

ARE YOU FLUENT IN COMPOSITION AND RHETORIC? SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF OUR TEACHING PARTNERS

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INTRODUCTION

Composition instructors and librarians frequently ride together in their quest to produce information literate students. However, the ride can get bumpy when communication about the goals of library instruction breaks down. Sometimes librarians are told to just be more proactive when communicating with composition instructors about library instruction, but what if the real problem is that we speak two different languages?

This article summarizes an interactive presentation at LOEX 2017 that aimed to help instruction librarians learn the rhetorical language so often used by instructors of first year writing, also known as *Composition and Rhetoric*. Specifically, the workshop began with a mini-class in major rhetorical concepts along with associated vocabulary. Then, participants had a chance to analyze an actual assignment from a composition class in order to see how instructors frame the role of research using this rhetorical language. Finally, there was an opportunity to reflect on using rhetorical language in one's own context of working with first year writing instructors.

BACKGROUND

To understand how this workshop came to fruition, it may be helpful to know a little of the presenter's personal background. The first several years of her career were spent teaching languages, specifically teaching English as a foreign/second language and Spanish. Along the way, she earned an M.L.S. and transitioned to the world of libraries. When a family move brought her to central Pennsylvania, however, she found herself working neither as a language teacher nor a librarian. Instead, she was hired by the English department at Penn State to teach freshman composition. A few years later, this experience led her back to librarianship when she accepted an instruction librarian position at the same institution, primarily working with the freshman composition program.

It was through this lens that the idea for this workshop arose. Having experienced library instruction as a course instructor and then working as an instruction librarian, she noticed that librarians and composition instructors use very different language when talking with students about research. For example, when discussing topic selection, librarians refer to the scholarly conversation, but freshman writing instructors rarely use this term. Instead, they talk about topics needing *exigence*. After seeing many similar examples of such contrasting language, she wondered if librarians could be trained in the language of their teaching partners in order to improve communication. With her background in language teaching and LOEX conference proposals due soon, the idea for teaching rhetorical language to instruction librarians was born.

RHETORICAL LANGUAGE

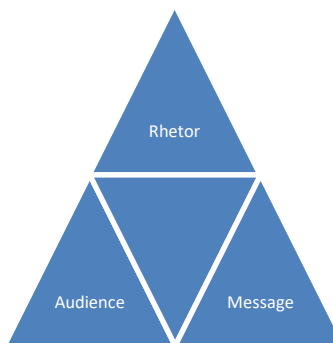
The first portion of the presentation was dedicated to teaching the audience rhetorical vocabulary. While not all freshman composition courses have a rhetorical bent, those that do use certain core vocabulary items throughout the semester. This core terminology is related to two major concepts: the rhetorical situation and the available means of persuasion. Before delving into this terminology, however, it may be helpful to clarify the word **rhetoric**.

Aristotle’s classical definition of rhetoric refers to the art of persuasion and popular textbooks such as *Everything’s an Argument* (Lunsford & Ruskiewicz, 2013) stick by this definition. However, persuasion can be, perhaps too often, associated with deception. When we think of persuasion, images of dirty politicians and sleazy salesmen might come to mind. For this reason, some writing instructors and textbooks find it useful to instead think of rhetoric as the art of purposeful communication or effective communication (Faigley & Selzer, 2012; Glenn, 2013).

Rhetorical Situation

Given that rhetoric refers to effective communication, the **rhetorical situation** is simply the context in which rhetoric is used. A quick search on Google Images will reveal many visual models to represent the rhetorical situation, but the most common is the rhetorical triangle, shown in Figure 1. In one corner of the triangle is the **rhetor**, also known as the speaker, writer, or communicator. In another corner is the **audience**, and in the third corner is the **message**, also referred to as the subject or topic, that the rhetor hopes to communicate. Organizing these items in a triangle is meant to show that all three of these items interact in the art of communicating effectively.

Figure 1: Picture of Rhetorical Triangle



In addition to these main parts of the rhetorical situation, there are numerous other factors present in any given rhetorical situation. For example, an effective rhetor also has a **purpose** for communicating to his or her particular audience, perhaps to compel the audience to do something, to make a change, or to reconsider an idea. There are also **resources** and **constraints** that a good rhetor takes into account when crafting a message. Resources are those things that will help the rhetor in communicating successfully while constraints are potential obstacles or limitations on how a message can be communicated.

Finally, an important part of any rhetorical situation is something called **exigence**. Exigence is what compels a rhetor to enter the rhetorical situation. It is the urgency for communicating, often prompted by the opportunity for change. In other words, exigence is, simply put, the reason for communicating in the first place.

To illustrate the components of the rhetorical situation, let’s consider an example. Imagine that you would like to convince your spouse to take your family on an international vacation. If you decide to communicate with him or her for this purpose, you would be entering a rhetorical situation, or communicating purposefully. You, as the spouse, would be the rhetor and your audience would be your husband. Your message would be along the lines of “we should consider taking our children abroad this year when we look at vacation options.” The purpose would be to get your spouse to agree to this plan. The exigence, or the reason you are compelled to make this case, might be that you are personally craving a trip abroad and think that it would be good for your children at their current ages. A resource might be that you found a good deal for a particular trip but a constraint might be that the trip would still be expensive.

Available Means of Persuasion

The **available means of persuasion** encompass all of the ways a rhetor might influence an audience. When teaching freshman composition, the presenter tells students that the available means represent everything they have in their toolbox for delivering an effective message. For example, a rhetor can choose from a variety of formats or mediums when deciding to communicate. Likewise, the location in which the message is delivered may be a rhetorical choice. Then, of course, the elements of the message itself are part of the available means. One of these elements is the rhetor’s use of persuasive strategies, also known as the **rhetorical appeals**.

While there are a number of rhetorical appeals, usually just three are emphasized in freshman writing classes: **ethos**, **pathos**, and **logos**. Ethos refers to the ethical appeal of a rhetor’s credibility while pathos refers to the emotions of the audience. Logos, on

the other hand, represents the appeal of good, well-supported reasons. It is important to note that a skilled rhetor often makes use of all three of these appeals in any given piece of communication. Also, the three appeals sometimes overlap. For example, a writer might present a good reason that not only establishes logos but also adds to his or her ethos.

To better understand how a rhetor might use the rhetorical appeals, let's look at an example. Let's imagine that you, as a librarian, would like to attend LOEX 2018. To do so, you need to persuade your audience—the library administration—to allow you the time and funds to attend. To establish your ethos, or credibility, you might show that you have done your homework in terms of looking into the cost and time needed to attend the conference. For logos, you could explain that the workshop will allow you to stay current in your area of librarianship and to bring back new teaching ideas to colleagues at your institution. Finally, to tap into pathos, or your audience's emotions, you could remind the administration how attending LOEX 2018 will benefit the students, who your institution is ultimately serving.

ASSIGNMENT ANALYSIS

After reviewing and practicing the vocabulary above, LOEX workshop participants then spent a few minutes reviewing an actual assignment from a composition class, shown in Appendix A. Participants were asked to highlight the rhetorical vocabulary in the assignment description and then discuss how a librarian might describe this assignment differently. One librarian mentioned that a librarian focuses more on the research process while another mentioned that librarians are often trained to think of research determining the thesis rather than vice versa. Another pointed out that there is actually very little mention of research at all beyond the call for credible sources. The presenter also highlighted the fact that there is no mention of participating in a scholarly conversation though there is emphasis on a topic being exigent. In other words, the assignment calls for there being a genuine reason to enter the rhetorical situation but it does not need to be a scholarly reason.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

The final portion of the presentation offered time for participants to consider how they might use some of this vocabulary in their own teaching contexts. To give an example, the presenter shared one way she has used this vocabulary in her own library instruction. Specifically, she encourages students to choose databases according to their own rhetorical situations. In other words, the databases that are best suited to a particular student's needs will depend on that student's audience and purpose.

During the discussion, several participants mentioned that they would emphasize using library sources as a way of both establishing ethos and supporting logos. More than one mentioned that they might use the word exigence in discussing topic development with student. Finally, one librarian who works with special collections mentioned that personal stories from archival collections could help students in leveraging pathos.

The session concluded with a few words of caution. While there are certainly many opportunities to incorporate rhetorical vocabulary into library instruction, librarians should make sure they are confident in their understanding of terminology before using it. If they misuse the vocabulary, it could hurt their credibility with course instructors and students alike. Secondly, librarians should avoid overdoing it with the rhetorical vocabulary as this may be akin to name-dropping. Last but not least, not all programs use classical rhetorical terms such as ethos, pathos, and logos. Before using these terms, each librarian should investigate the specific terminology used by the composition program at his or her institution. Such terminology will likely be present in the course syllabus and textbook, so the librarian can analyze these in order to discover the language used at that particular institution.

REFERENCES

Faigley, L. & Selzer, J. (2012). *Good reasons with contemporary arguments*. 5th Ed. Boston: Longman.

Glenn, C. (2013). *The Harbrace guide to writing*. 2nd Ed. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Publishing.

Lunsford, A.A. & Ruszkiewicz, J.J. (2013). *Everything's an argument*. 6th Ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

APPENDIX A

Assignment 3: Position Argument

Purpose: Argue a point. Take a stand. Change a behavior. Correct a misconception. Refute an argument or belief. Launch a manifesto! In a paper of four pages, identify an interesting problem or issue that merits your taking a stand; translate your stand into a thesis statement; support your ideas with specific examples and details, and marshal the rhetorical appeals to persuade others to accept your position by modifying their thinking, behavior, or influence. You might decide to take a position on some facet of corporate influence (ch. 5), language use (ch. 7), or electronic communication (ch. 10). Or you might decide to take a stand on an issue that is even closer to your heart. Whether your issue is serious, light-hearted, or somewhere in between, it must be debatable and lend itself to genuine disagreement.

Directions: Your argument should (1) open by establishing a situation or problem that is exigent and an audience who is (or should be) invested in this situation; (2) provide a thesis that states your purpose (to express or defend a position, to question or argue against a belief or action, or to invite or convince an audience to change an opinion or practice); (3) make effective use of the three persuasive strategies—ethos, pathos, and logos; (4) use at least 5 credible sources to add support to your logos and (5) supply a clear, identifiable conclusion that you want your audience to reach or reconsider.

As you consider your rhetorical situation in general and your audience in particular, be mindful of your tone. You can hold an opinion or advance an idea without being confrontational. In fact, sophisticated arguers concede points to each other and search for common ground. This behavior shows a willingness to engage in genuine dialogue and creates a positive atmosphere for disagreement.