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What is Rhetoric?

Rhetoric is the study of effective speaking and writing (*discourse*), and the art of persuasion, and many other things.

In its long and vigorous history, rhetoric has enjoyed many definitions, accommodated differing purposes, and varied widely in what it included. And yet, for most of its history, it has maintained its fundamental character as a discipline for training students:

1. to perceive how language is at work orally and in writing, and
2. to become proficient in applying the resources of language in their own speaking and writing.

Discerning how language is working in others' or one's own writing and speaking, one must (artificially) divide form and content, *what* is being said and *how* this is said. Because rhetoric examines so attentively the *how* of language, the *methods* and *means* of communication, it has sometimes been discounted as something only concerned with style or appearances, and not with the quality or *content* of communication. For many (such as Plato) rhetoric deals with the superficial at best, the deceptive at worst ("mere rhetoric"), when one might better attend to matters of substance, truth, or reason as attempted in dialectic¹ or philosophy or religion.

Rhetoric has sometimes lived down to its critics, but as set forth from antiquity, rhetoric was a comprehensive art just as much concerned with *what* one could say as *how* one might say it. Indeed, a basic premise for rhetoric is the indivisibility of means from meaning; *how* one says something conveys meaning as much as *what* one says. Rhetoric studies the effectiveness of language comprehensively, including its emotional impact (*pathos*), as much as its propositional content (*logos*). To see how language and thought work together, however, we must first artificially divide content and form.

¹ The art of logical argumentation; like rhetoric, dialectic is concerned with persuasion and logical proof and takes into account opposing viewpoints on a given issue. Unlike rhetoric, dialectic is restricted to issues of argumentation, proof, and the methods and fallacies of logical reasoning. Dialectic does not theorize the use of emotions (except as a fallacy), nor does it concern itself with audiences or contexts as does rhetoric. At times in the history of rhetoric, dialectic has been seen as a counterpart to rhetoric; at times it has competed with rhetoric. Those who have emphasized the priority of dialectic over rhetoric have done so by reducing rhetoric to being concerned only with style, or managing appearances and manipulating audiences.

Content/Form

Rhetoric requires understanding a fundamental division between *what* is communicated through language and *how* it is communicated.

Aristotle phrased this as the difference between *logos* (the logical content of a speech) and *lexis* (the style and delivery of a speech). Roman authors such as Quintilian would make the same distinction by dividing consideration of things or substance, *res*, from consideration of verbal expression, *verba*.

In the Renaissance, Erasmus of Rotterdam reiterated this foundational dichotomy for rhetorical analysis by titling his most famous textbook "On the Abundance of Verbal Expression and Ideas" (*De copia verborum ac rerum*). This division has been one that has been codified within rhetorical pedagogy, reinforced, for example, by students being required in the Renaissance (according to Juan Luis Vives) to keep notebooks divided into form and content.

Within rhetorical pedagogy it was the practice of imitation that most required students to analyze form and content. They were asked to observe a model closely and then to copy the form but supply new content; or to copy the content but supply a new form. Such imitations occurred on every level of speech and language, and forced students to assess what exactly a given form did to bring about a given meaning or effect.

The divide between form and content is always an artificial and conditional one, since ultimately attempting to make this division reveals the fundamentally indivisible nature of verbal expression and ideas. For example, when students were asked to perform translations as rhetorical exercises, they analyzed their compositions in terms of approximations, since it is impossible to completely capture the meaning and effect of a thought expressed in any terms other than its original words.

This division is based on a view of language as something more than simply a mechanistic device for transcribing or delivering thought. With the sophists of ancient Greece, rhetoricians have shared a profound respect for how language affects not just audiences, but thought processes. [. . .]

One way to understand the overlapping nature of *logos* and *lexis*, *res* and *verba*, invention and style, is through the word "ornament." To our modern sensibilities this suggests a superficial, inessential decoration—something that might be pleasing but which is not truly necessary. The etymology of this word is *ornare*, a Latin verb meaning "to equip." The ornaments of war, for example, are weapons and soldiers. The ornaments of rhetoric are not extraneous; they are the equipment required to

achieve the intended meaning or effect.

Thus, rhetoricians divided form and content not to place content above form, but to highlight the interdependence of language and meaning, argument and ornament, thought and its expression. It means that linguistic forms are not merely instrumental, but fundamental—not only to persuasion, but to thought itself.

This division is highly problematic, since thought and ideas (*res*) have been prioritized over language (*verba*) since at least the time of Plato in the west. Indeed, language is a fundamentally social and contingent creature, subject to change and development in ways that concepts are not. For rhetoricians to insist that words and their expression are on par with the ideals and ideas of abstract philosophy has put rhetoric at odds with religion, philosophy, and science at times.

Nevertheless, rhetoric requires attending to the contingencies and contexts of specific moments in time and the dynamics of human belief and interaction within those settings. This rhetorical orientation to social and temporal conditions can be understood better with respect to three encompassing terms within rhetoric that are fundamental to the rhetorical view of the world:

- ***kairos***: the right moment or opportune occasion for speech; the way a given context for communication both calls for and constrains one's speech. Thus, sensitive to *kairos*, a speaker or writer takes into account the contingencies of a given place and time, and considers the opportunities within this specific context for words to be effective and appropriate to that moment.
- ***audience***: who will hear or read the text; rhetorical analysis always takes into account how an audience shapes the composition of a text or responds to it.
- ***decorum***: fitting one's speech to the context and audience; a central rhetorical principle that requires one's words and content to fit with the circumstances and occasion (*kairos*), the audience, and the speaker. Essentially, if one's ideas are appropriately embodied and presented (thereby observing decorum), then one's speech will be effective. Conversely, rhetorical vices, such as unnecessary repetition, wordiness in an attempt to appear eloquent, overuse of figures of speech, or misuse of words in context, are breaches of decorum.

Persuasive Appeals

Persuasion, according to Aristotle and the many authorities that would echo him, is brought about through three kinds of proof or persuasive appeal:

Logos	The appeal to reason or logic (the content and organization of the speech)
Pathos ² audience)	The appeal to emotion (the acknowledgement of the audience)
Ethos	The appeal to one's character or credibility/ethics (appearing knowledge and well-meaning about one's subject)

Although they can be analyzed separately, these three appeals work together in combination toward persuasive ends.

Aristotle calls these "artistic" or "intrinsic" proofs—those that could be found by means of the art of rhetoric—in contrast to "nonartistic" or "extrinsic" proofs such as witnesses or contracts that are simply used by the speaker, not found through rhetoric.

Figures of Speech/Rhetorical Devices

As rich and interesting as the figures and devices are (e.g., metaphor, simile, hyperbole, allegory, repetition, parallelism), they do not constitute the whole of rhetoric, as some have mistakenly surmised. Such a view is a vast reduction of the discipline of rhetoric, which has just as much to do with the discovery of things to say (Invention), their arrangement (Arrangement), committal to memory (Memory), and presentation (Delivery) as it has to do with the figures of speech, which are typically categorized under the third of these canons of rhetoric, Style.

Why is Rhetoric Important?

Those who are skilled at rhetoric are more likely to achieve their goal—convincing others of their point of view or position or getting the audience to refine their thoughts on an issue or idea. Rhetorical skill depends on the speaker's purposeful use of appeals and devices combined with well-developed content and effective delivery. Politicians, lawyers, religious leaders, and even teachers are helped by being effective rhetoricians. There are also times when rhetoric is used to convey an inaccurate or

² Pathos is also the category by which we can understand the psychological aspects of rhetoric. Criticism of rhetoric tends to focus on the overemphasis of pathos, emotion, at the expense of logos, the message.

harmful message. So, understanding rhetoric is also useful for being a critical listener or reader who can determine when a speaker or writer is using rhetoric to hide the truth.