind. As an example of both negative and positive associations, *The Synonym Finder* (1984) lists "bombast" and "pomposity" after such initial favorable listings as "eloquence" and "expressiveness." Recognized rhetoric authority, Edward P. J. Corbett, states: "**Rhetoric** is the art or the discipline that deals with the use of discourse,

either spoken or written, to inform or persuade or motivate an audience, whether that audience is made up of one person or a group of persons" (1990, 3). Put succinctly, then, **rhetoric** can be defined as the art of effective communication.

HISTORY OF RHETORIC

Contemporary interpretations of **rhetoric** reflect controversies dating back to its very beginnings. **Rhetoric** began with Corax of Syracuse in fifth century B.C. as a means to help individuals reclaim confiscated property after warfare. As a democratic state, Athens welcomed the new art as a practical means to discover knowledge and truth in their public forums. Notable rhetoricians were Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle, but Western culture has been most influenced by the enduring philosophies of Aristotle, delineated in his treatise *Rhetoric* written in approximately 333 B.C.

While early orators and sophists felt that one should use logic and ethics as a means to persuade audiences to accept truth, a few later sophists began to corrupt **rhetoric**. These Athenian teachers were extremely influential as they were responsible for educating budding young citizens in literature, science, philosophy, citizenship, and oration. When oration became a highly esteemed, much sought-after, and profitable skill, a few unscrupulous sophists began to build their reputations on their students' oratory skills, and virtue was swept aside in the race for prosperity. Winning became the primary consideration; truth became dispensable. When unprincipled practitioners resorted to pompous, empty bombast, the disci-

pline quickly earned an unsavory reputation, and the term **rhetoric** fell into disrepute as the public assigned negative connotations to the once honorable discipline. Ironically, the Greek term *sophistes* meant "wise man." If sophists were wise men, they did not invest wisely in their own futures: many young people were left with a lasting impression that integrity was secondary to winning through manipulation with empty **rhetoric**.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Aristotle was thorough in his exploration of **rhetoric** and, as a result, today's rhetorical theories are still based on his principles. Three canons of **rhetoric** currently studied are: discovery of arguments, arrangement of materials, and considerations of style. Even today, rhetoricians and English teachers teach effective **rhetoric** strategies and principles in composition and **rhetoric** classes.

After students select a thesis, they must discover arguments as a means to develop that thesis. This is the purpose of Aristotle's common topics, and according to Frank D'Angelo, "[The topics] in Aristotle were used to construct propositions" (1984, 58). These topics may include definition, comparison, relationship, circumstances, or proofs. Once students have selected a topic, they may use logical analyses as a means to develop the topic while they avoid such fallacies in reasoning as over-generalizations.

Another consideration in the writing process is the proper arrangement of material into a cohesive structure. Typically in persuasion,

this will include the introduction, a brief overview, proofs, refutations, and a conclusion.

Lastly, students must consider elements of style—sentence length and variety, diction, euphony, coherence, paragraphing, and figures of speech. Figures of speech encompass such techniques as the use of analogy, simile, metaphor, parallelism, antithesis, ellipsis, alliteration, assonance, climax, personification, hyperbole, litotes, irony, paradox, oxymoron, and erotema (the rhetorical question). Such techniques help convey complex ideas clearly.

This entire process describes the essential elements of **rhetoric** which are applicable to both written composition and oratory discourse. When writers strive for optimum effectiveness in discourse, they should also include considerations of audience, human nature, and human emotions. Although we may prefer to have our arguments considered on the merit of logic or reason alone, emotional factors often do come into play. Accordingly, in consideration of both logic and emotion, Aristotle noted that appeals should be advanced on three different levels: appeal to reason (*logos*), appeal to emotions (*pathos*), and appeal to personality or character (*ēthos*) (cited in Corbett 37). If one fails to use all three appeals in an argument, one will risk sacrificing optimum effectiveness.

APPLICATIONS FOR LIFE

Since **rhetoric** is the art of effective communication, its principles can be applied to many facets of everyday life. For example, we use **rhetoric** in letter writing, employment interviews, and conversation as a means to persuade or favorably dispose the audience. The traditional principles of **rhetoric**, in other words, can help individuals present themselves logically and ethically.

As a simplistic example which may appeal to teenagers, consider the plight of a young man proposing

that a young lady accompany him to a dance because he is the most logical choice. Such a brash vocalization, naturally, would be ludicrous and the proposal would be highly unlikely to elicit the desired response. Upon analysis through Aristotle's tenets for persuasion, one can conclude that, although the suitor may have made a logical appeal, he failed to incorporate into his argument the appeals of emotion combined with personal appeal. In order to achieve effective communication, the suitor would need to have personal appeal, make an emotional appeal and, finally, be logical enough to formulate an intelligent proposal.

As with any noble endeavor, however, the principles of **rhetoric** can be used for good or for evil, in moderation or in complete abandonment of all moral or ethical precepts. In modern day classrooms, for instance, students can use communication skills, painstakingly imparted by conscientious educators, as a means to achieve their own ends without regard for the rights of others and without regard for morality or truth.

We need to help our students learn to contend with modern-day Machiavellians, such as politicians well versed in the fine art of doublespeak. After all, knowledge is power. If children are educated in the methods and strategies of effective **rhetoric**, they will be empowered with the ability to fend off their would-be manipulators and even effectively proffer counter proposals or arguments. Of course, young people are not often concerned with politics, but they are confronted daily with peer pressure in relation to issues of morality. We can empower them to communicate their opinions effectively in favor of responsible choices. These potential leaders could, then, influence their peers in a positive way. As Joseph M. Williams, an authority on style, states:

One common reason people do not achieve their potential

is their inability to communicate, to get their ideas on paper quickly in a way that lets others understand those ideas easily. Whenever professionals are asked what they wish they had studied more diligently, their first or second answer is always communication, especially writing. (1994, preface)

The skills of an educated rhetorician are still much in demand. They may be categorized and disguised under such terms as composition, speech, advertising, interpersonal relations, propaganda, broadcasting, business communications, negotiation, community relations, and international diplomacy. However stated, effective communication is often a prerequisite for applicants in any profession. Although the term **rhetoric** may have fallen into disrepute outside the field of education, the study of **rhetoric** is an important and honorable discipline encompassing many of the skills needed to cultivate an able and effective communicator.

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