

Rhetorical Proof: Aristotle in a Box

Kimberly M. Cuny and Sarah M. Wilde

Objective

To provide students with an opportunity to identify the three tools of persuasion and their interconnectivity.

Approximate Time Required

One class session (50- to 75-minutes). This activity could be employed after or during initial *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* instruction.

If the activity is done as a homework assignment, 10- to 15-minutes could be allotted for a full class discussion about the three tools and how they relate to each other. If students were only asked to focus on one tool, a 20- to 30-minute discussion could follow to help the students understand all of the tools and how they are related. Lastly, if the activity were done during a business-oriented class, 50- to 75-minutes in addition to a homework assignment would be sufficient to complete the activity. The homework assignment could take the form of a reflection journal and discuss business ethics and/or marketing tactics.

Materials Needed

Students:

Pen or pencil for completing handout.

Professor:

A variety of adult and child cereal boxes (students could be instructed to bring one in for class).

Assessment tool for discussion (optional).

Photo copies of assignment handout.

Rationale

It would be hard to deny that the ability to persuade, convince, cajole, or win over is one of the most useful skills in human life. It seems a crucial knack to be mastered by anyone aspiring to influence the private or public activities of men and women, for whatever ends. It may seem that oratory is a natural endowment; however, in ancient Greece, the ability to persuade carried a high social prestige during the 4th century BC (Lawson-Tancred, 1991).

Rhetoric is a useful skill. With some audiences, even if we should possess the most precise understanding of a question, we would more easily achieve persuasion by speaking rhetorically. The function of

rhetoric is not persuasion, but the '*detection of the persuasive aspects of each matter*' (Lawson-Tancred, 1991, pp. 69-70). "It's the power to observe the persuasiveness of which any particular matter admits" (Lawson-Tancred, 1991, p. 74). The Aristotelian approach to rhetoric involved the philosopher in three major topics otherwise not covered previously: the detailed psychology of the emotions, the use of informal reasoning, and the aesthetics of prose style. The study of rhetoric has transcended to become an important component in the general study of man. Persuasion is a systematic, possibly even scientific exercise and can be taught (Lawson-Tancred, 1991).

Aristotle divided the art of persuasion into three subsidiary techniques – that of projecting an impression, that of lucidly expounding the facts and that of creating a suitable disposition in the audience. Three kinds of proofs are thought to be furnished through the speech. Some reside “in the *character*, some in a certain *disposition* of the audience and some in the *speech itself*, through its demonstrating or seeming to demonstrate” (Lawson-Tancred, 1991, p. 74). Proofs from character are produced, whenever the speech is given in such a way as to render the speaker worthy of credence. This effect must come about in the course of the speech, not through the speaker’s perceived degree of a certain character believed in advance. A speaker’s reasonable image can contribute to his or her persuasiveness, causing character to be the strongest proof of all in a sense. Proofs from the disposition of the audience are produced whenever they are induced by the speech into an emotional state. Lastly, proof is achieved by the speech, when one demonstrates either a real or an apparent persuasive aspect of each particular matter (Lawson-Tancred, 1991). These proofs have come to be known as the three tools of persuasion— *ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*.

In working at The University Speaking Center at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, we have the opportunity to understand the public speaking needs of students across the curriculum. Many of the students who come to the Center for assistance need help with the organization of their presentation. Upon review of several textbooks currently used in teaching the basic course across the country, we found that persuasion is under represented. We developed this activity to aid faculty across the curriculum whose students participate in oral persuasive activities such as debate, mock trial, and the traditional speech.

The idea of using cereal boxes to teach first came to us at the 2004 Virginia Association of Teachers of English conference where Lisa and Kurt Schick presented their work with 4th grade ESL students. Their presentation was an application of what they referred to as *rhetoric across the curriculum*. This activity will provide teachers with a creative and engaging way of helping students understand a concept that can be very theoretical yet very applicable both in the academic setting and in one’s career. While rhetorical proofs were not discussed, we found it both easy and fun to extend their application to rhetorical proofs. *Ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* are three separate proofs but are very interconnected in that all three work together to help a speaker be perceived as persuasive.

What To Do Before The Activity

Photocopy assignment handout and create and photocopy assessment tool (optional).

What to do when introducing this activity. Distribute and instruct students to complete the handout.

What To Do During The Activity

Walk around the room so that students stay on task. Check in with groups to see if they have any questions and to make sure they are on the right track. Begin to help the students see the interconnectivity between the tools in that the use of pathos and logos can contribute to a speaker’s, or in this case, a product’s or company’s ethos.

What To Do After The Activity

Facilitate class discussion about any issues that came up in the groups. Have students report some of their findings to the class orally. Help students see the interconnectivity between the three tools. (For example, help the students realize that by using relevant and reliable logos, a speaker’s

or company's ethos will be affected positively.) Ask questions that allow students to critically analyze what they have learned as a result of taking part in this activity. Sample questions include:

What conclusions can we draw as a result of our overall experiences with this activity?

What surprised you most about this class assignment?

Do *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* relate to each other? If so, how does one affect the other (s)?

If a speaker, product or company only utilized one or two of the three tools would you still be persuaded? Explain.

What are the strengths of this activity?

What are the weaknesses of this activity?

What are the limitations of an activity such as this?

How can this activity be changed to make it better?

What are the practical implications of this activity for future class assignments?

Appraisal

Full class discussion which follows the activity will offer overall assessment of student learning. Exam questions or a written reflection assignment which requires student reflection of learning can better measure the learning and allow the faculty to know if objectives were met. Such reflections should occur after the class has had the opportunity to learn and apply *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. The reflection should require critical thinking about skills learned or refined, personal knowledge gained, and the understanding/application of course theory.

Alternative Uses Or Extensions

In an effort to save time or in the case of a small class size, each group can be assigned just one of the rhetorical proofs. In this application, sharing with the whole class will be crucial to ensure all students are exposed to the key principals.

This could be adjusted to serve as a homework assignment instead of a classroom activity.

Students could be asked to bring in any packaged goods from their home/dorm for this activity.

In a business-oriented class, students could compare and contrast the use of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in both store-brand and brand-name products.

References

Lawson-Tancred, H. C. (1991). *Aristotle: The art of rhetoric*. New York: Penguin Books.

Additional Readings

Baker, E. (1965). The Immediate Effects of Perceived Speaker Disorganization on Speaker Credibility and Audience Attitude Change in Persuasive Speaking. *Western Speech*, 29, 148-162.

Brembeck, & Winston, L. (1964). The Content of a College Course in Persuasion. *Speech Teacher*, 13(4), 277-282.

- Cockcroft, R. (2004). Putting Aristotle to the proof: style, substance and the EPL group. *Language & Literature*, 13(3), 195-216.
- Cope, E. M. (1973). *The rhetoric of Aristotle*. New York: Arno ress.
- Furley, D. J., & Nehamas, A. (1994). *Aristotle's rhetoric*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Grimaldi, S. J. (1988). *Aristotle, Rhetoric II A Commentary*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Hart, R. (1999). Teaching Persuasion. In A. L. Vangelisti, J. A. Daly, & G. W. Friedrich (Eds.), *Teaching Communication: Theory, Research, and Methods* (pp. 131-140) (2nd ed.). Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Rhetorical Proof: Aristotle in a Box

Task: To provide students with an opportunity to identify the three tools of persuasion and their interconnectivity.

Goal: Identify and evaluate application(s) of Aristotle's three part classification of a rhetorical proof and understand how the three tools are related to each other.

Assignment: In small teams, use cereal boxes to find examples of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Record your findings below each of the three definitions. As time allows, groups will be asked to share their findings with the class and to reflect on how the three tools are related.

Ethos - a set of attitudes that the audience holds concerning the speaker and/or the audience's attitude toward or perception of the speaker (in this application the "speaker" can be either the product or the company and the "audience" is the consumer)

Pathos - often intended to make audience members feel sad, angry, guilty, or some other emotion; it can also involve an appeal to the needs and values of an audience (the "audience" is the consumer)

Logos - consists of the specific examples, comparisons and contrasts, statistics, and statements from authority; it is also called evidence or supporting material