Classical Argument

A (Very) Brief History of Rhetoric

The study of rhetoric has existed for thousands of years, predating even Socrates, Plato and the other ancient Greek philosophers that we often credit as the founders of Western philosophy. Although ancient rhetoric is most commonly associated with the ancient Greeks and Romans, early examples of rhetoric date all the way back to ancient Akkadian writings in Mesopotamia.

In ancient Greece and Rome, rhetoric was most often considered to be the art of persuasion and was primarily described as a spoken skill. In these societies, discourse occurred almost exclusively in the public sphere, so learning the art of effective, convincing speaking was essential for public orators, legal experts, politicians, philosophers, generals, and educators. To prepare for the speeches they would need to make in these roles, students engaged in written exercises called *progymnasmata*. Today, rhetorical scholars still use strategies from the classical era to conceptualize argument. However, whereas oral discourse was the main focus of the classical rhetoricians, modern scholars also study the peculiarities of written argument.

Aristotle provides a crucial point of reference for ancient and modern scholars alike. Over 2000 years ago, Aristotle literally wrote the book on rhetoric. His text *Rhētorikḗ*(*On Rhetoric*) explores the techniques and purposes of persuasion in ancient Greece, laying the foundation for the study and implementation of rhetoric in future generations. Though the ways we communicate and conceptualize rhetoric have changed, many of the principles in this book are still used today. And this is for good reason: Aristotle's strategies can provide a great guide for organizing your thoughts as well as writing effective arguments, essays, and speeches.

Below, you will find a brief guide to some of the most fundamental concepts in classical rhetoric, most of which originate in *On Rhetoric.*

The Rhetorical Appeals

To understand how argument works in *On Rhetoric*, you must first understand the major appeals associated with rhetoric. Aristotle identifies four major rhetorical appeals: ethos (credibility), logos (logic), pathos (emotion), and Kairos(time).

- **Ethos** – an appeal to credibility. This is the way a speaker (or writer) presents herself to the audience. You can build credibility by citing professional sources, using content-specific language, and by showing evidence of your ethical, knowledgeable background.

- **Logos** – an appeal to logic. This is the way a speaker appeals to the audience through practicality and hard evidence. You can develop logos by presenting data and statistics, and by crafting a clear claim with a logically-sequenced argument.
- **Pathos** – an appeal to emotion. This is the way a speaker appeals to the audience through emotion, pity, or passions. The idea is usually to evoke and strengthen feelings already present within the audience. This can be achieved through story-telling, vivid imagery, and an impassioned voice.
- **Kairos** – an appeal made through the adept use of time. This is the way a speaker appeals to the audience through notions of time. It is also considered to be the appropriate or opportune time for a speaker to insert herself into a conversation or discourse, using the three appeals listed above. A Kairotic appeal can be made through calls to immediate action, presenting an opportunity as temporary, and by describing a specific moment as propitious or ideal.

An easy way to conceptualize the rhetorical appeals is through advertisements, particularly infomercials or commercials. We are constantly being exposed to the types of rhetoric above, whether it be while watching television or movies, browsing the internet, or watching videos on YouTube.

Imagine a commercial for a new car. The commercial opens with images of a family driving a brand-new car through rugged, forested terrain, over large rocks, past waterfalls, and finally to a serene camping spot near a tranquil lake surrounded by giant redwood trees. The scene cuts to shots of the interior of the car, showing off its technological capacities and its impressive spaciousness. A voiceover announces that not only has this car won numerous awards over its competitors but that it is also priced considerably lower than comparable models, while getting better gas mileage. "But don't wait," the voiceover says excitedly, "current lessees pay 0% APR financing for 12 months."

In just a few moments, this commercial has shown masterful use of all four appeals. The commercial utilizes pathos by appealing to our romantic notions of family, escape, and the great outdoors. The commercial develops ethos by listing its awards, and it appeals to our logical tendencies by pointing out we will save money immediately because the car is priced lower than its competitors, as well as in the long run because of its higher MPG rate. Finally, the commercial provides an opportune and propitious moment for its targeted audience to purchase a car immediately.

Depending on the nature of the text, argument, or conversation, one appeal will likely become most dominant, but rhetoric is generally most effective when the speaker or writer draws on multiple appeals to work in conjunction with one another. **To learn more about Aristotle's rhetorical appeals, click here.**

Components and Structure

The classical argument is made up of five components, which are most commonly composed in the following order:

- **Exordium –** The introduction, opening, or hook.
- **Narratio –** The context or background of the topic.
- **Proposito and Partitio –** The claim/stance and the argument.
- **Confirmatio and/or Refutatio –** positive proofs and negative proofs of support.
- **Peroratio –** The conclusion and call to action.

Exordium

Think of the exordium as your introduction or "hook." In your exordium, you have an opportunity to gain the interest of your reader, but you also have the responsibility of situating the argument and setting the tone of your writing. That is, you should find a way to appeal to the audience's interest while also introducing the topic and its importance in a professional and considerate manner. Something to include in this section is the significance of discussing the topic in this given moment (Kairos). This provides the issue a sense of urgency that can validate your argument.

This is also a good opportunity to consider who your intended audience is and to address their concerns within the context of the argument. For example, if you were writing an argument on the importance of technology in the English classroom and your intended audience was the board of a local high school, you might consider the following:

- New learning possibilities for students (General Audience Concerns)
- The necessity of modern technology in finding new, up-to-date information (Hook/Kairos)
- Detailed narrative of how technology in one school vastly improved student literacy (Hook/Pathos)
- Statistics showing a link between exposure to technology and rising trends in literacy (Hook/Logos)
- Quotes from education and technology professors expressing an urgency for technology in English classrooms (Hook/Ethos)

Of course, you probably should not include all of these types of appeals in the opening section of your argument—if you do, you may end up with a boring, overlong introduction that doesn't function well as a hook. Instead, consider using some of these points as evidence later on. Ask yourself: *What will be most important to my audience? What information will most likely result in the action I want to bring about?* Think about which appeal will work best to gain the attention of your intended audience and start there.

Narratio

The narratio provides relevant foundational information and describes the social context in which your topic exists. This might include information on the historical background, including recent changes or updates to the topic, social perception, important events, and

other academic research. This helps to establish the rhetorical situation for the argument: that is, the situation the argument is currently in, as impacted by events, people, opinion, and urgency of some kind. For your argument on technology in the English classroom, you might include:

- Advances in education-related technology over the centuries
- Recent trends in education technology
- A description of the importance of digital literacy
- Statistics documenting the lack of home technology for many students
- A selection of expert opinions on the usefulness of technology in all classrooms

Providing this type of information creates the setting for your argument. In other words, it provides the place and purpose for the argument to take place. By situating your argument within in a viable context, you create an opportunity to assert yourself into the discussion, as well as to give your reader a genuine understanding of your topic's importance.

Propositio and Partitio

These two concepts function together to help set up your argument. You can think of them functioning together to form a single thesis. The propositio informs your audience of your stance, and the partitio lays out your argument. In other words, the propositio tells your audience what you think about a topic, and the partitio briefly explains why you think that way and how you will prove your point.

Because this section helps to set up the rest of your argument, you should place it near the beginning of your paper. Keep in mind, however, that you should not give away all of your information or evidence in your partitio. This section should be fairly short: perhaps 3-4 sentences at most for most academic essays. You can think of this section of your argument like the trailer for a new film: it should be concise, should entice the audience, and should give them a good example of what they are going to experience, but it shouldn't include every detail. Just as a filmgoer must see an entire film to gain an understanding of its significance or quality, so too must your audience read the rest of your argument to truly understand its depth and scope.

In the case of your argument on implementing technology in the English classroom, it's important to think not only of your own motivations for pursuing this technology in the classroom, but also of what will motivate or persuade your respective audience(s). Some writing contexts call for an audience of one. Some require consideration of multiple audiences, in which case you must find ways to craft an argument which appeals to each member of your audience. For example, if your audience included a school board as well as parents andteachers, your propositio might look something like this:

"The introduction of newer digital technology in the English classroom would be beneficial for all parties involved. Students are already engaged in all kinds of technological spaces, and it is important to implement teaching practices that invest students' interests and prior

knowledge. Not only would the marriage of English studies and technology extend pedagogical opportunities, it would also create an ease of instruction for teachers, engage students in creative learning environments, and familiarize students with the creation and sharing technologies that they will be expected to use at their future colleges and careers. Plus, recent studies suggest a correlation between exposure to technology and higher literacy rates, a trend many education professionals say isn't going to change."

Note how the above paragraph considers the concerns and motivations of all three audience members, takes a stance, and provides support for the stance in a way that allows for the rest of the argument to grow from its ideas. Keep in mind that whatever you promise in your propositio and partitio (in this case the new teaching practices, literacy statistics, and professional opinion) must appear in the body of your argument. Don't make any claims here that you cannot prove later in your argument.

Confirmatio and Refutatio

These two represent different types of proofs that you will need to consider when crafting your argument. The confirmatio and refutatio work in opposite ways, but are both very effective in strengthening your claims. Luckily, both words are cognates—words that sound/look in similar in multiple languages—and are therefore are easy to keep straight. Confirmatio is a way to confirm your claims and is considered a positive proof; refutatio is a way to acknowledge and refute a counterclaim and is considered a negative proof.

The confirmatio is your argument's support: the evidence that helps to support your claims. For your argument on technology in the English classroom, you might include the following:

- Students grades drastically increase when technology is inserted into academics
- Teachers widely agree that students are more engaged in classroom activities that involve technology
- Students who accepted to elite colleges generally possess strong technological skills

The refutatio provides negative proofs. This is an opportunity for you to acknowledge that other opinions exist and have merit, while also showing why those claims do not warrant rejecting your argument.

If you feel strange including information that seems to undermine or weaken your own claims, ask yourself this: have you ever been in a debate with someone who entirely disregarded every point you tried to make without considering the credibility of what you said? Did this make their argument less convincing? That's what your paper can look like if you don't acknowledge that other opinions indeed exist and warrant attention.

After acknowledging an opposing viewpoint, you have two options. You can either concede the point (that is, admit that the point is valid and you can find no fault with their reasoning), or you can refute their claim by pointing out the flaws in your opponent's

argument. For example, if your opponent were to argue that technology is likely to distract students more than help them (an argument you'd be sure to include in your argument so as not to seem ignorant of opposing views) you'd have two options:

- Concession: You might concede this point by saying "Despite all of the potential for positive learning provided by technology, proponents of more traditional classroom materials point out the distractive possibilities that such technology would introduce into the classroom. They argue that distractions such as computer games, social media, and music-streaming services would only get in the way of learning."

In your concession of the argument, you acknowledge the merit of the opposing argument, but you should still try to flip the evidence in a positive way. Note how before conceding we include "despite all of the potential for positive learning." This reminds your reader that, although you are conceding a single point, there are still many reasons to side with you.

- Refutation: To refute this same point you might say something like, "While proponents of more traditional English classrooms express concerns about student distraction, it's important to realize that in modern times, students are already distracted by the technology they carry around in their pockets. By redirecting student attention to the technology administered by the school, this distraction is shifted to class content. Plus, with website and app blocking resources available to schools, it is simple for an institution to simply decide which websites and apps to ban and block, thereby ensuring students are on task."

Note how we acknowledged the opposing argument, but immediately pointed out its flaws using straightforward logic and a counterexample. In so doing, we effectively strengthen our argument and move forward with our proposal.

Peroratio

Your peroratio is your conclusion. This is your final opportunity to make an impact in your essay and leave an impression on your audience. In this section, you are expected to summarize and re-evaluate everything you have proven throughout your argument. However, there are multiple ways of doing this. Depending on the topic of your essay, you might employ one or more of the following in your closing:

- Call to action (encourage your audience to do something that will change the situation or topic you have been discussing).
- Discuss the implications for the future. What might happen if things continue the way they are going? Is this good or bad? Try to be impactful without being overly dramatic.
- Discuss other related topics that warrant further research and discussion.
- Make a historical parallel regarding a similar issue that can help to strengthen your argument.
- Urge a continued conversation of the topic for the future.

Remember that your peroratio is the last impression your audience will have of your argument. Be sure to consider carefully which rhetorical appeals to employ to gain a desirable effect. Make sure also to summarize your findings, including the most effective and emphatic pieces of evidence from your argument, reassert your major claim, and end on a compelling, memorable note. Good luck and happy arguing!