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Did You Know You're a Rhetorician?

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by *Kristin Cole and Sue Mendelsohn*

Using rhetoric in writing consultations.

Using rhetoric in writing consultations may leave consultants feeling like Dorothy lost in the Land of Oz. Before we study rhetoric, its foreign terms and fancy theorists -- *kairos* and Toulmin and *ethos*, oh my! -- lurk in a dark forest. Evil witches and monkeys jump out, blocking our paths home to the more familiar territory of the English major: discussing the writing process and flow, organization and transitions. If you've never explored the Land of Rhetoric before, join me for a stroll down the Yellow Brick Road. While our walk may feel new and frightening at first, like Dorothy, you'll find your way back home, wiser for having undertaken the journey.

If you thought rhetoric was the Wicked Witch of the West, I couldn't blame you. Popular culture levels a decisive blow against embracing the term. In newspapers, the word typically carries a negative connotation; mud-slinging politicians claim their opponents are "full of rhetoric." Yet, when it denotes a field of study, rhetoric is a powerful set of ideas that spans from the ancient Greeks to contemporary comedians.

Rhetoric is, to put it very simply, both the study of argumentation and argumentation itself. Writers and writing consultants are rhetoricians because we all craft arguments to convey our ideas. Additionally, whether we know it or not, consultants are teachers of rhetoric; we show writers how they can find the heart, the brains, and the nerve to navigate through the Oz of writing using the tools of rhetoric.

So why should we bother learning yet another unfamiliar set of concepts? One good answer is that when we're asked to consult outside our areas of expertise it's the common language of rhetoric that can help us get at the root of a writer's concerns across any discipline.

Let's consider the case of Joe bringing in a biology lab report on monkey pox in prairie dogs for help drafting his introduction and conclusion. Right about now, you, the consultant, are regretting your decision to test out of freshman biology. Glenda the Good Witch won't save you, but rhetoric is here to help. Consider a few concepts that may allow you to connect with Joe on his unfamiliar topic.

- *Kairos*: Joe is having trouble explaining why monkey pox is a worthy subject of study. You can introduce the notion of *kairos* -- a consideration of how the circumstance and social context in which the rhetoric will be heard changes the way it's received -- to help him situate his findings. For instance, what are the circumstances surrounding monkey pox today? It's a disease spreading from prairie dogs to humans, therefore, research into the disease is particularly

pertinent for human health right now.

- *Audience-identification* and *warrant*: Joe's conclusion criticizes the Democratic Party for cutting monkey pox research funding. How can you suggest this is not the most effective strategy without appearing to be speaking from personal bias? One rhetorical theorist, Kenneth Burke, asks rhetoricians to focus on identifying with audiences rather than persuading them. This shift emphasizes collaboration with readers, building on shared understanding rather than winning a debate. Another rhetorician, Stephen Toulmin, called this shared understanding a warrant. You might ask Joe to consider both his professor's expectations for a lab report and his professor's political stance on monkey pox research funding. If the professor doesn't expect to see partisan opinions in a lab report or if she is a staunch democrat, will she identify with Joe's criticism? Identification helps a writer distinguish his relationship to his audience as collaborative rather than exclusively persuasive.

- *Ethos*: You could also address Joe's political stance by discussing *ethos*: the writer's reputation or credibility. Any writer understands that credibility is essential to getting your message heard. Joe's rhetoric won't be effective if he doesn't convince his reader that he understands the conventions of a lab report, which exclude political fist pounding.

Let us return to Oz, for a moment. Once Dorothy and her friends reach the Land of Oz, the Wizard pulls awards for the Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man out of his bag. Dorothy says, "I don't think there's anything in your black bag for me." And there wasn't, but as Glenda teaches her she had the power to go home all along. Rhetoric isn't a magical tool we keep in our black bags. On the contrary, once we understand it, we may discover that it provides the language for tools we've had all along. This new wisdom allows us to come home with a new insight into the familiar things we've always known; coming home to rhetoric allows us to make writers feel at home there too.

Kristin Cole and Sue Mendelsohn are graduate students in the English Department and consultants in the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

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