

Classical Rhetoric

Rhetoric has been around as long as we have. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, formally studied the art of rhetoric. His studies impact rhetoric and communication studies today. Here are some of the basics behind what we call “classical rhetoric.”

A better grasp of **logos**, **ethos**, and **pathos** will improve the writing and arguments of any writer or thinker. (Warning: the terms “logos,” “ethos,” and “pathos,” will be applied in a modern understanding. Aristotle used the terms differently.)

Logos

Logos is often understood as an appeal from logic or reason. In Greek, it means “word.”

Logos entails the content, quality, and arrangement of the argument. In other words, facts and logic make for effective logos.

Here is an example of the type of logical appeal we have in mind: “Bill Clinton’s administration balanced the budget; whereas George Bush’s administration increased the deficit; therefore, financially, Clinton was a better president.”

Example:

The American Heritage Dictionary is the best dictionary because it contains more than 70,000 entries and the language origins of specific words.

Ethos

Ethos is often understood as an appeal from credibility. This refers to how you, as an author, create a sense of credibility of your argument to the audience. A good writer or thinker uses ethos to their advantage. In every paper or speech you write, you’ll be creating a sense of ethos, whether good or bad.

For instance, citing sources is practicing good ethos because you’re saying “I’ve done this research.” Keep the principle of ethos in mind whenever you create an argument, because nobody is persuaded by an argument that appears unreliable.

Nearly everything impacts ethos. For example, if you’re creating an academic poster, using bright neon colors will reduce your ethos because people don’t take bright neon colors seriously. Similarly, incorrect grammar curtails your credibility.

Example:

The American Heritage Dictionary is the best dictionary because it's the easiest to use. My research requires constant use of dictionaries, and I have used nine dictionaries over the past twenty years. Not one comes close to the American Heritage.

Pathos

Pathos is often understood as an appeal from emotion. Understanding what kind of argument you're making is critical, because if you're making an argument from emotion, in certain academic fields, you can discredit yourself. In speeches, particularly in persuasive speeches, appeals centered on emotion are more widely accepted.

In order to effectively use pathos, you must be aware of your audience. This will allow you to know what will move them and what will provoke them--and what will leave them indifferent.

For instance, politicians give speeches in areas that have been affected by controversial political decisions. In Flint, a politician seeking election may point to the Flint Water Crisis and the failure of those currently in office. However, if that same politician were in California, they may point to the series of wildfires and the failure of other politicians to contain them.

You're using pathos if you're trying to make the audience *feel* a certain way.

Example:

The American Heritage Dictionary is the best dictionary because it's historical analysis of select words is able to capture the identity of the people the words come from, effectively, keeping those people alive through their words.