Ethos-Pathos-Logos-The-3-Rhetorical-Appeals

"Part 1" of the *Norton Field Guide to Writing* covers the concept of "Rhetorical Situations" (1-17).

Whenever we write, whether it's an email to a friend or a toast for a wedding, an English essay or a résumé, we face some kind of rhetorical situation. We have a purpose, a certain audience, a particular stance, a genre, and a medium to consider—and often as not a design. All are important elements that we need to think about carefully. (1)

This concept is usually covered in English 101, and you can review "Part 1" if you need to refresh your understanding. In what follows below, we're going to cover what are called the "three rhetorical appeals."

What is Rhetoric?

Before we can understand the ways in which the rhetorical appeals work, we must first understand what rhetoric is.

Definition

There are many commonly-used definitions, but for our purposes "rhetoric" refers to all of the following:

- The art of persuasion, and
- The study of the art of persuasion, and
- An individual act of persuasion.

In the work we'll do in our rhetorical analysis, there are 2 parties to be concerned with:

1. *The rhetor*: the party that is attempting to persuade, and
2. *The audience*: the party that is the target of persuasion.

We will consider ourselves to be a 3rd party: *the observer*. We're not being persuaded. We're not persuading. We're just observing the interaction between *the rhetor* and *the audience*.

Example A woman pulls her car up to the Starbucks drive-through, and before she can even order her large cup of coffee, the voice on the other end of the speaker says, "Thank you for choosing Starbucks! May I interest you in a low-fat apple-banana bran muffin this morning, paired with a tall skinny soy latte?" Who is *the rhetor* in this situation? It's the Starbucks employee, because that's the person trying to persuade someone. Who is *the audience*? It's the woman in the car, because she's the person the rhetor is trying to persuade. What is *the act of persuasion* taking place? The Starbucks employee is attempting to persuade the woman to buy a muffin and a pricey coffee drink. What would a *rhetorical analysis* of this situation be like? An *observer*—such as yourself—would consider the rhetor, the audience, and the rhetoric that is being used by the rhetor in an attempt to persuade the audience. The observer would analyze the rhetoric—in this case, using the framework of the three rhetorical appeals (explained below)—and then explain their analysis in an essay. Has the rhetor made effective use of rhetoric in trying to persuade the audience? Why or why not?
It's important for you to remember that rhetorical analysis requires you, the observer, to refrain from being a part in what's going on between the rhetor and the audience. You are the silent third party. It is not your job to decide if you are persuaded by the rhetor. Instead, it's your job to decide if the audience would be persuaded by the rhetor. Sometimes you have a very specific idea of who the audience is, but sometimes you just have a very general idea.

Three Rhetorical Appeals

"Of the [modes of persuasion] provided through speech there are three species: for some are in the character of the speaker, and some are in disposing the listener in some way, and some in the argument itself, by showing or seeming to show something" --Aristotle, On Rhetoric, 1356b (trans. George A. Kennedy)

In other words, Aristotle argues that there are three elements to the art of persuasion:

- **ethos**: The rhetor is perceived by the audience as credible (or not).
- **pathos**: The rhetor attempts to persuade the audience by making them feel certain emotions.
- **logos**: The rhetor attempts to persuade the audience by the use of arguments that they will perceive as logical.

We call these three elements *rhetorical appeals*. It's not necessary for every act of persuasion to make use of all three appeals. Often, however, there is some element of each. In academic writing, ethos and logos are given more respect than pathos. An essay that relies primarily on pathos, with little use of ethos or logos, is unlikely to be perceived by an academic audience as persuasive. Below, each of these appeals is explained in more detail.

**Ethos**

The use of ethos is called an "ethical appeal." Note that this is very different from our usual understanding of the word "ethical." "Ethos" is used to describe the audience's perception of the rhetor's credibility or authority. The audience asks themselves, "What does this person know about this topic?" and "Why should I trust this person?" There are two kinds of ethos:

- **extrinsic** (the character, expertise, education, and experience of the rhetor), and
- **intrinsic** (how the rhetor writes or speaks).

When we discuss the ethos of the rhetor, we decide whether it is strong or weak. We might use a phrase like, "His extrinsic ethos is strong because..." or "His intrinsic ethos is strong, but his extrinsic ethos is weak..."

**Examples of extrinsic ethos: Sports**: If you are a successful professional basketball player—like Michael Jordan, for example—talking about basketball to other pro athletes, then your ethos is strong with that particular audience even before you open your mouth or take pen to paper. Your audience assumes you are knowledgeable about your subject because of your experience. Now, if you are instead a *baseball* player talking about basketball, then your extrinsic ethos is not as strong because you haven't been played pro basketball, but you're still a professional athlete and know something about that kind of life. However, if you are a college professor of English, then your extrinsic ethos is likely to be pretty weak with your audience. They might just assume that you know nothing about basketball or about professional sports. Change your audience around, however, and the ethos of each hypothetical rhetor might change. An audience of pre-school kids, for example, would have no idea who Michael Jordan is, and so his extrinsic ethos would be weaker with that audience than with the audience of other pro athletes.
Examples of intrinsic ethos: Sports: Let's say you're that professional basketball player mentioned above, and you start to address your audience when suddenly you stutter and mumble, you use the wrong sports terminology (or you mispronounce that terminology), and you stare at your shoes the entire time you're talking. Suddenly your overall ethos takes a nose-dive with your audience, and you become less persuasive. They conclude that regardless of your experience, the way you're expressing yourself reveals that you are not someone to be taken seriously. At the other extreme, let's say you're that hypothetical English professor, and you speak with confidence and use all of the correct sports-based terminology. You look around at the faces of your audience as you speak and project your voice to the back of the room. Your overall ethos, which was weak to begin with because the audience was skeptical of what an English professor would know about their sport, suddenly gets stronger. It gets stronger because your intrinsic ethos goes up in the eyes of your audience. The way that a rhetor speaks or writes will also affect ethos. Intrinsic ethos is strong when the rhetor expresses himself or herself confidently and intelligently, using language that is appropriate for the audience.

Mistakes to avoid First, you should always remember that when you are engaged in rhetorical analysis, it's not your job to decide if you perceive the rhetor as credible or authoritative. Instead, you must evaluate how the audience is likely to perceive the rhetor. Second, do not confuse the strategy of "Testimony and Authority" (see below, under "Logos") with ethos. When a rhetor uses information from someone else as a source to support their argument, that's an example of logos: it's the strategy of "Testimony and Authority." Students sometimes confuse the two because in both cases, the credibility and authority of the person speaking (or writing) is important. However, there's an important difference. When the rhetor is known by the audience to be experienced and an expert on the topic, their extrinsic ethos is strong. When the rhetor cites someone else who is experienced and an expert, that's an example of logos, because the rhetor is using the strategy of testimony and authority.

Pathos

The use of pathos is called a "pathetic appeal." Note that this is very different from our usual understanding of the word "pathetic." "Pathos" is used to describe the rhetor's attempt to appeal to "an audience's sense of identity, their self-interest, and their emotions." If the rhetor can create a common sense of identity with their audience, then the rhetor is using a pathetic appeal. So if that college English professor above mentions having played basketball in high school and convinces the audience that she or he was pretty good, then not only does that fact strengthen the rhetor's ethos, it also makes a pathetic appeal. (This is also why so many politicians will open their speeches with "My fellow Americans..." This is why many of them use the phrase "My friends..." so much when speaking to audiences.) "Pathos" most often refers to an attempt to engage an audience's emotions. Think about the different emotions people are capable of feeling: they include love, pity, sorrow, affection, anger, fear, greed, lust, and hatred. If a rhetor tries to make an audience feel emotions in response to what is being said or written, then they are using pathos.

Example Let's say a rhetor is trying to convince an audience of middle-class Americans to donate money to a hurricane relief fund. The rhetor can make pathetic appeals to an audience's feelings of love, pity, fear, and perhaps anger. (The extent to which any of these emotions will be successfully engaged will vary from audience to audience.)

- "Love" will be felt if the audience can be made to believe in their fundamental connections to other human beings.
- "Pity" will be felt if the plight of the homeless hurricane victim can be made very vivid to the audience.
- "Fear" will be felt if the audience can be made to imagine what they would feel like in that homeless victim's place.
- "Anger" will be felt if the audience realizes how little has been done by those who are responsible for helping.

If the rhetor works all of these things together properly (and also doesn't screw up ethos and logos), then the audience is more likely to be persuaded.
Mistakes to avoid The emotions we’re talking about here are emotions that might be felt by the audience, not emotions felt by the rhetor. If a rhetor is clearly angry about the topic being addressed, for example, that should not be taken as a pathetic. However, if the rhetor is clearly trying to make the audience feel angry, then that should, in fact, be considered a pathetic appeal. And whether or not the audience does, in fact, feel the emotions in question, the observer can still recognize when the rhetor is using a pathetic appeal. Sometimes, the pathetic appeal is weak (meaning it probably won't succeed). Sometimes, the pathetic appeal is strong (meaning it probably will succeed).

Logos

The use of logos is called a "logical appeal." A statement does not have to be considered logical to be a logical appeal. As an observer, you can recognize that the rhetor is attempting to use logos to persuade the audience, but that recognition doesn't mean the rhetor is succeeding. We use the term logos to describe what kind of rhetorical appeal is being made, not to evaluate whether or not an appeal makes sense to us (as observers) or to the audience being addressed. "Logos" is the use of the strategies of logic to persuade your audience. If an statement attempts to persuade the audience by making a reasonable claim and offering proof in support of that claim (rather than by trying to make them feel certain emotions, or by making them perceive the speaker as credible), then that statement is a logical argument.

Mistakes to avoid When you are engaged in rhetorical analysis, you are an observer of the interaction between the rhetor and the audience. So it's not your job to decide whether or not an argument is logical. Instead, it's your job to decide whether or not an argument will be perceived by the audience as logical.

There are many ways of making logical arguments. Here are a few common strategies:

Cause or consequence

A claim about one thing causing another, or one thing being caused by another.

Example: Global warming is caused by greenhouse gases being produced by humankind.

Example: The current economic crisis was caused primarily by deregulation of the financial industry.

Example: If the government gets involved in providing health insurance to the American people, we will see a sharp decline in the quality of our medical care.

Analogy

A claim about the qualities of one thing using a comparison about another thing.

Example: The ozone layer of the atmosphere is like the outer layer of skin on the human body, and if it goes away, planet Earth will be in a lot of pain. Going to that class is about as exciting as watching paint dry.

Example: "George Bush taking credit for the Berlin Wall coming down is like the rooster taking credit for the sunrise." (Al Gore, 1992 Vice Presidential Debate)

Example: That candidate is what we call a post turtle. Imagine you're driving along a country road and you see a turtle up on top of a fence post. He doesn't know how he got there. He doesn't know what he's doing there. And he has no idea what to do next. (See this entry at Snopes.com)

Testimony and authority
A claim that involves citing the opinion of someone other than the rhetor, someone respected by the audience.

**Example:** 4 out of 5 Dentists surveyed would recommend sugarless gum to their patients who chew gum (Trident Gum advertisement).

**Example:** The leading U.S. military commanders in Iraq say the surge strategy is working.

**Example:** How bad is the current financial mess? According to Alan Greenspan, U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman, it's "the type of wrenching financial crisis that comes along only once in a century" ("Greenspan").

**Definition**

A claim about the meaning or nature of something.

**Example:** The president is a socialist.

**Example:** Last year's Super Bowl game was extremely boring

**Syllogism**

A claim using deductive logic involving a major premise, a minor premise, and conclusion. This is a move from the general to the specific.

**Example:** Nuclear power plants generate dangerous nuclear waste, the new power plant they're planning to build in our community is a nuclear power plant. So the new power plant will be dangerous.

**Example:** Republicans favor deregulation. John McCain is a Republican, so he will pursue a policy of deregulation if elected.

**Example:** Democrats like to "tax and spend." Barack Obama is a Democrat, so he's going to raise our taxes if elected.

**Support a generalization with examples**

A claim using inductive logic, where a general statement about something is backed up by specific examples.

**Example:** In the second presidential debate of 2008, Senator John McCain emphasized his own good judgment in this way: "And I am convinced that my record, going back to my opposition from sending the Marines to Lebanon, to supporting our efforts in Kosovo and Bosnia and the first Gulf War, and my judgment, I think, is something that ... I'm willing to stand on."

**Example:** In the second presidential debate of 2008, Senator Barack Obama argued that the United States should maintain good relations with other nations in order to make the best use of our own military resources in a time of economic constraint. He then illustrated his general statement with this specific example: "Let's take the example of Darfur just for a moment. Right now there's a peacekeeping force that has been set up and we have African Union troops in Darfur to stop a genocide that has killed hundreds of thousands of people. We could be providing logistical support, setting up a no-fly zone at relatively little cost to us, but we can only do it if we can help mobilize the international community and lead."

**Combining all 3 rhetorical appeals**

Seldom is any one statement an example of only one appeal.
"I have to tell you that if you don't stop smoking, you're going to die," said the doctor to her patient.

This statement combines all three appeals:

- Extrinsic ethos: the rhetor—a doctor—is an expert on the subject
- Pathos: attempting to make the audience feel fear
- Logos: using the strategy of "Cause or Consequence"

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**Summary**

Let's review what we covered above: **Rhetoric** is defined for our purposes as

- The art of persuasion, and
- The study of the art of persuasion, and
- An individual act of persuasion.

In the work we'll do in our rhetorical analysis, there are 2 parties to be concerned with:

1. **The rhetor**: the party that is attempting to persuade, and
2. **The audience**: the party that is the target of persuasion.

We will consider ourselves to be a 3rd party: **The observer.** We're not being persuaded. We're not persuading. We're just observing the interaction between the rhetor and the audience. The rhetorical appeals are the three elements to the art of persuasion as defined by Aristotle

- **ethos**: The rhetor is perceived by the audience as credible (or not).
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