The Rhetoric of the Op-Ed Page: Ethos, Logos, and Pathos

Developed by John R. Edlund

MODULE: STUDENT VERSION

Reading Selections for this Module

Edlund, John R. "Three Ways to Persuade." 2011. Print.

Text—"Three Ways to Persuade"

Activity 1: Getting Ready to Read

Consider the title and the subheads in the article "Three Ways to Persuade" by John R. Edlund. What is this article about? What do the three terms "ethos," "logos," and "pathos" mean? Now read the whole article, thinking briefly about the discussion questions at the end of each section. When you finish the article, engage in the option assigned by your teacher.

Option 1: Quickwrite

Think of something you tried to persuade a parent, teacher, or friend to do or believe. It might have been to buy or pay for something, to change a due date or a grade, to change a rule or decision, to go somewhere, or some other issue. What kinds of arguments did you use? Did you use logic? Did you use evidence to support your request? Did you try to present your own character in a way that would make your case more believable? Did you try to engage the emotions of your audience? Write a short description of your efforts to persuade your audience in this case.

After you have completed the option assigned, discuss the following questions:

1. Do people use Aristotle's concepts of ethos, logos, and pathos every day without thinking about it? Can you think of some examples?
2. Do these concepts apply to politics and advertising as well as person-to-person persuasion? Can you think of some examples?
3. Are there other means of persuasion that Aristotle did not discuss?

Activity 2: Exploring Key Concepts

For each term (Ethos, Pathos, Logos), answer the following questions:

1. What does this term mean to you?
2. Should we use the Greek word, or is there an English word that means exactly the

same thing?

3. Look at the discussion questions for each section. Are Aristotle's three terms relevant to your own writing?

Activity 3: Exploring the Concept of "Persuasion"

The article is called "Three Ways to Persuade." Aristotle says that the art of rhetoric is the art of "finding the available means of persuasion." What does it mean to persuade someone? Is it the same as "convince"? In the dialogue called Gorgias, Plato has the famous sophist (or rhetorician) Gorgias define rhetoric as "the art of persuasion in courts of law and other assemblies about the just and unjust." Plato then has Socrates ask Gorgias, "Which sort of persuasion does rhetoric create in courts of law and other assemblies about the just and unjust, the sort of persuasion which gives belief without knowledge or that which gives knowledge?"

Gorgias answers, "Clearly, Socrates, that which only gives belief." This exchange leads to some important philosophical questions:

1. What is the difference between "knowledge" and "belief"?

One way of thinking about this is to take a current controversial event such as a murder, a scandal, a celebrity divorce, or other prominent news item and fill out a box with four quadrants labeled like this:

What I know	How I know it
What I believe	Why I believe it

2. Is "proving" different from "persuading"? Does proving lead to knowledge, while persuading leads to belief? How do we "prove" that something is true? Are there some notions that we believe strongly, even though we can't prove them?

3. What is the difference between what is certain and what is probable? If, as in a courtroom, the jury decides that something has been proved "beyond a reasonable doubt," does that mean that it is certainly true or merely highly probable? Are we persuaded only by what is certain or sometimes by what is probable, in that it is likely to be true, or that most people would agree that it is true?

4. In the dialogue mentioned above, Gorgias says that rhetoric is about the "just and unjust." How would you distinguish a "just" action from an "unjust" action? (The word "just" here is related to the word "justice.")

Three Ways to Persuade

By John R. Edlund

1 Over 2,000 years ago the Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that there were three basic ways to persuade an audience of your position: *ethos, logos,* and *pathos.*

Ethos: The Writer's Character or Image

2 The Greek word *ethos* is related to our word *ethics* or *ethical,* but a more accurate modern translation might be "image." Aristotle uses *ethos* to refer to the speaker's character as it appears to the audience. Aristotle says that if we believe that a speaker has good sense, good moral character, and goodwill, we are inclined to believe what that speaker says. Today we might add that a speaker should also appear to have the appropriate expertise or authority to speak knowledgeably about the subject matter. *Ethos* is often the first thing we notice, so it creates the first impression that influences how we perceive the rest. *Ethos* is an important factor in advertising, both for commercial products and in politics. For example, when an actor in a pain reliever commercial puts on a doctor's white coat, the advertisers are hoping that wearing this coat will give the actor the authority to talk persuasively about medicines. Of course, in this particular instance the actor's *ethos* is a deceptive illusion, but the character, background, and authority of the speaker or writer can be a legitimate factor in determining whether we find him or her credible.

3 A writer's *ethos* is created largely by word choice and style. Student writers often have a problem with *ethos* because they are asked to write research papers, reports, and other types of texts as if they have authority to speak persuasively, when in fact they are newcomers to the subject matter and the discourse community. Sometimes students try to create an academic image for themselves by using a thesaurus to find difficult and unusual words to sprinkle throughout their texts. Unfortunately, this sort of effort usually fails, because it is difficult to use a word correctly that you have not heard or read in context many times.

4 Sometimes a writer or speaker will use what is called an *ad hominem* argument, an argument "against the man." In this strategy, the writer attacks the character or personality of the speaker instead of attacking the substance of his or her position. This kind of argument is usually considered to be a logical fallacy, but it can be very effective and is quite common in politics. This type of argument undermines a speaker or writer's *ethos.* When you are writing a paper, consider the following questions.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What kind of image do you want to project to your audience?
2. What can you do to help project this image?
3. What words or ideas do you want to avoid in order not to harm your image?
4. What effect do misspelled words and grammatical errors have on your image?

Logos: Logical Arguments

5 In our society, logic and rationality are highly valued and this type of persuasive strategy is usually privileged over appeals to the character of the speaker or to the emotions of the audience. However, formal logic and scientific reasoning are usually not appropriate for general audiences, so we must rely on a more *rhetorical* type of reasoning.

6 For Aristotle, formal arguments are based on what he calls syllogisms. This is reasoning that takes the form:

All men are mortal.
Socrates is a man.
Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

7 However, Aristotle notes that in ordinary speaking and writing we often use what he calls a rhetorical syllogism or an *enthymeme.* This is an argument in which some of the premises or assertions remain unstated or are simply assumed. For example, no one in ordinary life would think that Socrates could be immortal. We would simply *assume* that Socrates could be killed or that he would die of natural causes after a normal lifespan. As a result, we can logically say the following: Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal. Not all assumptions are as obvious as this one, however.

8 For example, when the bubonic plague swept through Europe and parts of Asia in the 14th century, killing as much as three quarters of the population in less than 20 years, it was not known how the disease was spread. At one point, people thought that the plague was spread by cats. If one *assumes* that cats spread the disease, the obvious solution to the problem is to eliminate the cats, and so people began killing cats on sight. However, we now know that the plague is spread by fleas which live on rats. Because cats kill rats, killing off the cat population led to an increase in the rat population, a corresponding increase in plague carrying fleas, and thus an increase in cases of plague in humans. Killing off the cats was a logical solution to the problem of plague, but it was based on a faulty assumption.

9 Rhetorical arguments are often based on probabilities rather than certain truth. The people of medieval Europe really had no way to determine what the real cause of the plague was, but they felt that they had to do something about it, and the cat hypothesis seemed probable to them. Unfortunately, this is true of many of the problems we face even today. We cannot know with absolute certainty what the real solution is, yet we must act anyway.

10 Persuasion, to a large extent, involves convincing people to accept our assumptions as probably true and to take appropriate action. Similarly, exposing questionable assumptions in someone else's argument is an effective means for preparing the audience to accept your own contrary position.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Imagine some arguments that start from faulty assumptions, such as "If pigs could fly," or "If money grew on trees." What would be some of the logical consequences?
2. Do you think that logical arguments are a better support for a position than arguments that are based on authority or character? In other words, would you support a policy just because a celebrity or an important expert supported it?
3. Can you think of a time when you successfully used a logical argument to persuade someone of something? What was it?

***Pathos:* The Emotions of the Audience**

11 Most of us think that we make our decisions based on rational thought. However, Aristotle points out that emotions such as anger, pity, fear, and their opposites, powerfully influence our rational judgments. Due to this fact, much of our political discourse and much of the advertising we experience is directed toward moving our emotions.

12 Anger is a very powerful motivating force. Aristotle says that if we want to make an audience angry we need to know three things: 1) the state of mind of angry people, 2) who the people are that this audience usually gets angry at, and 3) on what grounds this audience gets angry at those people. While the actual causes of a war may be economic or political, and thus related to *logos,* the mobilization of a people or a nation to war inevitably consists of appeals to *pathos.* Leaders mobilize their followers to go to war by reminding them of their historical grievances against other groups or nations, blaming other groups for economic difficulties, and focusing on perceived insults, crimes, and atrocities committed against their own citizens by others. In the twentieth century, such appeals to *pathos* inspired the Holocaust in Germany, genocide in Rwanda, and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. Individuals were inspired through *pathos* to attack, rape, or kill neighbors who had lived near them all their lives, simply because of their ethnicity or religion.

13 Many political decisions have an emotional motivation. For example, when a gunman with an assault rifle shot up a schoolyard full of children, people were suddenly interested in banning such weapons. In this case, several emotions are involved, but perhaps the strongest one is pity for the small children and their families. The logical arguments for banning or not banning assault rifles had not changed at all, but people were emotionally engaged with the issue after this event and wanted to *do* something.

14 Of course, not all appeals to *pathos* result in violence or political action. Advertisements for consumer goods often aim at making us insecure about our attractiveness or social acceptability and then offer a remedy for this feeling in the form of a product. This is a common strategy for selling mouthwash, toothpaste, chewing gum, clothing, and even automobiles.

15 Appeals to the emotions and passions are often very effective and are very common in our society. Such appeals are not always false or illegitimate. It is natural to feel strong emotions about tragedies, victories, and other powerful events as well as about one's own image and identity. You may find it effective to use *pathos* in your own writing.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Can you think of an advertisement for a product or a political campaign that uses your emotions to persuade you to believe something? Describe it, and analyze how it works.
2. When do you think it is unfair or deceptive to try to use emotions to persuade people?
3. Have you ever made a decision based on your feelings that you regretted later?
4. Did emotions ever serve you well in making a decision?