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February’s Free Lesson comes from one of our favorite informational textbooks, *Rhetoric, Logic, & Argumentation: A Guide for Student Writers*. This lesson introduces students to the three types of rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos). A detailed analysis of Sojourner Truth’s famous “Ain’t I a Woman” speech helps students gain a deeper understanding of how ethical appeals function. Finally, students are asked to put their new skills to the test in analyzing an ethical argument that the Greek philosopher Socrates made at his own trial.

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Prestwick House

PO Box 658

Clayton, DE 19938

1-800-932-4593

www.prestwickhouse.com



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)

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.



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.

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.



Exercise: Identification

Identify the term from the word bank that best matches each description.

logos, pathos, rhetoric, audience, ethos, message, speaker

1. Related to the audience's feelings.
2. "The art of ruling the minds of men."
3. Emphasizes reason and proof.
4. The individual(s) on the receiving end of the communication.
5. The individual presenting the argument in speech, writing, or another medium.
6. The ideas being communicated.
7. Emphasizes the speaker's character.

Appeal to Ethos

An appeal to ethos (ethical appeal) calls attention to positive characteristics of the speaker as a means of adding credibility to an argument. The speaker attempts to appear principled, competent, authoritative, and likable. In creating this image, the speaker gains the audience's favor, increasing the likelihood that the message will be accepted and believed. Forming an ethical appeal is similar to the process of creating a "reliable narrator" when writing fiction—it is the process of developing a trustworthy and believable persona.

In the following quote from Congressman and presidential candidate Ron Paul, we see a clear and straightforward example of an appeal to ethos.

As an O.B. doctor of thirty years, and having delivered 4,000 babies, I can assure you life begins at conception. I am legally responsible for the unborn, no matter what I do, so there's a legal life there. The unborn has inheritance rights, and if there's an injury or a killing, there is a legal entity. There is no doubt about it.

Here, Paul prefaces his argument against legalized abortion by highlighting his background as an obstetrician who has delivered thousands of babies. By mentioning his thirty years as a medical doctor, Paul establishes his credibility and authority on the topic at hand. Identifying with the medical profession also allows Paul to benefit from the positive stereotypes that label doctors as people of considerable intelligence and character.

The quote from Ron Paul is an example of an overt appeal to ethos, in which the speaker explicitly describes his or her credentials or other positive personal traits to gain an audience's trust. However, many appeals to ethos are made in a subtler manner. For example, in some cases, a speaker will candidly confess some negative trait to appear honest and humble, hoping to gain an audience's trust. Perhaps the subtlest form of ethical appeal is simply using proper grammar and polite conventions of speech or behavior in order to appear well educated, intelligent, and likable.

The appeal to ethos is a tool that all speakers should use; it has considerable persuasive power, and when used properly, it can add useful information to a debate. Ethical appeals must be made with great care, however, because they can sometimes be misleading. In some cases, an ethical appeal can turn into a fallacious **argument from authority**,³ in which a speaker insists that an argument is true simply because a so-called expert affirms it. This approach is illogical and should be avoided. To determine whether an ethical appeal is being used correctly, ask yourself whether the information that's provided about the speaker is presented honestly, without exaggeration, and whether the information is adequately supported by a logical argument.

The following speech presents an example of an ethos-centered approach to expressing an argument. In this brief address, delivered spontaneously by Sojourner Truth at a women's convention in 1851 and transcribed by an observer, Truth argues that women should be treated as equals with men and uses her own experience and her own character to illustrate her argument. Observe the techniques she uses and the impressions they create.

³This is a logical fallacy that will be discussed in greater detail later in the book.

“Ain’t I a Woman?”

WELL, CHILDREN, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the Negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [A member of the audience whispers, “intellect.”] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or Negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.

The speech begins with Sojourner addressing the audience as “children.” This creates an affable, informal tone and establishes Truth's image as a motherly figure.

In this passage, Truth describes her own experiences to establish her expertise on the subject of how women differ from men. Through the experiences she lists here, Truth demonstrates that she has firsthand knowledge of how hard women can work and the kinds of hardships they are capable of surviving. Truth's testimony of her own strength and perseverance make her a credible witness on the subject of women's abilities. (Note that this is not an argument from authority because Truth is using herself as an example, rather than using her opinion as the defining point of the argument.)

Truth makes herself appear humble and likable through self-deprecating humor.

Here, Truth again makes an attempt at humor to establish rapport with the audience.

In another display of modesty, Truth thanks the audience for hearing her and refers to herself as “old Sojourner”

Truth's ethical appeals in this argument defy expectations: rather than presenting herself as highly educated and erudite, she embodies a simple, plainspoken persona. In so doing, she comes across as likable, trustworthy, and world-wise. In many cases, downplaying one's personal abilities, as Truth does here, is even more effective than highlighting them.

Ethical appeals can take many forms, and most arguments will be presented with some regard to ethos, even if the speaker never makes any specific reference to him- or herself; even the decision to remain formal and distant can be a part of a speaker's ethos. Every detail of a composition can reflect in some way on the speaker, and must, therefore, be chosen wisely.



Exercise: Analysis

In 399 B.C., Socrates was tried for having corrupted the youth of Athens and defied Greek religious teachings. Before being sentenced to death, Socrates spoke in his own defense at his trial. The following excerpt comes from the beginning of Socrates' address to the jury, as rendered by his student Plato.

Read the following passage carefully. Then, identify and describe Socrates' methods in presenting a persuasive ethos. Be sure to name the specific qualities Socrates attempts to embody, and include examples from the text to illustrate your points.

I KNOW NOT, O Athenians, how you may be affected by my accusers: I indeed have through them almost forgotten myself, so persuasively have they spoken; though, as I may say, they have not asserted anything which is true. But among the multitude of their false assertions I am most surprised at this, in which they say that you ought to beware of being deceived by me, as if I were an eloquent speaker. For that they should not be ashamed of asserting that which will be immediately confuted by me in reality, since in the present instance I shall appear to you to be by no means eloquent, this seems to me to be the consummation of impudence, unless they call him eloquent who speaks the truth. For, if they assert this, I shall indeed acknowledge myself to be a rhetorician, though not according to their conceptions. They have not then, as I said, asserted anything which is true; but from me you will hear all the truth. Not, by Jupiter, O Athenians, that you will hear from me a discourse splendidly decorated with nouns and verbs, and adorned in other respects like the harangues of these men; but you will hear me speaking in such language as may casually present itself. For I am confident that what I say will be just, nor let any one of you expect it will be otherwise: for it does not become one of my age to come before you like a lad with a studied discourse. And, indeed, I very much request and beseech you, O Athenians, that if you should hear me apologizing in the same terms and modes of expression which I am accustomed to use in the Forum, on the Exchange and Public Banks, and in other places, where many of you have heard me, that you will neither wonder nor be disturbed on this account; for the case is as follows: I now for the first time come before this tribunal, though I am more than seventy years old; and consequently I am a stranger to the mode of speaking which is here adopted. As, there-

fore, if I were in reality a foreigner, you would pardon me for using the language and the manner in which I had been educated, so now I request you, and this justly, as it appears to me, to suffer the mode of my diction, whether it be better or worse, and to attend to this, whether I speak what is just or not: for this is the virtue of a judge, as that of an orator is to speak the truth.