What Do Students Need to Know About Rhetoric?

Hepzibah Roskelly
University of North Carolina
Greensboro, North Carolina

> The AP Language and Composition Exam places strong emphasis on students' ability to analyze texts rhetorically and to use rhetoric effectively as they compose essay responses. It's an important question for teachers, therefore, to consider what students need to know about this often misunderstood term in order to write confidently and skillfully.
>
> The traditional definition of rhetoric, first proposed by Aristotle, and embellished over the centuries by scholars and teachers, is that rhetoric is the art of observing in any given case the "available means of persuasion."
>
> "The whole process of education for me was learning to put names to things I already knew." That's a line spoken by Kinsey Millhone, Sue Grafton's private investigator in one of her series of alphabet mystery novels, *C is for Corpse.* When I began a graduate program that specialized in rhetoric, I wasn't quite sure what that word meant. But once I was introduced to it, I realized rhetoric was something I had always known about.

Any of these opening paragraphs might be a suitable way to begin an essay on what students need to know as they begin a course of study that emphasizes rhetoric and prepares them for the AP English Language Exam. The first acknowledges that the question teachers ask about teaching rhetoric is a valid one. The second establishes a working definition and suggests that the writer will rely on classical rhetoric to propose answers to the question. And the third? Perhaps it tells more about the writer than about the subject. She likes mysteries; she knows that many people (including herself when she was a student) don't know much about the term. But that third opening is the one I choose to begin with. It's a *rhetorical* decision, based on what I know of myself, of the subject, and of you. I want you to know something of me, and I'd like to begin a conversation with you. I also want to establish my purpose right away, and Millhone's line states that purpose nicely. Rhetoric is all about giving a name to something we already know a great deal about, and teachers who understand that are well on their way to teaching rhetoric effectively in their classes.

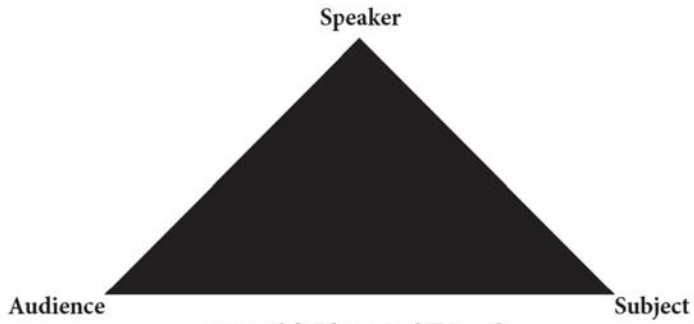
The first thing that students need to know about rhetoric, then, is that it's all around us in conversation, in movies, in advertisements and books, in body language, and in art. We employ rhetoric whether we're conscious of it or not, but becoming conscious of how rhetoric works can transform speaking, reading, and writing, making us more successful and able communicators and more discerning audiences. The very *ordinariness* of rhetoric is the single most important tool for teachers to use to help students understand its dynamics and practice them.

Exploring several writers' definitions of rhetoric will, I hope, reinforce this truth about the commonness of rhetorical practice and provide some useful terms for students as they analyze texts and write their own. The first is Aristotle's, whose work on rhetoric has been employed by scholars and teachers for centuries, and who teachers still rely on for basic understandings about the rhetorical transaction.

The Rhetorical Triangle: Subject, Audience, Speaker's Persona

> Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.
> —Aristotle

Aristotle believed that from the world around them, speakers could observe how communication happens and use that understanding to develop sound and convincing arguments. In order to do that, speakers needed to look at three elements, graphically represented by what we now call the rhetorical triangle:



Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle

Aristotle said that when a *rhetor* or speaker begins to consider how to compose a speech— that is, begins the process of invention—the speaker must take into account three elements: the *subject,* the *audience,* and the *speaker.* The three elements are connected and interdependent; hence, the triangle.

Considering the *subject* means that the writer/speaker evaluates what he or she knows already and needs to know, investigates perspectives, and determines kinds of evidence or proofs that seem most useful. Students are often taught how to conduct research into a subject and how to support claims with appropriate evidence, and it is the subject point of the triangle that students are most aware of and feel most confident about. But, as Aristotle shows, knowing a subject—the theme of a novel, literary or rhetorical terms, reasons for the Civil War—is only one facet of composing.

Considering the *audience* means speculating about the reader's expectations, knowledge, and disposition with regard to the subject writers explore. When students respond to an assignment given by a teacher, they have the advantage of knowing a bit of what their

audience expects from them because it is often spelled out. "Five to seven pages of error-free prose." "State your thesis clearly and early." "Use two outside sources." "Have fun." All of these instructions suggest to a student writer what the reader expects and will look for; in fact, pointing out directly the rhetoric of assignments we make as teachers is a good way to develop students' rhetorical understanding. When there is no assignment, writers imagine their readers, and if they follow Aristotle's definition, they will use their own experience and observation to help them decide on how to communicate with readers.

The use of experience and observation brings Aristotle to the *speaker* point of the triangle. Writers use who they are, what they know and feel, and what they've seen and done to find their attitudes toward a subject and their understanding of a reader. Decisions about formal and informal language, the use of narrative or quotations, the tone of familiarity or objectivity, come as a result of writers considering their speaking voices on the page. My opening paragraph, the *exordium*, attempts to give readers insight into me as well as into the subject, and it comes from my experience as a reader who responds to the personal voice. The creation of that voice Aristotle called the *persona*, the character the speaker creates as he or she writes.

Many teachers use the triangle to help students envision the rhetorical situation. Aristotle saw these rhetorical elements coming from lived experience. Speakers knew how to communicate because they spoke and listened, studied, and conversed in the world. Exercises that ask students to observe carefully and comment on rhetorical situations in action—the cover of a magazine, a conversation in the lunchroom, the principal's address to the student body—reinforce observation and experience as crucial skills for budding rhetoricians as well as help students transfer skills to their writing and interpreting of literary and other texts.

Appeals to Logos, Pathos, and Ethos

In order to make the rhetorical relationship—speakers to hearers, hearers to subjects, speakers to subjects—most successful, writers use what Aristotle and his descendants called the *appeals*: logos, ethos, and pathos.

They appeal to a reader's sense of *logos* when they offer clear, reasonable premises and proofs, when they develop ideas with appropriate details, and when they make sure readers can follow the progression of ideas. The logical thinking that informs speakers' decisions and readers' responses forms a large part of the kind of writing students accomplish in school.

Writers use *ethos* when they demonstrate that they are credible, good-willed, and knowledgeable about their subjects, and when they connect their thinking to readers' own ethical or moral beliefs. Quintilian, a Roman rhetorician and theorist, wrote that the

speaker should be the "good man speaking well." This emphasis on *good* character meant that audiences and speakers could assume the best intentions and the most thoughtful search for truths about an issue. Students' use of research and quotations is often as much an ethical as a logical appeal, demonstrating to their teachers that their character is thoughtful, meticulous, and hardworking.

When writers draw on the emotions and interests of readers, and highlight them, they use *pathos*, the most powerful appeal and the most immediate—hence its dominance in advertisements. Students foreground this appeal when they use personal stories or observations, sometimes even within the context of analytical writing, where it can work dramatically well to provoke readers' sympathetic reaction. Figurative language is often used by writers to heighten the emotional connections readers make to the subject. Emily Dickinson's poem that begins with the metaphor "My life had stood—a loaded gun," for example, provokes readers' reactions of fear or dread as they begin to read.

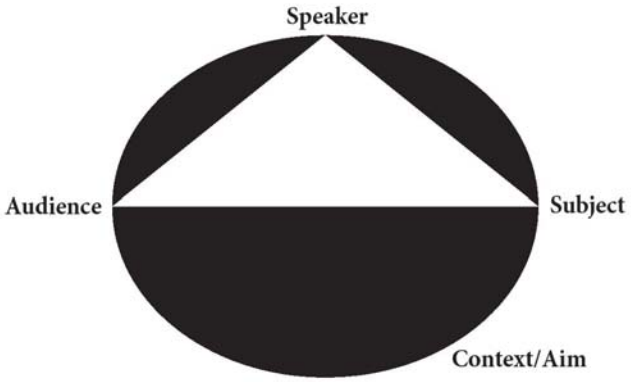
As most teachers teach the appeals, they make sure to note how intertwined the three are. John F. Kennedy's famous line (an example of the rhetorical trope of *antimetabole,* by the way), "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country," calls attention to the ethical qualities of both speaker and hearer, begins to propose a solution to some of the country's ills by enlisting the direct help of its citizens, and calls forth an emotional patriotism toward the country that has already done so much for individuals. Asking students to investigate how appeals work in their own writing highlights the way the elements of diction, imagery, and syntax work to produce persuasive effects, and often makes students conscious of the way they're unconsciously exercising rhetorical control.

Any text students read can be useful for teachers in teaching these elements of classical rhetoric. Speeches, because they're immediate in connecting speaker and hearer, provide good illustrations of how rhetorical relationships work. In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar,* Marc Antony's speech allows readers to see clearly how appeals intertwine, how a speaker's persona is established, how aim or purpose controls examples. Sojourner Truth's repetition of the phrase "Ain't I a Woman?" shows students the power of repetition and balance in writing as well as the power of gesture (Truth's gestures to the audience are usually included in texts of the speech). Asking students to look for rhetorical transactions in novels, in poems, in plays, and in nonfiction will expose how rhetorical *all* writing is.

Context and Purpose

> Rhetoric is what we have instead of omniscience.
> —Ann Berthoff

It's important to note that Aristotle omitted—or confronted only indirectly—two other elements of the rhetorical situation, the *context* in which writing or speaking occurs and the emerging aim or *purpose* that underlies many of the writer's decisions. In part, Aristotle and other classical rhetoricians could assume context and aim since all speakers and most hearers were male, upper class, and concerned with addressing important civic, public issues of the day. But these two considerations affect every element of the rhetorical triangle. Some teachers add circles around the triangle or write inside of it to show the importance of these two elements to rhetorical understanding.



Ann Berthoff's statement suggests the importance of context, the situation in which writing and reading occur, and the way that an exploration of that situation, a rhetorical analysis, can lead to understanding of what underlies writers' choices. We can't know for sure what writers mean, Berthoff argues, but we have rhetoric to help us interpret.

The importance of context is especially obvious in comedy and political writing, where controlling ideas are often, maybe even usually, topical, concerned with current events and ideas. One reason comedy is difficult to teach sometimes is that the events alluded to are no longer current for readers and the humor is missed. Teachers who have taught Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," for example, have to fill in the context of the Irish famine and the consequent mind-numbing deprivation in order to have students react appropriately to the black humor of Swift's solutions to the problem. But using humorist David Sedaris's essays or Mort Sahl's political humor or Dorothy Parker's wry social commentary provides a fine opportunity to ask students to do research on the context in which these pieces were written. Students who understand context learn how and why they write differently in history class and English or biology. And giving students real

contexts to write in—letters to the editor, proposals for school reforms, study notes for other students— highlights how context can alter rhetorical choices in form and content.

Intention

> Rhetoric . . . should be a study of misunderstandings and their remedies.
> —I. A. Richards

Richards's statement reveals how key *intention* or aim is to rhetorical effectiveness. Words and forms carry writers' intentions, but, as Richards indicates, those aims can be miscommunicated. Investigating how readers perceive intentions exposes where and how communication happens or is lost. For Richards, rhetoric is the way to connect intentions with responses, the way to reconcile readers and writers. Intention is sometimes embodied in a thesis statement; certainly, students get lots of practice making those statements clear. *But intention is carried out throughout a piece, and it often changes.* Writing workshops where writers articulate intentions and readers suggest where they perceive them or lose them give students a way to realize intentions more fully.

Many texts students read can illuminate how intentions may be misperceived as well as communicated effectively. "A Modest Proposal," for example, is sometimes perceived as horrific by student readers rather than anguished. Jane Addams's "Bayonet Charge" speech, delivered just before America's entrance into World War I, provoked a storm of protest when it seemed to many that she was impugning the bravery of fighting soldiers who had to be drugged before they could engage in the mutilation of the bayonet charge. Although she kept restating her intention in later documents, her career was nearly ruined, and her reputation suffered for decades. I use that example (in part because you may not be familiar with it) to show that students can find much to discuss when they examine texts from the perspective of misunderstandings and their remedies.

Visual Rhetoric

One way to explore rhetoric in all its pervasiveness and complexity is to make use of the visual. Students are expert rhetoricians when it comes to symbolic gesture, graphic design, and action shots in film. What does Donald Trump's hand gesture accompanying his straightforward "You're fired" on the recent "reality" television program *The Apprentice* signal? (Notice the topical context I'm using here: perhaps when you read this, this show will no longer be around.) Why does Picasso use color and action in the way he does in his painting *Guernica*? Why are so many Internet sites organized in columns that sometimes compete for attention? Linking the visual to the linguistic, students gain confidence and control as they analyze and produce rhetoric.

Conclusion

So what do students need to know about rhetoric? Not so much the names of its tropes and figures, although students often like to hunt for examples of asyndeton or periphrasis, and it is also true that if they can identify them in texts they read they can in turn practice them in their own writing, often to great effect. (If you're interested in having students do some work with figures of speech and the tropes of classical rhetoric, visit the fine Web site at Brigham Young University developed by Professor Gideon Burton called *Silva Rhetoricae*, literally "the forest of rhetoric": humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/silva.htm. That site provides hundreds of terms and definitions of rhetorical figures.) However, it's more important to recognize how figures of speech affect readers and be able to use them effectively to persuade and communicate than it is to identify them, and the exam itself places little emphasis on an ability to name *zeugma* (a figure where one item in a series of parallel constructions in a sentence is governed by a single word), but great emphasis on a student's ability to write a sentence that shows an awareness of how parallel constructions affect readers' responses.

Students don't need to memorize the five canons of classical rhetoric either—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery—although studying what each of those canons might mean for the composing processes of today's student writers might initiate provocative conversation about paragraph length, sentence structure, use of repetition, and format of final product.

What students need to know about rhetoric is in many ways what they know already about the way they interact with others and with the world. Teaching the connections between the words they work with in the classroom and the world outside it can challenge and engage students in powerful ways as they find out how much they can use what they know of the available means of persuasion to learn more.

Some useful books on rhetoric:

Crowley, Sharon, and Debra Hawhee. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students.* 3rd Ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004.

Covino, William A., and David A. Jolliffe. *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, Boundaries.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995.

Lunsford, Andrea A., John J. Ruszkiewicz, and Keith Walters. *Everything's an Argument.* 3rd Ed. New York: Bedford, St. Martin's, 2004.

Mailloux, Steven. *Rhetorical Power.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989.

For the complete collection, *Special Focus in English Language and Composition: Rhetoric*, visit the College Board Store at:
http://store.collegeboard.com/productlist.do?catId=8&subCatId=18