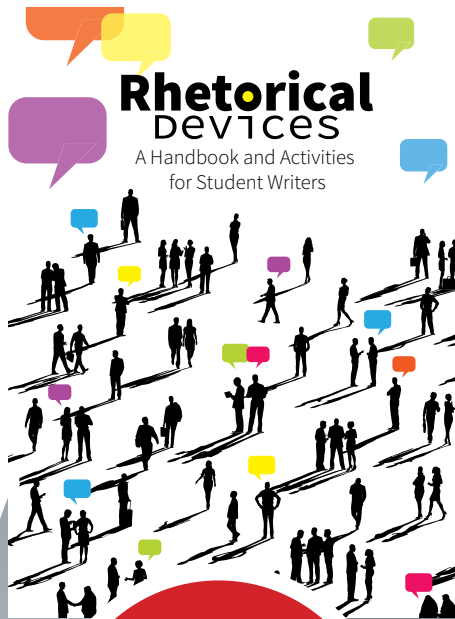




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Rhetorical DEVICES

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for Student Writers

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Pronunciation Guide	1
SECTION ONE:	Introduction	2
SECTION TWO:	Examples of Rhetorical Pitfalls	4
SECTION THREE:	The Four Aims of Rhetoric	8
SECTION FOUR:	Popular Rhetorical Devices: Strategy	
	Device 1: <i>Hyperbole</i>	13
	Device 2: <i>Understatement</i>	15
	Device 3: <i>Litotes</i>	19
	Device 4: <i>Antithesis</i>	22
	Device 5: <i>Hypophora</i>	26
	Device 6: <i>Rhetorical Question</i>	30
	Device 7: <i>Procatalepsis</i>	32
	Device 8: <i>Distinctio</i>	37
	Device 9: <i>Simile</i>	41
	Device 10: <i>Metaphor</i>	52
	Device 11: <i>Analogy</i>	63
	Device 12: <i>Allusion</i>	72
	Device 13: <i>Eponym</i>	79
	Device 14: <i>Sententia</i>	87
	Device 15: <i>Exemplum</i>	94
	Popular Rhetorical Devices: Organization	
	Device 16: <i>Climax</i>	101
	Device 17: <i>Parallelism/Chiasmus</i>	106
	Device 18: <i>Anadiplosis/Conduplicatio</i>	115
	Device 19: <i>Metabasis</i>	125

Device 20: <i>Parenthesis</i>	131
Device 21: <i>Apostrophe</i>	140
Device 22: <i>Enumeratio</i>	145
Device 23: <i>Antanagoge</i>	149

Popular Rhetorical Devices: Style

Device 24: <i>Epithet</i>	155
Device 25: <i>Asyndeton/Polysyndeton</i>	164
Device 26: <i>Zeugma</i>	169
Device 27: <i>Synecdoche/Metonymy</i>	174
Device 28: <i>Hyperbaton</i>	180

Popular Rhetorical Devices: Analysis of Reading

Device 29: <i>Aporia</i>	183
Device 30: <i>Anaphora/Epistrophe/Symploce</i>	185
Device 31: <i>Amplification</i>	190
Device 32: <i>Personification</i>	194
Device 33: <i>Parataxis</i>	197

SECTION FIVE: Cumulative Exercises.....	200
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What Is Rhetoric?

In reading, speaking, or writing, rhetoric is a tool that enhances composition; its aim is to persuade, to inform, to express a personal thought, or simply to entertain the reader. What the formal study of rhetoric allows us to do is isolate exactly what it is we've done so that in the future we can do it again for a similar effect. Rather than haphazardly casting words on the page, letting our vague expectations guide us, we can carefully construct our writing, effectively using the rhetorical devices we have learned.

Although there are literally hundreds of figures of rhetoric, ranging from *anadiplosis* to *zeugma*, some are so rare that you are unlikely to run into them, while others, such as *hyperbole* and *metaphor*, are so common that it is rare to see a newspaper article or hear a speech in which they are not frequently used. For our purpose we will consider 33 of the most useful rhetorical devices.

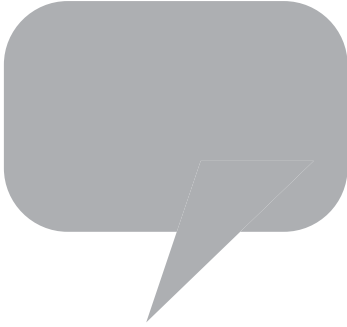
Keep in mind, however, when using figures of rhetoric, it is important to make sure you are helping your cause, rather than hindering it. A misused form, or a form used in an inappropriate place, can act as an obstacle to your readers, breaking the flow of your argument or actively confusing them about your meaning.

Rhetorical Devices that Help with Strategy

As a writer, you'll want to use rhetorical devices to help strengthen the strategy of your paper. Some of these devices are meant as transitional tools, to help you move seamlessly from one portion of your essay to another, while others are meant to help you present your evidence or information as strongly as possible. Still others help link the entire essay together, making it cohesive and intentional—characteristics valued by the scorers of large-scale writing assessments.

Rhetorical Devices that Help with Style

Whereas strategy and organization are the walls and foundation of an essay, style is the decoration, much like the paint, the wallpaper, and the furniture one might place in a house. Your style will say a lot about your personality and will also reveal your attitude toward the subject and your attitude toward the reader. It can mean the difference between an essay that people read once and forget, or one you clip out of a magazine or newspaper and read over and over. Poor style might mean that no one will ever read the entire essay. It can also mean the difference between a clear, lucid argument, and one that is almost impossible for the reader to understand. Therefore, the stylistic devices that you choose will have a powerful effect, one way or another, on the reception that your writing receives.



EXAMPLES OF RHETORICAL PITFALLS



One of the most useful and versatile rhetorical devices is the *metaphor*. A *metaphor* connects one subject with another that may not be obviously related. When used correctly, it allows the writer to do this in a way that is both stylistically pleasing and concise.

The following quotation has been edited and altered so that it includes a misused *metaphor*. It is from Pope John Paul II, discussing the Nazi Holocaust and the long-lasting impact it has had on Europe:

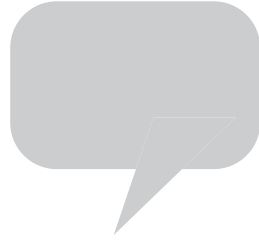
Here, as at Auschwitz and many other places in Europe, we are overcome by the **echo** of the **tears** of so many. Men, women, and children cry out to us from the depths of the horror that they knew. How can we fail to heed their cry? No one can forget or ignore what happened. No one can diminish its scale.

Note that a *metaphor* is introduced in the first sentence—the idea of the past at Auschwitz and other death camps echoing down through the ages. However, it is then immediately connected with a subject—tears—that cannot echo. This problem is commonly referred to as mixing *metaphors*, and using *metaphors* in this way can cause your reader a great deal of confusion or hilarity, which does not serve the subject. At the very least, it can break the flow of a good *metaphor* by introducing an impossible image that your reader can't correctly visualize.

Another commonly used rhetorical device is *parallelism*. This device connects parts of a sentence, or longer pieces, by using the same structure throughout. *Parallelism* is often used to build force through repetition. It is commonly found in political speeches, as well as religious texts such as the Bible. The benefits of well-used *parallelism* can easily be lost, however, by failing to properly match the form between each element.

Look, for example, at the following quotation from former President George W. Bush, talking about his old friends from Texas and the importance they hold in his life:

I like my buddies from west Texas. I liked them when I was young, I liked them when I was middle-age, I liked them before I was president, and I like them during president, and I like them after president.



POPULAR RHETORICAL DEVICES



STRATEGY

Device #1 - Hyperbole:

This is the most popular and commonly used rhetorical device in the entire world of rhetorical devices!

Hyperbole is a powerful rhetorical form when used properly, but a terrible distraction when used improperly. It consists of exaggerating some part of your statement in order to give it emphasis or focus. *Hyperbole* is never meant to be understood literally by the reader, and you should take great care to make sure its intent is apparent. There are few things more damaging to a writer's credibility than having *hyperbole* mistaken for fact, which destroys the point of the *hyperbole*. Consider these two examples of *hyperbole*: “*What is causing the biggest problem is that there are over three billion people on the planet,*” and “*The planet is getting so crowded we may have to take turns sitting down.*” The first may seem hyperbolic, but it merely states a fact; the second, on the other hand, is a fine example of *hyperbole*. It states the same basic idea in a way that is consciously exaggerated for effect.

Hyperbole is the single-most overused rhetorical form. People use it in everyday speech, in writing, and in any form of discourse they happen upon. We are a culture absorbed by exaggeration, and, left unchecked, it can weaken your writing immensely. If you find yourself using *hyperbole* as a way to avoid using actual figures, or to fill space, rethink your strategy.

There are three main uses of *hyperbole*. Each of our examples that follow will demonstrate one of these uses. The first example shows how to use it when you want to make a point strongly; for instance, apply *hyperbole* if you desire to energize your statement and drive it home with gusto.

Example #1: “There are more reasons for NASA to fund a trip to Jupiter than there are miles in the journey.”

The next example shows how to use *hyperbole* when you want your reader to snap to attention and focus on what you're writing. It can be used to break the trance your reader has fallen into—as a wake-up call, or a tap on the shoulder. Often, *hyperbole*, through *metaphor*, accomplishes this purpose best, although many authors enjoy using tongue-in-cheek *hyperbole*.

Example #2: “At these words, the people became so silent you could hear a beating heart from across the room.”

Device #4 - Antithesis:

A fairly simple way to show a complex thought.

Antithesis makes use of a contrast in language to bring out a contrast in ideas. It is one of the most attractive and powerful tools in speech and writing. Some of the most famous lines in modern history are built on the *antithesis*, from Neil Armstrong’s “*That’s one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind,*” to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “*...not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*” *Antithesis* has a natural beauty to the human ear because we are creatures who love to organize and categorize our thoughts and ideas. *Antithesis* organizes ideas in a way that is both evocative and powerful, and it is an excellent tool to have in your writer’s toolbox.

Antithesis can be built by contrasting any of the different parts of a statement.

- You may wish to keep the structure of the sentences identical, but use two opposing words.
- You may wish to change entire clauses to contrast with one another.
- You may even wish to have whole sentences oppose one another throughout the course of a paragraph. While simply opposing a key word can be the easiest to build, longer uses of *antithesis* can be very powerful.

The sound of a sentence built on *antithesis* can also be used to great effect. Trying to alliterate, or match the first sound of the contrasting words, can help highlight the opposition. For example:

“Life can be kind and cruel, full of hope and heartache,”

can drive the point home more eloquently than:

“Life can be kind and mean, full of joy and heartache.”

Example #1: “In this age of modernity, can we truly condone such horrific acts?”

Example #2: “How can we expect a man to give more than we ourselves are willing to give?”

Example #3: “Do you want a world in which those dearest to you can know peace and safety or a world in which every moment carries with it the constant fear of death?”

Exercise 1:

Write 5 original *rhetorical questions* to help your readers arrive at—and agree with—the point to which you have been leading them. *The first one has been done for you as an example.*

1. Why should we *not* protest the selling of our natural resources to the highest bidder?
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Exercise 3:

Complete the adages that follow by filling in the blank with the appropriate ending. The first one has been done for you as an example. You must be careful with phrases that are too familiar, or you might be marked down for using clichés. In addition, do not use them frequently, or it could cause a problem.

- | | | | |
|----------------------------|-----------|----|-------------------------|
| 1. As you sow, | ___ J ___ | A. | to catch a trout. |
| 2. Barking dogs | _____ | B. | after the event. |
| 3. Children should | _____ | C. | before you have it. |
| 4. Desires are | _____ | D. | seldom bite. |
| 5. You must lose a fly | _____ | E. | where the shoe pinches. |
| 6. Happy is the country | _____ | F. | has many friends. |
| 7. It is easy to be wise | _____ | G. | make light work. |
| 8. Knowledge | _____ | H. | that has no history. |
| 9. Lend your money and | _____ | I. | nourished by delays. |
| 10. Many hands | _____ | J. | so shall you reap. |
| 11. Never spend your money | _____ | K. | be seen and not heard. |
| 12. Only the wearer knows | _____ | L. | that wears a crown. |
| 13. Success | _____ | M. | lose your friend. |
| 14. Uneasy lies the head | _____ | N. | is power. |

Exercise 1:

Write 10 original constructions that build to a *climax*. Be especially careful to avoid clichés and meaningless statements that, while they may technically employ *climax*, would do nothing to help a writer achieve the intended purpose.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Example #1: “Having dealt as we have with the many devices used by a writer in his craft, we shall now proceed to examine those devices a reader may make use of to analyze a piece of literature.”

Example #2: “I have laid out for you neatly and in proper array the various flaws in the current system. Let me next offer you workable alternatives.”

Example #3: “The previous passages explain when they got here, and who brought them. The next quotation shows how and why they made the journey.”

Exercise 1:

Write 5 original constructions that employ *metabasis*. On at least some of them, try to avoid using any form of the first person. *The first one has been done for you as an example.*

1. *Up to now, we’ve focused on rhetorical devices that help the writer strategically. Now we will explore those that help him or her organize an essay.*
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.