

WHAT IS RHETORIC?

DEFINITIONS OF RHETORIC

Rhetoric is not easily defined. The definition has undergone many changes since it was first practiced about 2,500 years ago. The philosopher Plato defined Rhetoric as “the art of enchanting the soul” through language. Whereas Plato’s student, Aristotle, claimed that rhetoric was the counterpart of intellectual conversations, a method of observing persuasion and thought.

To Aristotle, Rhetoric was a means of reading, analyzing, or interpreting texts and talk. He suggested that rhetoric was the act of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.

Contemporary scholars have defined Rhetoric as “the art, practice, and study of human communication” (Lunsford). In the course, we will use the definition provided by these scholars as we learn and apply rhetoric.

THE HISTORY OF RHETORIC

Rhetoric began with the ancient Greeks. But, the rise of the Roman empire brought an expansion of rhetoric. Famous orators from Cicero to Quintilian taught and discussed rhetoric and presented it to the masses. As the Roman empire endured for hundreds of years, Rhetoric continued to be explored as one of the most important subjects in school. In most cases, a student who attended school learned the Trivium, an ancient curriculum of Grammar, Arithmetic, and Rhetoric.

At beginning of the last century, Rhetoric has been justly associated with effective speaking and writing. In fact, World War II single-handedly revived the importance of the study of rhetoric when the demand to produce machinery and corresponding documentation for the war effort became profoundly important.

At the end of the last century, Rhetoric expanded again to include visual and gestural elements. Today, we regard rhetoric as being multimodal.

WHAT IS MULTIMODALITY?

Multimodality refers to the idea of working within the multiple modes of communication: the textual (i.e., handwritten, printed, or typed texts), the visual (e.g., graphics, charts, images/photos, motion pictures, animation, etc.), the oral (e.g., speech, sound, and even music), and the gestural (involving bodily movement both in the physical and electronic sense). As we explore rhetoric in the class, we will work through these various modes of communication and look at different facets of each.

WHY DO YOU NEED RHETORICAL SKILLS? TWO "HISTORICAL" CASE STUDIES

The Legend of Corax of Syracuse

Once upon a time, people lived in small villages and small city-states (sort of like Washington, D.C.). As you can imagine, rich people lived there and poor people lived

there. Now, most people made their money doing what you might imagine: They sold things. They made things. They farmed things. They tended livestock. Every now and then, a rich person would steal something from a poor person. When that happened, the rich person and the poor person would go to court (much like we have today). In fact, our courts actually evolved from the ancient Greeks and Romans (the same with Algebra, Astronomy, etc.).

Anyway, the two people (the criminal and the victim) went before a judge, and they would argue about the situation. Nine times out of ten, the person with the better argumentative skills would win the case. Well, if a person was rich, then he/she could “hire” a person to argue the case for them. Thus, the first lawyers were born. We called these lawyers, “Sophists.” These sophists would basically earn their income by arguing with people in court. And, they would often teach the rich how to argue on their own.

One of the best was a man named, Corax. Corax started to become disenchanted with working for the rich and stealing from the poor. So, he began to teach the poor how to argue and how to win. And, as the tale goes, many poor people went on to win court cases. Corax called his art of persuasion, Rhetoric. Thus, we attribute Corax to being the “founder” of the art of rhetoric. Of course, this happened 2,500 years ago or more, and we can’t confirm or deny much of the accounts, as many of the same accounts reference things like the lost island of Atlantis and such. However, we can extract the lesson: A person with sufficient ability in language and persuasion can convince people to do things. And, most importantly, they can defend themselves (and/or help) in civic matters.

Alexander the Great

When you hear a person talk about Alexander the Great, the first question everyone always asks is: Why was he so great? Well, truth be told, he was great, because he helped establish one of the largest empires in all of history. His empire stretched from the edge of the Atlantic through Europe all the way to India. Now, when he was a boy, his father, Philip of Macedon, had already conquered quite a bit of territory. So, while he was out conquering and fighting battles, young Alex would stay at home learning. His first tutor was... yep, Aristotle.

Aristotle was the student of Plato, and Plato was the student of Socrates. And, as far as argumentation, persuasion, and critical thinking go, you could not find a person more impressive than Socrates. We call him the father of Western philosophy. Rumor has it that Socrates would sit on the street, and he would start debating with people just walking by. His debates were so impressive that he garnered a place in public politics and was eventually charged with corrupting the youth of Athens.

Back to Alexander the Great: Alexander used the skills taught to him by Aristotle to persuade thousands of men to join him in his conquests. His mind was said to be as sharp as a spear. Undoubtedly, the art of Rhetoric was a major tool for one of the greatest leaders of history. So, since the beginning of time, colleges have taught

Rhetoric. In fact, in ancient Roman, young people would learn three things (called the Trivium): arithmetic, grammar, and rhetoric.

If you think about it, right now, you are learning math and taking a course in rhetoric (which happens to have some components rooted in the study of grammar). Taken even further, consider that Alexander had one of the largest empires in the history of the world. Next consider that the Romans had one of the longest standing civilizations in the Western hemisphere. Thus, learning rhetoric seems to be a pretty good thing.