



Rhetorical Appeals

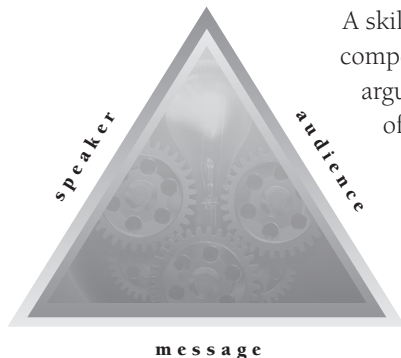
THERE ARE MANY DEFINITIONS for the term *rhetoric*, but Plato may have put it best when he described it as “the art of ruling the minds of men.” In more literal terms, **rhetoric** can be defined as “the technique or study of communication and persuasion.” The study of rhetoric is an immense topic, but this book will cover the basic modes of persuasive communication.

First, there are three main elements to consider in crafting an argument: the **speaker**, the **audience**, and the **message**. All efforts at communication focus on one or more of these elements. In this book, we use the term “speaker” for the individual who is delivering the message, whether in writing, speech, or another medium. The “audience” is the person or group of people who will receive the “message”—the information the speaker attempts to convey to the audience.

speaker: the individual who is delivering the message, whether in writing, speech, or another medium (i.e., the writer, orator, or presenter)

audience: the person or people who receive the message (i.e., the readers, listeners, or observers)

message: the information the speaker wishes to convey to the audience (i.e., the argument, topic, or thesis)



A skilled communicator will keep each of these three components in mind while formulating and presenting an argument. The three elements are often depicted as parts of a triangle, which illustrates their mutually supportive relationship. Just as a triangle has three sides, a well-crafted message will consider each of these three factors.

Etymology: The English word “rhetoric” is derived from the Greek *rhetor*, which means “orator.” It is also closely linked to the term *rhema*, which means “that which is spoken.” In its modern usage, “rhetoric” describes any form of persuasive verbal communication, whether oral or written.

The Three Rhetorical Appeals

The communication triangle we’ve just discussed was derived from Aristotle’s fourth-century B.C. *Treatise on Rhetoric*, which describes three different modes of persuasion—one focused on the sender of the message, one on the receiver, and one on the message itself. We categorize these classical appeals that Aristotle describes using the Greek words *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.

In Aristotle’s words,

*Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the **personal character of the speaker** [ethos]; the second on **putting the audience into a certain frame of mind** [pathos]; the third on the **proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself** [logos].¹*

ethos: moral character. In an *appeal to ethos*, also known as an ethical appeal, the speaker emphasizes the strength of his or her own moral character and experience in order to establish personal credibility.

pathos: emotion. An *appeal to pathos* attempts to elicit an emotional response from the audience.

logos:² reason, logic, words. An *appeal to logos* relies on the use of rational analysis and persuasive language.



Earlier, we arranged the elements of communication around the three points of a triangle. We can now replace the elements of speaker, audience, and message with their corresponding classical approaches. Ethos is an approach that’s focused on the speaker, pathos on the audience, and logos on the message.

Although we describe each of these appeals as a separate mode of persuasion, the most effective communications are those that subtly and seamlessly combine all three of these approaches. Ideally, an argument should establish the speaker’s credibility (whether directly or implicitly), engage the emotions of the audience, and be founded in solid logic, eloquently expressed. The following chapters discuss each appeal separately.

¹From Aristotle’s *Treatise on Rhetoric*. The words “ethos,” “pathos,” and “logos” have been added.

²The word “logos” has a variety of meanings, but we have limited our definition to fit the context of rhetorical appeals.