

Rhetoric – The Art of Persuasion

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, the definition of “rhetoric” is “The art or study of using language effectively and persuasively...” (“rhetoric” def. 1.a.).

According to Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), rhetoric’s purpose is similar to that of a doctor’s, which is to convince a person to see a particular point of view for his or her own good (Rapp, 4.1).

Aristotle’s rhetoric consists of three elements: ethos, logos and pathos. Ethos is an appeal to character, which we might interpret today as the establishment of credibility. Logos is an appeal to logic. Since Aristotle himself developed syllogistic logic (which is at the core of deductive reasoning) he would no doubt approve of the use of syllogism in a modern persuasive argument. An example of a syllogism is: If all men are mortal and Bob is a man, then Bob is mortal.

In addition to ethos and logos, is pathos, which is an appeal to emotion. As everyone knows, instinctively, you are likely to be convinced of something if you are emotionally moved. If someone makes you cry or cheer, you are more likely to take his or her side.

Rhetoric is used in everyday discussion, and it is used by the mass media in the telling of the news. Often, writings that may be perceived on their face to be “objective reporting” are really, upon a more profound perusal, nothing more than subjective persuasion. The choice of topic, the choice of subject, the choice of medium, the order and placement of the information, the display (or not) of accompanying photos and/or art, and the mindful use of literary elements and devices in the text, such as diction, symbolism and figurative language, all contribute to a news story’s effect on the reader.

This brings us to the notion of purpose. All rhetoricians must ponder their purpose – their objective – when they set out to persuade. *What do they want to say, to whom and why?* Once the speaker comes to terms with those central questions, he or she can divine a persuasive piece that will, arguably, get the job well done.

Works Cited

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<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/rhetoric>>.

Rapp, Christof, "Aristotle's Rhetoric", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/#purpose/>.