

# Understanding Kairos as a Rhetorical Appeal

**KAIROS**—an appeal to the timeliness of one’s message.

*Kairos* is the idea that the moment has to be just right to persuade your audience. If you have heard that you have to “strike while the iron is hot” you have heard of the idea of Kairos.

A speaker is appealing to the Kairos of the argument when they point out:

- *Why is it now* that the audience should take action
- Why this argument applies more *at this point in time than ever before*
- What it is about this moment that *makes it the best time* to change

We all know that the context in which an argument is made can make a huge difference. Ever heard a friend say that now is “not the time” to deliver bad news to a parent, or ask a parent for a favor? Ever have an adult say “Now is not the time” to talk about a sensitive subject (like at the family dinner table)? All of those examples speak to the concept of Rhetorical Occasion-- the context and timing of an argument. And it is not just in arguments that context is everything.

## Example—Experiment by Joshua Bell in 2007

Bell, who had performed worldwide before heads of state and could command fees of \$1000 per minute, played a \$3.5 million Stradivarius during the morning rush hour in a Washington DC metro station. [According to this video](#) and the multiple newspaper reports, not one of the nearly 2000 people who passed by him during his 45 minute performance stopped to listen (Weingarten 2007). Often used as an example of how terrible humanity can be, a more forgiving interpretation is that his performance was just in a context that was completely wrong for the purpose. We know that comments taken “out of context” can seem much worse than they were, and so this performance was “out of context” and didn’t make sense to those listening to it. It all comes down to timing.

## Kairotic Moment

**A *kairotic* moment can be a turning point, a finest hour, or any other special circumstance calling for a time-sensitive response. Kairos is all about a precise combination of timing and action; it’s about recognizing or creating just the right moment to make the right move (Fletcher 2015).** Politicians often work very carefully to talk about certain issues, or make certain attacks, or reveal certain information based on when the timing is “just right.” What all this adds up to is that when you are writing your own message, you need to make it clear to your audience why the time is now to take action. You need to address the ***urgency*** of the situation, or your audience will not feel any sense of urgency to do what you are asking them to do.