

Rhetoric

Rhetoric, the art of speaking or writing effectively, originated in ancient Greece. While it is not universal to all cultures, its conventions persist to this day as a set of shared expectations in American academic discourse. Rhetorical conventions support persuasive communication as we seek various responses from our readers—from common understanding to moral agreement to enlightenment to empathy. The design of a persuasive argument is particular to a given rhetorical situation, which takes into account four basic components: 1) the **author**, 2) the **audience**, 3) the **text** and 4) its **context**.

Rhetorical Elements

Aristotle distinguished four rhetorical forms — **logos** (*logic*), **cosmos** (*context*), **ethos** (*ethics*), and **pathos** (*empathy*) — as the paths by which an author offers an experiential understanding of her perspective to her audience. Successful writing will simultaneously provide a logical stream of evidence, with necessary background information, gathered and presented credibly, that persuasively engages the reader.

Logos presents an idea or set of ideas (conclusions) developed through logical progression, which enables the audience to “see” and thus understand an argument.

Cosmos gives the reader enough topical context to understand the argument.

Ethos presents an argument credibly by demonstrating factual knowledge, insightful understanding, or personal experience that creates belief and/or trust within the audience.

Pathos presents an argument with an understanding of the audience’s predisposition, capitalizing on shared ideals to influence opinion.

Rhetorical Organization

In classical rhetoric, both oratorical and written forms followed an elaborate and influential structure, which included the following parts: an *exordium*, “commencement” or **introduction**; *narratio*, “story” or a **narrative** or **history**; *partitio*, “partition” or **outline of points**; *confirmatio*, “confirmation” or **argument**; *refutatio*, “refutation” or **counter to the argument**; and *peroratio*, “speak to the end” or **conclusion**.

This classical organization is still widely followed, and is perhaps more familiar in its distilled sequence of introduction, body, and conclusion. Of course organization is not as simple as having a beginning, middle, and end. Within this structure, an organizational strategy — such as **topic** (different topics organized by importance, logic, or association) or **time** (events ordered chronologically, from recent to past or vice versa) or **space** (writing according to physical position) — provides the paper’s backbone, freeing the writer to focus on making the argument.

Rhetorical Modes

The modes of rhetoric are proven and collectively understood ways to construct ideas and arguments. We use them every day, consciously or unconsciously, in writing and in speaking. Sometimes academic assignments require writing within a specific mode; other times the writer must select a mode that best fits her purpose. Most writing in fact often employs multiple modes; reviewing them helps clarify the varied and particular ways in which we communicate effectively.

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Description conveys sensory perception through sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, “painting” with words to emphasize significant details. *Objective description* provides factual information; *subjective description* creates a mood or impression.

Narration tells a story by relaying a sequence of events with the emphasis on what happened rather than why it happened.

Illustration uses examples to explain a viewpoint or support an argument or thesis.

Definition identifies characteristics or clarifies boundaries to describe something in specific terms.

Exposition explains a subject by answering the five basic questions: who, what, where, when, and why?

Argumentation seeks to prove a point of view through clear reasoning and evidence.

Division and Classification Analysis examines a topic by breaking it down into parts, grouping similar information.

Process Analysis separates actions into progressive parts to inform how something works or give instructions.

Compare and Contrast juxtaposes two (or more) ideas or objects to examine the similarities and differences between two.

Cause and Effect seeks to explain a topic by exploring its reasons and results. Problem and Solution follows cause and effect with a suggestion for remedial action.

Analogy helps the reader understand an idea by drawing a parallel to something more familiar.