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How to Win an Argument: Building a Rhetorical Appeal

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The purpose of this article is to help you understand the foundational rhetorical elements of ethos, pathos, and logos and apply these elements to your style of argumentation.

The Rhetorical Triangle

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion: the ability to successfully influence an audience. To think rhetorically in your writing is to think about how your readers will *receive* your words. Being aware of your audience can strengthen your argument and overall impact. According to Aristotle, the ability to persuade an audience is determined by how well the speaker appeals to the rhetorical triangle of ethos, pathos, and logos.

- Ethos – Be Credible. Considering the character of the speaker or writer, Ethos adheres to human ethics, establishing one's position, credibility, or trustworthiness.
- Pathos – Be Emotional. People need to be convinced by appealing to their desires and values. Pathos relates to the audience and invokes an emotional response.
- Logos – Be Logical. By appealing to rationality and objectivity, Logos uses strong reasoning, credible evidence, and logical assessment as the propeller for persuasion.

Recognizing Ethos, Pathos, and Logos

One way you may find Ethos, Pathos, and Logos helpful is through using these principles as ways to evaluate the effectiveness of a source. When evaluating a text, consider asking the following questions:

- Ethos – How well are they establishing or explaining their credibility? What are the author's qualifications? Does the author consider other viewpoints? Do they approach it with an appropriate, fair tone that does not undermine their credibility?
- Logos – How well do they set up their argument? Does the author provide a clear, specific, and arguable thesis? Does the thesis have credible sources and logical reasoning?
- Pathos – Does the writer appeal to the values and beliefs of the reader by using examples readers can relate to or care about? Does the author use vivid descriptions and images to engage readers? Is the author appealing to particular beliefs or ideas?

Examples

While the rhetorical triangle indicates the importance of balance between all three faculties, it's important to note that your topic may need to draw on one or two aspects more than others. In other words, your paper may require more logos than pathos, or vice versa. For instance, when a politician is either beginning a campaign or embattled in a scandal, she will likely want to emphasize her character by speaking about her sense of morality or pointing to her voting record, utilizing ethos to establish credibility. You may have also experienced this when applying for scholarships or universities, appealing to pathos by tapping into your personal story.

When using rhetoric for your writing, consider the following steps to strengthen your argument:

- Ethos – emphasize your trustworthiness, appeal to your character to highlight your credibility, establish an even tone, and balance each side equally.
- Pathos – appeal to your audience by using narrative and emphasizing your shared values, establishing an emotional connection, and ethically invoking emotional reactions in your readers.
- Logos – appeal to reason, build your argument with logic, use data to support your claims, and defend your argument with internal consistency and clarity.

Conclusion

The use of rhetoric will benefit your ability to communicate in an academic sense, as well as in the real world and all fields of study. Whatever you write, an understanding of rhetoric will greatly enhance your ability to persuade. To master the art of rhetoric, read the work of persuasive writers and speakers. Read not just *what* they say but *how* they say it. Whenever you're writing a document, think about how you can use ethos, pathos, and logos as a guide for your argument, being certain to balance out the elements of the rhetorical triangle based on the needs of your audience.

Tips

1. Assess your purpose and goals for your paper. Ask how you might enhance (or diminish) your character in the minds of your readers.
2. Formulate how you will gather evidence for your argument with credible sources and evidence. Gather an inventory of support, evidence, and strong reasoning to build your argument's validity.
3. When revising your writing, for each document, paragraph, and sentence, ask yourself, "**How might my reader receive this?**"
4. Consider ways to balance or adjust the rhetorical triangle for different audiences. What audiences need more facts? Which ones need to feel your passion for the topic?

Works Consulted

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