

PART 1

What "Becoming Rhetorical" Means

Introduction: What It Means to Become Rhetorical

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By working through this chapter, you will be able to...

- Define “rhetoric.”
- Understand that developing rhetorical skill requires training.
- Understand the difference between rhetorical analysis and rhetorical action.
- Understand the concept of “transferable skill.”

“The goal of rhetorical training is . . . to become a certain kind of person, one who has internalized the art of rhetoric . . . [Rhetoric] is ‘resident’ in the educated person, who doesn’t so much *learn* rhetoric as *becomes* rhetorical.”

—David Fleming

What might it mean to *become rhetorical*, and why would anyone want to do that? After all, the term “rhetoric” tends to be associated with sleazy smooth talkers, able to spout empty political puffery or be generally bombastic. You probably don’t need to look far to find an example of these qualities in political debates, on talk shows, or via social media feeds.

So let’s clarify this right away: **rhetoric** in the context of this book refers to the wide array of communicative devices humans have at their disposal to create effects on each other. Rhetoric is an ancient art, one of the first disciplines. While it was originally developed to help people make persuasive speeches, rhetoric is still studied for its supreme practicality and adaptability. Popular depictions of rhetoric focus on its more negative qualities: persuasion at all costs (including manipulation, trickery, and browbeating)—the opposite of speaking the truth—but in reality such depictions present a very limited and skewed version of rhetoric. The twentieth-century literary critic Wayne Booth called this kind of manipulative rhetorical practice “rhetrickery,” to distinguish it from rhetorical practice as a whole.



FIGURE 1 What messages and embedded values and beliefs are embodied in the intentionally designed compositions depicted here?

In actuality, *all* intentionally designed communication is rhetorical: not just traditionally persuasive things like advertisements, opinion pieces, and grant proposals, but also instructions, photographs, websites, tweets, documentaries, and posters with restaurant nutritional information. Even aspects of the built environment like the design of cities and parks, stores, hospitals, prisons, schools, and public monuments and memorials embody particular beliefs, values, and attitudes and are intended to have some sort of effect on an audience (Figure 1).

What Is Rhetorical Training?

The fact that the definition of rhetoric encompasses so much shows how it is different from other kinds of study. Unlike disciplines such as psychology and biology, rhetoric doesn’t comprise a body of knowledge that one needs to absorb before one can really become a master. Rather, studying rhetoric is more akin to studying music performance: it involves mastering a set of principles and tools through extensive practice in many different situations. “Becoming rhetorical” means honing your ability to recognize, analyze, and respond appropriately to any situation that involves communication—whether verbal, visual, auditory, or a more complex mix of all of these (a form of composition called **multimodal**).

EXAMPLE Just as everyone has at least some innate musical ability, all people have some measure of rhetorical talent. Through your attention to audience and your awareness of the unwritten rules of what is appropriate and not appropriate to do in particular circumstances, you successfully navigate any number of communication situations. The fact that you’re in a college course right now is evidence of this rhetorical ability. At the same time, musicians can become more skilled and accomplished through extensive study and practice, just as people can become better rhetoricians: more attuned to the nuances of audience and situation, more aware of how various forms of communication affect them, and more able to mobilize their own rhetorical skills to appropriately and skillfully communicate.

The goal of rhetorical *training* is first to more consciously develop your rhetorical skills, then to make those skills habitual, or, as the quote from rhetorical

MindTapView Tiny Lecture 1:
Rhetoric Is a Muscle

scholar and professor David Fleming that begins this chapter puts it, to make rhetorical skill “resident” (think *reside*) in oneself. Becoming rhetorical means being able to effectively diagnose (through *rhetorical analysis*) the dynamics of a communication situation. Developing skills in rhetorical analysis will help you develop a richer, more nuanced understanding of the factors that comprise and affect communication. It will also help sensitize you to how you can produce your own appropriate and skilled responses to situations that require communication. It’s the goal of this book to teach you how to do both.

Why Rhetorical Analysis Is Important

Rhetorical analysis refers to the effort to understand how communication (by a variety of means) creates particular effects on people. In situations that they encounter regularly, people perform rhetorical analysis without much conscious effort.

EXAMPLE As a college student you make dozens, if not hundreds, of small decisions every day based on your analysis and assessment of a variety of communication situations. You might assess what’s being communicated by someone’s outward appearance, as represented by his or her clothing, gestures, and posture. If your history professor always wears a bow tie and begins his meticulously prepared lectures without pleasantries, you may decide to address him politely and formally as “Dear Dr. Smith” when you email to ask for an extension on your assignment. And based on the misspellings and strange syntax in an email you just received, you choose to delete it rather than following its instructions to reset the password for your university account.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 in this book focus on taking that natural inclination to analyze and assess, and applying it to judging situations that you may encounter less frequently: namely, to deliberately designed messages that are aimed at persuading you to do, change, be, think, or believe something. Of course, you already do this to some extent. Even if you’re irritated by certain kinds of messages (perhaps those ubiquitous ads on *Facebook* and other websites inviting you to “click here for one weird old trick to eliminate belly fat”), this irritation indicates that you’ve quickly analyzed them to some extent, if only to dismiss them. The goal here is to make this process of quick analysis more explicit and deliberate—to be able to articulate precisely how and for whom a message is constructed, what effect it aims to have on its intended audience, and how effective its strategies are.

It’s been said that we live in an attention economy, where the most limited resource is our ability to pay attention to the bombardment of messages. If this is the case, then it’s possible for many of the messages we see each day to affect us without us realizing it. To be more grounded and attentive thinkers, it’s vital to be able to slow down our attention and patiently

notice the particulars of how messages are attempting to work on us. This is the goal of Part 2 of *Becoming Rhetorical*.

Each chapter of Part 2 addresses a different type of rhetoric. Since analysis of written texts is still the gold standard for most introductory writing courses, Chapter 3, “Analyzing Textual Rhetoric,” focuses on discerning arguments and rhetorical tools specific to written and spoken texts. But because communication these days takes place in so many other forms, *Becoming Rhetorical* also aims to help you analyze messages that are not primarily verbal. Chapter 4, “Analyzing Visual Rhetoric,” provides tools for analyzing rhetoric that relies heavily on static images: photographs, advertisements, visuals that appear in written texts, and new specialty genres such as infographics. And Chapter 5, “Analyzing Multimodal Rhetoric,” teaches you how to analyze more complicated compositions; ones that might use several different types of communication (videos, podcasts, or websites that embed video, for instance).

**TEXTUAL**
Chapter 3**VISUAL**
Chapter 4**MULTIMODAL**
Chapter 5**FOR DISCUSSION**

To become attuned to your rhetorical environment, think of three intentionally designed messages that you’ve encountered today. These don’t have to be verbal messages (in fact, it’s better if they’re not); they can be visual, auditory, or material messages as well. For each one, jot down some thoughts about whom they aim to persuade and what kind of messages they send. What effects do they aim to have on their audience? What messages are more overt, or on the surface? What messages might be more hidden, or less obvious? Share these with the class as a means of developing a richer, more nuanced picture of the rhetorical environment. Which of the examples provided by your classmates was most surprising to you as an example of rhetoric?

Why Rhetorical Action Is Important

The concepts and vocabulary that you’ll work with in Parts 1–2 of this book serve as the foundation for **rhetorical action** (the focus of Part 3). Rhetorical action means the deliberate shaping of messages for an audience. Part 3 of *Becoming Rhetorical* aims to provide you with techniques to define rhetorical problems and respond to specific kinds of rhetorical situations with arguments and other rhetorical tools. While it can’t possibly cover every kind of rhetorical problem you might encounter, it aims to highlight those that you will most likely run into over the course of your career as a college student and as a citizen: explaining, defining, advocating, evaluating, and

proposing. Each chapter in Part 3 includes assignments for academic writing, for public writing, for visual rhetoric, and for multimodal rhetoric.

Developing skills in rhetorical analysis helps provide a richer, more nuanced sense of the possibilities for responding to situations that involve communication. Here, “rhetorical practice” means producing a *skillful* response to any situation that requires or invites communication. “Skillful” is the operative word here.

EXAMPLE To go back to the musical example, if you’ve ever played a musical instrument, you know the difference between having a natural “ear” or sense of rhythm and being able to really make music. Making music requires that you play so proficiently that you can forget what your body is doing as you become immersed in the act of playing.

Even if you’ve never trained enough to get to that point, you probably understand that the difference between the two is *practice*—conscious, diligent, frequent repetition, both of one particular song and many different types of songs. Likewise, skillful rhetorical practice requires that you continually train with the techniques of rhetoric. This book introduces you to a number of tools in rhetorical analysis and rhetorical practice—some are ancient, some only a decade old—with the understanding that only repeated practice with them will help you become rhetorically skillful.

What It Really Means to Become Rhetorical: Transfer of Skills

Much of educational research in the last several decades has focused on the important question of the transfer of knowledge or skills. **Transfer of knowledge**, or the ability to take understanding, knowledge, skills, or concepts from one field of knowledge and apply it in a different situation, is considered the true measure of learning. However, it has proven to be an elusive goal. People notoriously silo information—that is, they often cannot see connections even among courses in the same major. Learning to communicate, in writing or otherwise, poses the same problem.

EXAMPLE Many people assume that because they learned to write a five-paragraph essay for their high school English classes, they know how to write. This isn’t to say that the five-paragraph essay is bad or invaluable; in fact, this form of thesis-driven writing will serve you well on essay exams and certain kinds of academic responses. But learning this model in the sense of trying to repeat it over and over, even in situations where it’s inappropriate or flat-out wrong, isn’t the kind of learning that many would call useful.

Researchers argue that for knowledge and skills to become transferable, learners must *know what they know*: to apply lessons from one situation to another, they must first recognize those lessons. In writing, for instance, a writer who *knows what she knows* is able to see not just how to write a

particular kind of essay but also recognize the elements of the situation involved in writing. You’ve probably heard the expression “if you give a man a fish, he eats for a day; if you teach him to fish, he can eat for a lifetime.” Well, this book does give you “fish” in the form of tutorials for composing in many different genres and modes. But more importantly, it also aims to teach you to fish in the sense that practicing with rhetorical concepts such as audience, exigence, and purpose across a wide variety of situations will help you be able to apply them to new situations that aren’t covered here (or maybe don’t even exist yet).

This is why each chapter concludes with a brief “For Reflection: Transferable Skills and Concepts” assignment. These are designed to help you, the communicator, take stock of the skills and concepts that you’ve learned in that chapter and think about other situations not mentioned in the chapter to which these might apply.

FOR DISCUSSION

To better understand the concept of transfer, think of how skills you may have developed in one area have helped you in another, seemingly unrelated area. Choose something that you’re skilled at (for instance, playing a musical instrument, language, a team sport, gaming, building things). Now see if you can break this activity down into all the specific skills required to do this thing well. Write these all down, then look over the list of skills. In what other areas of your life have these skills helped you, even if they’re totally unrelated? (Learning to read music is said to improve the ease with which you learn languages, for instance.) As a class, make a map of these skills and how they transfer.