

Composing Rhetorically

What You Will Learn

- ▶ To define rhetoric
- ▶ To explain the rhetorical appeals of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*
- ▶ To identify the elements of the rhetorical triangle
- ▶ To take a rhetorical approach to composing
- ▶ To analyze the rhetorical appeals in verbal and visual texts

Have you ever considered what a magical act *composition* is? If you're a painter, you take some oil or water colors, put them together on a canvas and, lo and behold, you have a work of art that people look at and say, "I wonder what that means," or "Aha, I see exactly what that means." If you're a musician, you take some notes, some harmonies, some rhythms and put them together on a score or play them on an instrument, and, lo and behold, you have a song, a sonata, a symphony that people listen to and say, "I can really feel the emotion in that number." If you're a film maker preparing to post on YouTube, you take a plot and characters, set them in action in a scene with sound effects, and, lo and behold, you have a video that people can view and say, "Wow, what an exciting story you told."

Notice what all of these acts share: Each of them involves creating something that invites people to read, to analyze and comprehend (and sometimes challenge) not only some central idea or point but also the impact that the piece they've experienced has on them and the impact you have on them as well. As the creator, you pull together and arrange different parts to create an idea, an impression, an attitude. Each part you design invites the audience—the people who look at the painting, hear the music, experience the video—to examine (and you hope admire) the way you have combined the parts so effectively.

Each of the genres above—the painting, the song, the film—is a **composition**, a common word in English that comes from the combination of the Latin prefix *com*, meaning "together," and *position*, meaning "a putting." It makes sense, doesn't it?

com + position = composition = a putting together

The chances are that if you're reading this book, you're taking a course that's teaching you *composition*. You may be taking a course called Advanced Placement English Language and Composition. You may be taking a course that's simply called "English" or "American Literature." But whatever it's called, the course is probably designed to teach you to do with *language* what painters do with color and form, what musicians do with tunes and harmonies and rhythms, what film makers do with dialog, video images, and sound effects. Your course teaches you to *put together* various "component parts" of language—patterns of organization, word choice, and sentence structure—to help you convey a compelling idea, produce an effect, achieve a purpose for your readers. You're learning to compose in ways that help readers trust your knowledge and your sincerity.

Rhetoric: A Good Thing for Composing

As the first two chapters made clear, when you read, you read inventively, capitalizing on how you, the reader, and the text and its author interact to make meaning. It makes sense, then, to understand that when you compose—in writing, in music, in art—you do so in the same way. In this chapter, we make clear that this way of writing—selecting and using the "component parts" of a text so that you accomplish a purpose and create meaning with a reader—is, in the very best sense of the word, **rhetorical**.

The word *rhetoric* has unfortunately been misused by critics sometimes, to suggest something empty, something that carries no authentic meaning, or even worse, something shady that obscures authentic meaning. It's too bad that some folks misunderstand the meaning of rhetoric. It doesn't mean empty words, dishonest communication, or overblown speechifying. Instead, rhetoric is an ancient and noble art that has been taught in schools for centuries, and it remains the most powerful tool for writers and readers as they interpret the world around them.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle called rhetoric "the faculty of observing all the available means of persuasion in a given case." The Roman educator Quintilian described rhetoric simply as "the art of speaking well." (And we would add "writing well.")

Our definition builds on these classical concepts to define **rhetoric** as *the way people produce texts to create meaning*. The way we make meaning depends on whether we speak or write, read or listen. It depends on who is listening to us as we speak, what our backgrounds are as we read, and where in time and space we're located.

The Appeals: *Logos*, *Ethos*, and *Pathos*

When readers interpret, they predict main points or central themes, they respond to the character and knowledge of the writer they read, and they are moved by language and examples that touch an emotional chord. Similarly, when writers or speakers communicate, they

- Create a main point, a central argument, that seems logical and reasonable—what some people call *appealing to logos*;
- Demonstrate knowledge as well as good character and good will—what some people call *appealing to ethos*;
- Understand and speak to the emotional and the personal—what some people call *appealing to pathos*.

Aristotle developed these three categories of response that writers and speakers use to make connections with audiences and move them to agreement or action. These **appeals** are useful to consider for readers who are reacting to them as they read and for writers who are attempting to convey ideas effectively, provide evidence for analysis or for arguments or for evaluating the claims of a variety of positions or of several texts.

These three appeals are usually all in operation in any text, but depending on the rhetorical situation—the aim of the writer, the genre, the needs of an audience—one might be privileged over another.

- **Logos:** The emphasis in the use of *logos* is the reasoned and carefully constructed argument, with evidence that can be followed clearly and seems verifiable or rational. In much of the writing you do in school, for example, whether you're writing to analyze or to argue or claim or to evaluate, you likely privilege *logos* in the way you invent ideas, arrange them, and prove them.
- **Ethos:** The writer who appeals to an audience through *ethos* establishes credibility as the most telling or effective evidence for claims. If the writer can show superior knowledge, strength of character, understanding of situations, the audience might be convinced of the rightness of the position. Additionally, writers who use appeals to an audience's sense of ethical behavior—fair play, honesty, neighborliness—highlight this appeal.
- **Pathos:** The emotional appeal of *pathos* centers on the response from an audience and on a writer's focus on emotional effects of the claims made and evidence offered. The reactions of anger, pity, fear, sorrow, and others are elicited by careful choices of organization and word choice. *Pathos* is the most powerful appeal since it so often moves audiences to action; it is the most misused for that reason as well.

Writers who make use of the appeals consciously and appropriately are usually also readers who have been affected consciously by those appeals. Knowing how

to respond and how to manipulate appeals is an important part of learning how to compose rhetorically.

The Writer's Rhetorical Triangle

Most important is the fact that the way we read and structure language is always *rhetorical*—always dependent on how speakers or writers, subjects, audiences, contexts and purposes interact to make communication work.

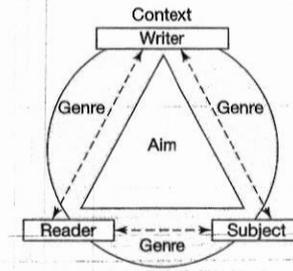


FIGURE 3.1 The Writer's Rhetorical Triangle

Figure 3.1 is a triangle showing rhetoric at work. The lines between speaker/writer—subject—audience illustrate the connections among those three elements. *Aim* (sometimes called “intention” or “purpose”) is at the center of the triangle because it informs how the three components of the triangle will interact. Surrounding the triangle is the circle of *context*, the conditions of the interaction. And the space between triangle and circle is filled by *genre*, the characteristic forms and formats that are part of the interaction.

You'll notice that this triangle is similar to the reader's rhetorical triangle we examined in Chapter 1, and of course this similarity is intentional (see page 6). Not only do readers use the rhetorical triangle to analyze and interpret what they read, but also the act of reading itself involves a combination of elements—texts and the writers who make them, readers, aims, and effects. You can see that reading and writing require similar acts of thinking, similar strategies of connection. Above all, both are rhetorical acts, and the more you understand and practice rhetoric the more skillful and confident reader and writer you will be.

ACTIVITY Using the Rhetorical Triangle to Analyze a Text

On July 13, 1865, Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, wrote an editorial encouraging Civil War veterans to take advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862 and apply for ownership of a 160-acre “stake” of undeveloped land, owned by the U.S. Government, west of the Mississippi River. The editorial contained the following sentences:

Washington is not a place to live in. The rents are high, the food is bad, the dust is disgusting and the morals are deplorable. Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the country.