Rhetorical Devices:

A HANDBOOK AND ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENT WRITERS

PRESTWICK HOUSE, INC.
"Everything for the English Classroom!"

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Rhetorical Devices

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INTRODUCTION

What is Rhetoric?

In reading, speaking, or writing, rhetoric is a tool that enhances composition; its aim is to persuade, to inform, to express a personal thought, or simply to entertain the reader. What the formal study of rhetoric allows us to do is isolate exactly what it is we've done so that in the future we can do it again for a similar effect. Rather than haphazardly casting words on the page, letting our vague expectations guide us, we can carefully construct our writing, effectively using the rhetorical devices we have learned.

Although there are literally hundreds of figures of rhetoric, ranging from *anadiplosis* to *zeugma*, some are so rare that you are unlikely to run into them, while others, such as *hyperbole* and *metaphor*, are so common that it is rare to see a newspaper article or hear a speech in which they are not frequently used. For our purpose we will consider 33 of the most useful rhetorical devices.

Keep in mind, however, when using figures of rhetoric, it is important to make sure you are helping your cause, rather than hindering it. A misused form, or a form used in an inappropriate place, can act as an obstacle to your readers, breaking the flow of your argument or actively confusing them about your meaning.

Rhetorical Devices that Help with Strategy

As a writer, you'll want to use rhetorical devices to help strengthen the strategy of your paper. Some of these devices are meant as transitional tools, to help you move seamlessly from one portion of your essay to another, while others are meant to help you present your evidence or information as strongly as possible. Still others help link the entire essay together, making it cohesive and intentional—characteristics valued by the scorers of large-scale writing assessments.

Rhetorical Devices that Help with Style

Whereas strategy and organization are the walls and foundation of an essay, style is the decoration, much like the paint, the wallpaper, and the furniture one might place in a house. Your style will say a lot about your personality and will also reveal your attitude toward the subject and your attitude toward the reader. It can mean the difference between an essay that people read once and forget, or one you clip out of a magazine or newspaper and read over and over. Poor style might mean that no one will ever read the entire essay. It can also mean the difference between a clear, lucid argument, and one that is almost impossible for the reader to understand. Therefore, the stylistic devices that you choose will have a powerful effect, one way or another, on the reception that your writing receives.

EXAMPLES OF RHETORICAL PITFALLS

One of the most useful and versatile rhetorical devices is the *metaphor*. A *metaphor* connects one subject with another that may not be obviously related. When used correctly, it allows the writer to do this in a way that is both stylistically pleasing and concise.

The following quotation has been edited and altered so that it includes a misused *metaphor*. It is from Pope John Paul II, discussing the Nazi Holocaust and the long-lasting impact it has had on Europe:

> Here, as at Auschwitz and many other places in Europe, we are overcome by the **echo** of the **tears** of so many. Men, women, and children cry out to us from the depths of the horror that they knew. How can we fail to heed their cry? No one can forget or ignore what happened. No one can diminish its scale.

Note that a *metaphor* is introduced in the first sentence—the idea of the past at Auschwitz and other death camps echoing down through the ages. However, it is then immediately connected with a subject—tears—that cannot echo. This problem is commonly referred to as mixing *metaphors*, and using *metaphors* in this way can cause your reader a great deal of confusion hilarity, which does not serve the subject. At the very least, it can break the flow of a good *metaphor* by introducing an impossible image that your reader can't correctly visualize.

Another commonly used rhetorical device is parallelism. This device connects parts of a sentence, or longer pieces, by using the same structure throughout. Parallelism is often used to build force through repetition. It is commonly found in political speeches, as well as religious texts such as the Bible. The benefits of well-used parallelism can easily be lost, however, by failing to properly match the form between each element.

Look, for example, at the following quotation from President George W. Bush, talking about his old friends from Texas and the importance they hold in his life:

> I like my buddies from west Texas. I liked them when I was young, I liked them when I was middle-age, I liked them before I was president, and I like them during president, and I like them after president.

Clearly, President Bush switches forms between the first two listed items—having to do with age—and the last three—having to do with his serving as president. He also uses an incorrect verb tense later in the sentence, a result of trying to hold too strictly to the parallel form. Rather than building force, this incomplete parallelism seems to stumble over itself in the middle and finishes with a grammatically flawed phrase.

These examples illustrate how incorrectly applied rhetorical devices can confuse your readers or detract from the strength of your statement. When properly applied, however, both *metaphor* and parallelism can lend great power to your writing.

While Pope John Paul II's quotation about the Holocaust was altered to include a misused *metaphor*, the actual quotation makes excellent use of the *metaphor*.

> Here, as at Auschwitz and many other places in Europe, we are overcome by the echo of the heart-rending laments of so many. Men, women, and children cry out to us from the depths of the horror that they knew. How can we fail to heed their cry? No one can forget or ignore what happened. No one can diminish its scale.

The Pope's *metaphor* evokes the heart-rending wails and cries of those who died during the Shoah, echoing down to us through the ages. By using the *metaphor* of an echo, John Paul II makes us see this pain as something that will continue for a long time to come. At the same time, he reminds us of real laments that real victims made. John Paul II continues his *metaphor* in the following sentences, having the victims "cry out" from the "depths," a placement that is both figurative of the darkness and horror they experienced and evocative of an echoing cry. He then finishes by stating the literal truth behind his *metaphor*: like an echo, it will continue to sound out in the future. Of course, John Paul II could have left out his *metaphor*, telling us simply that no one could forget or ignore the great horrors that occurred during WWII. However, by linking it to such strong imagery, he ensures we will hear what he has to say with the force and power it deserves.

We can easily change what President Bush said, to better convey his meaning and to strengthen the sound of his statement. There are two distinct parallelisms at work here, each of which would be better served by standing alone. One way of rewriting it would be:

> I like my buddies from west Texas. I liked
> them when I was young, I liked them when
> I was middle-aged, and I'll like them when
> I'm old.

This option takes the first two listed items of the original quotation—both having to do with his age when he knew his friends—and rounds them out with a final item that keeps the same age-related pattern. It might be preferable to change the middle list item to "I like them now that I'm middle-aged," as well, but we can give President Bush the benefit of the doubt here and leave his original words where possible. Another way of reforming the quotation would be to focus on the last three list items:

> I like my buddies from west Texas. I liked
> them before I was president, I like them now
> that I am president, and I'll like them after
> I've been president.

Look at the different benefits each of these constructions offers. In the first example, by eliminating references to the presidency, we strengthen the effect of the parallelism. In the second example, we clarify that President Bush's position has not affected his friendships. Both make good use of the device of parallelism, and both accomplish President Bush's aim: to inform his listeners about his loyalty to his friends.

THE FOUR AIMS OF RHETORIC

To Persuade

Persuasion is one of the oldest, and perhaps the most recognized, uses of rhetoric. Because of the way in which many rhetorical devices affect readers, you are offered an opportunity to subtly guide their perspective in ways often barred in a direct approach. By arousing an emotional response, evoking powerful imagery, or calling upon reputable authorities, rhetoric gives you a great deal of power with which to communicate your message.

It is no coincidence that the two groups who use rhetoric the most are also the two groups the most interested in persuading others: politicians and lawyers. Look at almost any political speech written in the past few hundred years, and you'll find many clever uses of rhetoric, for a good lawyer or politician wields rhetoric like a surgeon wields a scalpel: with education, with confidence, and with precision.

Many of the rhetorical devices covered in this book are used to persuade a reader. Some, such as an *exemplum* (citing examples) come naturally when crafting an argument, while others, such as *sententia* (quoting wise sayings) build from this common-sense approach and help to bolster your credibility. In a larger sense, nearly every rhetorical device can be seen as a way of helping to persuade; by improving style, by entertaining the reader, and by organizing thoughts, rhetorical devices can make an argument stronger and more convincing.

To Inform

While rhetoric may not be as visible in its informative uses as it is when being used to persuade, it still serves a vital function. If you look at writing that has helped you learn about something, or if you focus on a specific teacher's methods during class, you will likely come across many of the devices outlined in this book. Similarly, you undoubtedly use tools of rhetoric when you're teaching others or trying to explain a concept to someone else. We have all used the *metaphor* to make a difficult concept a bit more accessible, and there are many other devices that come just as naturally when trying to inform.

To Express

Essays written to express tend to be much less formal than those meant to inform, although the goal is similar. You will often be asked to express your personal thoughts on something—in a college entrance essay, for example. Using rhetorical devices can ensure that your ideas shine.

2. Issue: All forms of religious expression should be banned/recognized in public schools. (choose either "banned" or "recognized")

   Opposition (A):

   Rebuttal (A):

   Opposition (B):

   Rebuttal (B):

3. Issue: Schools should not be cutting back on money for music and art, they should be spending more.

   Opposition (A):

   Rebuttal (A):

   Opposition (B):

   Rebuttal (B):

4. Issue: Animal testing should be abolished.

   Opposition (A):

   Rebuttal (A):

   Opposition (B):

   Rebuttal (B):

5. Issue: Violent movies adversely influence adolescents.

   Opposition (A):

   Rebuttal (A):

   Opposition (B):

   Rebuttal (B):

Exercise 4:

Write a sentence that alludes to each of the following people. If you are completely unfamiliar with the name, look the person up on the Internet or in an encyclopedia. Be sure that readers would be able to identify the *allusion*. Choose one aspect of figure to focus on.

1. Cupid:

2. Pocahontas:

3. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

4. Scrooge:

5. Mother Teresa:

Exercise 3:

From the same 5 arguments in Exercise 1, choose the 2 that are *best* supported by the examples.

1. Technology has increased the speed of communication. The cellular phone has made it much easier to reach someone and have a conversation.

2. There are many violent movies that lead their young viewers to be desensitized towards violence. The movie *Home Alone* shows a young boy using a house full of dangerous traps to catch two bumbling burglars.

3. The party will be well supervised. There will be eight adults present, and all of them are parents of people who were invited.

4. Wind power is one example of a way that the United States can escape the dominance of oil. For example, in Pennsylvania, coal mining has tripled since the conflict began.

5. This has been the rainiest spring I can remember. Last spring, my water bills were three times what they have been this year.

Exercise 1:

Write 10 original constructions that build to a *climax*. Be especially careful to avoid clichés and meaningless statements that, while they may technically employ *climax*, would do nothing to help a writer achieve the intended purpose.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.