

Analyzing Rhetorical Situations

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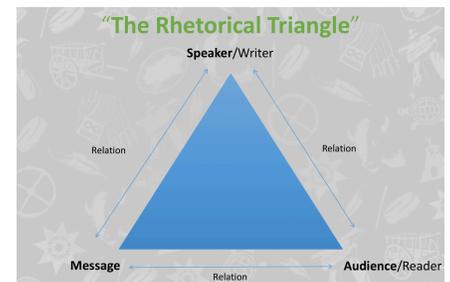
I. ELEMENTS OF A RHETORICAL SITUATION

Rhetorical Triangle

Two of Composition II’s course objectives require students to analyze and respond to a “rhetorical situation” within a “discourse community.” Maybe those two concepts are familiar to you from Composition I, but if it’s been some time since you took English 1101, now is a good time to revisit them!

Believe it or not we encounter rhetorical situations constantly, but how many times have you heard someone say, “You wouldn’t believe my day! I encountered *so many* crazy rhetorical situations!”? Yeah, I didn’t think so.

Before delving into rhetorical *situations*, let’s first revisit the rhetorical *triangle*, a concept you might have encountered or will encounter in a speech course. The rhetorical triangle is a set of interacting elements for effective communication: speaker/writer, message, and audience/reader. A speaker or writer is not really a speaker and a writer unless they have a message, and the message can’t make an impact without an audience. Seems obvious, right? Image credit: [Effective Professional Communication: A Rhetorical Approach](#), Bennetch, Owen, and Keesy, (2021).



Rhetorical Appeals

Greek philosopher, Aristotle, was the OG of rhetoric (basically invented it), and he affixed qualities and traits to each element of this triangle, called rhetorical appeals - most famously *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. I’ll also explain two more: *telos* and *kairos*.

Ethos

You might be able to infer the means of *ethos* and *logos* based on their letters. Ethos translated to English is *character*, but you also might associate the word with ethic, ethics, or ethical. Aristotle believed that an audience is more likely to be persuaded if the speaker was deemed as ethical, of strong moral character, and trustworthy. They would also likely be more receptive to a speaker's message or argument if they believed that the speaker shares the same morals and values.

Logos

Maybe you've inferred that the Greek word logos looks awfully similar to the words *logic* and *logical*. Translated in English as *word*, logos refers to the elements of strong reasoning and evidence in support of the speaker's message. Logos builds upon and supports a speaker's credibility as an audience's level of trust can only increase if that speaker supports their viewpoints with facts, evidence, and reasoning.

Pathos

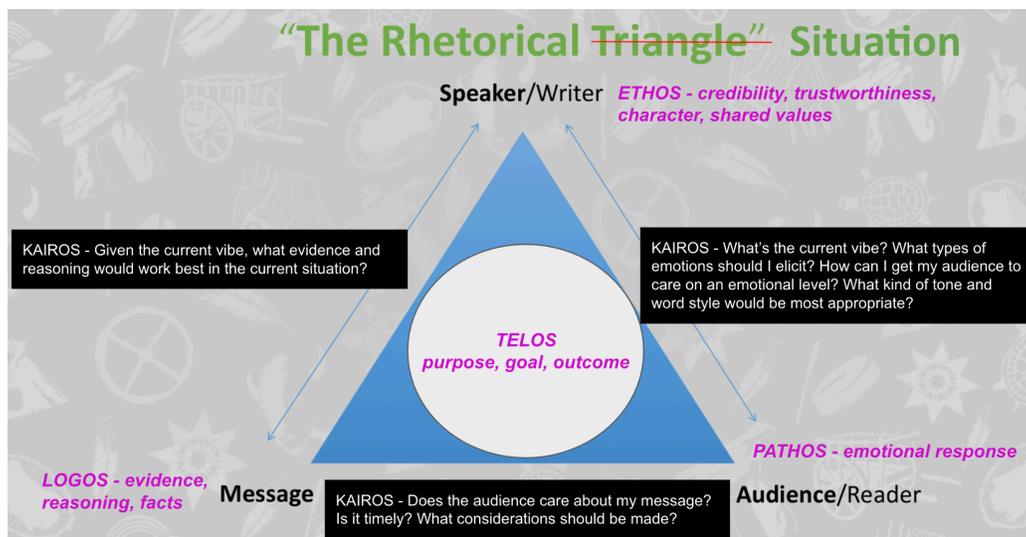
You may have recognized the word pathos in several contexts in your studies, or heard others refer to it. With the literal translation being *suffering*, it might be puzzling as to why Aristotle believed suffering to be an element of effective persuasion. However, suffering has multiple meanings, not all necessarily negative, with a broad understanding of it to mean emotion or experience. In this sense, effective persuasion requires more than just a logical argument delivered by a trustworthy speaker. Audiences must also *feel something*, whether that be empathy, fear, inspiration, nervousness, envy, joy, or despair.

Telos and Kairos

While ethos, pathos, and logos are the essential elements of persuasion, a speaker also has to be guided by two other critical elements: *telos* and *kairos*. Telos is Greek for goal, purpose, or outcome. Unless their goal is to only entertain an audience, a speaker's purpose is usually to motivate an audience to take some sort of action or change a behavior. A speaker's message should be tied to some sort of purpose. Kairos translates to *season*, *timing*, or *opportunity*. Speakers must consider the timing - even the general vibe - in order to tailor their message. What makes a speaker's message important or urgent right now? Why is their message timely or important? What events are occurring that make this message so critical? In what ways must the speaker's message be adjusted based on the purpose and current vibe? Can the speaker "read the room" and get a sense of what is appropriate or inappropriate to say?

Now let's lay these appeals over our first image of the rhetorical triangle and what we now have is a rhetorical *situation*.

Rhetorical Situation



Remember when I said that we encounter rhetorical situations all the time except we don't call them rhetorical situations? Well, here's an opportunity to learn about a real life rhetorical situation that happened at College of DuPage.

Blue Line Flag Controversy At COD

Last September, 2023, one of our criminal justice professors, Dr. Theo Darden, was leading a tour of the Homeland Security Building. This building is where criminal justice professors hold classes as well as where the Suburban Law Enforcement Academy (SLEA) is located. Several local police departments hire graduates of this academy. Some members of the tour happened to notice the [blue line flag emblem](#) hanging in COD employees' office windows. These community members expressed concern about the flag, given its current controversy and its more recent association with far right extremists and white supremacists. Professor Darden listened to the community members and said he would bring their concerns forward to the college's leadership team.

Meanwhile, the Director of Public Safety for the Village of Bloomingdale, Frank Giammarese, was told that Professor Darden opposed a memorial plaque displayed in a SLEA classroom honoring a graduate of the academy and demanded it be taken down. The SLEA graduate, [Raymond Murrell](#), went on to become a Bloomingdale officer, and sadly died in a car accident on his way to a larceny in progress call. Believing that Professor Darden wanted Murrell's memorial taken down, Giammarese decided to attend a COD board meeting and expressed his thoughts on the matter and to solicit a response from COD's leadership.

II. RHETORICAL SITUATIONS "IN THE WILD"

Analyzing Different Responses to the Controversy

For this assignment, we will watch some archive footage of COD's September 21, 2023 board meeting. Here are some details and directions to save you some time:

Bloomingdale's Director Of Public Safety

1. Click on this [link](#) and scroll the video forward until on or before minute 07:00.
2. Watch Frank Giammarese's public comments. You should absolutely watch it a few times, pausing to take notes, rewatching, etc.
3. Take notes on the following:
 - a. Telos - What is Giammarese's message? What is his goal? What outcome does he desire?
 - b. Ethos - Comment on his ethos. Is he credible? Y/N? Why? Why not? In what ways did he attempt to appeal to people's values? Did he "do his homework" before speaking? Did he have all the facts?
 - c. Logos - Comment on his use of logos. List some facts, evidence, and reasons that he used to support his message even if you believe they are ineffective.
 - d. Pathos, aka, emotional appeals - List some actions or statements he made that generated emotional responses. What sorts of emotions did Giammarese aim to elicit from his audience?
 - e. Kairos - Did Giammarese "read the room" correctly? How would you characterize his tone and word choices? Did he seem calm and level headed? Angry and hostile?
4. After taking notes and analyzing Giammarese's public comments, evaluate his message. Was he effective or ineffective? Credible? Not credible? Who was his target audience? Could there have been more than one audience he was trying to reach? If so - who?

DuPage County Prosecutor

1. You may fast forward or continue to watch the public remarks until minute 14:16.
2. Watch Michelle Norton's comments in the same way as Giammarese's, pausing, taking notes, re-watching, etc.
3. Take notes on the following:
 - a. Telos - What is Norton's message? What is her goal? What outcome does she desire?
 - b. Ethos - Comment on her ethos. Is she credible? Y/N? Why? Why not? In what ways did she attempt to appeal to people's values? Did she "do her homework" before speaking? Did she have all the facts?
 - c. Logos - Comment on her use of logos. List some facts, evidence, reasons, words/quotes from historical figures that she used to support her message even if you believe they are ineffective.
 - d. Pathos, aka, emotional appeals - List some actions or statements she made that generated emotional responses. What sorts of emotions did Norton aim to elicit?

- e. Kairos - Did Norton “read the room” correctly? How would you characterize her tone and word choices? What words and phrases in particular seemed appropriate or inappropriate? Did she seem calm and level headed? Angry and hostile?
4. After taking notes and analyzing Norton’s public comments, evaluate her message. Was she effective or ineffective? Credible? Not credible? Who was her target audience? Could there have been more than one audience she was trying to reach? If so - who?

Two COD Students

1. Watch responses from students, Luis Medina and Daniela Ramirez, using the same general approach, commenting on their appeals.
2. Compare the students’ comments with Giammarese and Norton’s comments. Which speakers did you find yourself agreeing with more: the law enforcement-related speakers or the COD students? Why do you think you were more aligned with those speakers?

Professor Theo Darden, Ph.D.

[Blue Line Flag Letter](#)

III. ASSIGNMENT: YOUR RESPONSE TO THE CONTROVERSY

Respectful Dialogue: Listening to Understand and Reflect, Not Agitate or Argue

1. Pretend you are someone who supports the blue line flag. You come from a law enforcement family, and you have even lost a family member in the line of duty. After learning more about the history of the “thin blue line,” and how the phrase and imagery has been co-opted by hate groups, you start to feel a little conflicted. You still believe that most people do not understand the challenges that law enforcement personnel face and that people do not consider the dangers of the profession and the toll it takes on one’s mental health, but you start to consider whether this flag’s meaning and symbolism are morphing into something different. What would be the most important decision to make about the banning of this symbol—your freedom of expression, or others’ sense of safety and belonging?
2. In complicated rhetorical situations, it is very hard for leaders to make everyone happy. Each of these speakers desired some sort of outcome from COD’s leadership. Sometimes leaders have to give *more* weighted input to some and *less* consideration to others. In this rhetorical situation at COD, who do you think deserved the most consideration and why?
3. Now that you know more information on the history of the blue line flag, what should the official COD policy be regarding the display of flags and controversial political material on campus?

Part I: Considering Rhetorical Appeals

If you were president of COD, and members of the community, students, and employees asked you to make a policy decision on the display of the Blue Line flag on campus, **what steps would you take** to inform your decision to ensure everyone at the college felt heard? Briefly outline your plan below.

Which constituency has weighted input on this issue? In other words, *to whom* should the president be *most responsive*?

As president, do you feel you have all the information you need in order to develop a policy about the Blue Line flag?

Part II: Responding to the Rhetorical Situation

Continuing in your role as the COD president, write a draft official announcement to the college summarizing the rhetorical situation, the process for making the decision, and the final policy. Keep in mind the following as elements of you, the presidents, responds to the rhetorical situation:

Writer: You, the current COD president

Context, Timing, and Opportunity (Kairos): You are responding to a controversy regarding the display of the Blue Line flag on campus. This situation is tense with the COD employees, students, and its community residents falling on different sides of the issue.

Purpose (Telos): To inform the college of your new policy of the display of the Blue Line flag on school grounds.

Audience: All COD employees

Writing Genre: An internal memo to COD employees

Guidelines

- Length - about the length of a typical office memo. Employees should be able to read it in less than five minutes.
- Organization - should be a series of paragraphs organized chronologically starting with a summary of the issue, your response to the issue, including all the steps and processes involved, then the wording of the official policy, and ending with some sort of sentiment that 1) shows your gratitude and appreciation for the work involved in making the policy and 2) a call for unity, mutual respect, and the goal of the college to live by its [mission, values, and institutional philosophy](#).
- AI Use - You can use GenAI to establish a draft/template, but I expect you to revise and add to it so it has more voice and humanity behind it.
- Do not concern yourself with grammar or spelling or general “correctness.” I’m just looking for your ideas and understanding of the complexities of crafting a message.
- Collaborate! Keep in mind that leaders like college presidents rarely write important messages on their own. They have multiple eyes on their draft and often have co-writers. Some even had ghostwriters or staff who write entire pieces of writing for them.