

Survey of Communication Study/Chapter 7 - Rhetorical Criticism

Chapter 7

Rhetorical Criticism

Chapter Objectives:

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Define rhetoric.
- Identify key features of classical rhetorical theory.
- Identify the challenges that contemporary theorists are making to the study of rhetoric.
- Define rhetorical criticism.
- Explain the purpose and uses of rhetorical criticism.
- Explain the different models of rhetorical criticism.
- Understand how rhetorical theory and criticism are a current part of the communication discipline.

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hat do you think of when you hear the word “rhetoric”? Do you have a positive association with the word? Perhaps it feels difficult to define. We often hear that rhetoric is connected to politics, or specifically, the speeches made by politicians, as in, “That campaign speech was just a bunch of empty rhetoric.” Sound familiar? As is often the case, the popular media has distorted the meaning of this word thus, making it difficult to understand. Another problem is that “rhetoric is not a content area that contains a definite body of knowledge, like physics; instead, rhetoric might be understood as the study and practice of shaping content” (Covino and Jolliffe 4). A third source of difficulty when it comes to defining this concept is that scholars themselves have been debating this term for thousands of years! In this chapter devoted to rhetorical theory and criticism, we will explore both of these separate but related fields of inquiry, briefly map out their history, discuss some of the major rhetorical theories and methods of doing rhetorical criticism, and finally, explain how this specialization contributes to the larger discipline of Communication. But, before going any further, let’s begin by highlighting the definitional and historical debate so we may begin with a common understanding of the term, “rhetoric.” Remember from Chapter 5 that we are defining **rhetoric** as “*any kind of symbol use that functions in any realm*” (Foss, Foss, and Griffin 7). One would think that after thousands of years people would finally come to an agreement about what rhetoric means. But as is the way with all symbols (words in this case) their meaning can and does change over time to reflect the ever-changing socio, political, religious, and cultural context in which they operate. More specifically, they change to reflect the needs, attitudes and beliefs of the people living and communicating within a particular context. Let us take a trip around the world and through time to explore the origin and meaning of rhetoric. As we tour the origins and various definitions of rhetoric we will also highlight the view or scope allowed by each, for “a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (Burke 49).

Rhetoric In Ancient Times

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e will begin our tour in Ancient Greece with the “first four”—Aspasia of Miletus, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—who have come to be regarded as the foremother and forefathers of rhetoric and the Communication discipline as a whole. Although little is known about her because she vanished from history circa 401 BCE, **Aspasia of Miletus** was perhaps the foremother of classical rhetoric as she is rumored to have taught rhetoric and home economics to Socrates. Her social position was that of a hetaera, or companion who was “more educated than respectable women, and [was] expected to accompany men on occasions where conversation with a woman was appreciated, but wives were not welcome” (Carlson 30). Her specialty was philosophy and politics and she became the only female member of the elite Periclean circle that included the most prominent Sophists of the day. In the circle she made both friends and enemies as a result of her political savvy and public speaking ability.

As a student of **Socrates** (469-399 BCE), **Plato** (429-347 BCE) wrote about rhetoric in the form of dialogues wherein the main character is Socrates. Through this form the **dialectic** was born. While this term has been debated since its inception, Plato conceptualized it as *a process of questions and answers that would lead to the ultimate truth and understanding*. Think for a moment about contemporary situations wherein this process is utilized. What about an in-class discussion wherein the professor questions the students about an interpretation or meaning of a poem? Or the role that a therapist takes by asking a series of questions to a patient to bring greater clarity in understanding one’s own thoughts, motives, and behavioral patterns? These are just two examples of the dialectic at work. What others can you think of? Ironic is the fact that while Plato contributed a great deal to classical rhetorical theory he was also very critical of it. In *Georgias*, for example, Plato argued that because rhetoric does not require a unique body of knowledge it is a false rather than true art.

While Plato condemned the art of rhetoric, his student, **Aristotle** (384-322 BCE) believed in the possibility of rhetoric as a means of creating community. The dialectical, or give and take approach, allows people to share and test ideas with one another with the goal of a more prosperous city-state. He defined rhetoric as the ability to see, in each particular case, the available means of persuasion. Two parts of this definition are particularly significant: the terms “in each particular case” and “persuasion.” The former suggests that Aristotle recognized the importance of context and audience; that a specific situation with a particular audience might direct the speaker, or rhetor, to create a message in a form that might look different in another context with another audience. He recognized the importance of **audience analysis**: that *different things appeal to different people*. To put in contemporary terms, let us look at an example from the marketing and advertising world. Mattel, the company who makes Barbie has long been interested in selling the doll as well as her friends and accessories worldwide. (Currently, a Barbie is sold somewhere in the world every 2 seconds!) Researching the Japanese doll market, advertisers found that Japanese girls do not play with their dolls in the same way as American girls—dressing them, fixing their hair, and role-playing with them. Instead, Japanese girls might place the dolls on a shelf and admire them. To sell Barbie in Japan meant that Mattel must also “teach” Japanese girls how to play and use Barbie like American kids do. As a result, their Japanese television commercials are explicit in the verbal messages as well as the images of playing with (not looking at) Barbie. Mattel has taken the same message—sell Barbie—and constructed it differently depending on the context and their audience. This would be an example of creating the necessary appeals to persuade kids (to buy Barbie) in each particular case (America versus Japan).

The second part of his definition dealing with persuasion suggests that Aristotle conceptualized a very specific and limited scope for rhetoric. That rhetoric exists in contexts where a person or a group of people is engaged in the process of communicating for the purpose of changing another in some way. Change may come in the form of trying to influence a prospective voter in an upcoming election or convincing a jury on the guilt or innocence of a defendant in a murder trial. As we will discuss later in this chapter, the sole focus on persuasion is one of the

critiques that contemporary theorists have when assessing rhetorical theory.

While much of the classical theorists were men and dealt with traditionally male roles, Pan Chao (c. 45 CE-115 CE) provides historical insight into Eastern rhetoric and the role of women in rhetoric. A strong believer in the benefits of education, she was one of the first people to argue for the education of girls and women. Writing on the four qualifications of womanhood (virtue, words, bearing, and work), she said of womanly words, they “need be neither clever in debate nor keen in conversation,” but women should “...choose words with care; to avoid vulgar language; to speak at appropriate times; and to not weary others (with much conversation), [these] may be called the characteristics of womanly words” (Pan Chao 417). The role of women and other nondominant groups is another concern of contemporary theorists that will be discussed later in more detail.

Articulating a Classical Rhetorical Theory

Two other key figures in classical rhetoric are Cicero (106-43 BCE) and Quintilian (c. 35-95). They deserve recognition for combining much of what was known from the Greeks and Romans into more complete theoretical systems. Many of the concepts to emerge from this time are still relevant today, although they may have been transformed in some way to reflect a more contemporary context. You may, for example, recognize them in the setting of a public speaking course. In the classical system there were three types of public speeches—legal, political, and ceremonial. Eventually the genre of rhetorical discourse would include poetry, sermons, letters, songs; and with the advent of the technology, mass mediated discourse such as television, radio, and film. Another major contribution was the formation of the **five canons: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery**. All of these should be easily recognizable as the stages of speech preparation. First, the speechwriter must invent and formulate the arguments based on logos-- rational appeal or logic. Next, the speech is organized in the most effective manner. Aristotle thought the logical appeals should go in the main part or body of the speech and the appeals to ethos and pathos should fall in the introduction and conclusion. After the proper arrangement of the information, the writer must think about style—the particular language choices that will enhance the enjoyment, and thus acceptability of the argument, on the part of the audience. The fourth step, memory, was vital in the classical period but is rarely a requirement in today’s public speaking contexts. Notes, cue cards, and teleprompters are all devices that have replaced this original fourth canon. The final element, delivery, consists of the use of nonverbal gestures, eye contact and vocal variations when presenting the speech to an audience. Think back to the evaluation form that your professor used to evaluate your speeches in class; chances are you were evaluated in some manner on your ability to perform the five canons.

Rhetoric Loses Its Status, Then Rises Again

As the Roman Empire fell and the historical period known as the Middle Ages (400-1400) dominated, rhetoric fell from grace. It was no longer a valued and honored skill but instead was thought of as a pagan art. This view coincided with the Christian domination of the period as, “Christians believed that the rhetorical ideas formulated by the pagans of classical Greece and Rome should not be studied and that possession of Christian truth was accompanied by an automatic ability to communicate the truth effectively” (Foss, Foss, and Trapp 8). Ironically, it was a Christian, Augustine, who recognized and articulated the role for rhetoric in the church. Prior to his conversion to Christianity, Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric, thus, he knew skills in oratory and that the ability to move an audience was consistent with the duties of a preacher. As the world grew bigger, people needed a form of communication that would travel across distance—thus letter writing became popular and was now considered within the scope of rhetoric. As the Middle Ages ended, the Renaissance took its place from 1400-1600. During this period two intellectual trends—humanism and rationalism—shaped the study of rhetoric. **Humanism** is *the study of history, moral philosophy, poetry, and rhetoric of classical antiquity*. These thinkers believed that the word was to be known and understood through language, rather than the natural or physical. **Rationalism**, however, *privileged scientific and objective answers to life’s questions and as such had little use for rhetoric*. In the modern period that followed three trends in rhetoric emerged—the epistemological, belletristic, and elocutionist.

Challenges To The Canon

While much of the classical rhetorical theories arose from the closely related context of public speaking, much of the theorizing that contributes to contemporary rhetoric comes from outside this context and, to some extent, outside the Communication discipline. While Aristotle and Augustine were chiefly concerned with questions of persuasive ability, contemporary theorists are concerned with relationships between power, knowledge, and discourse. Hopefully, you can see that this is a much broader set of questions and in turn the scope of rhetoric has also expanded. Below, we will discuss this expansion and the contributors.

Rhetoric In Contemporary Times

In addition to the broader set of concerns on the part of contemporary theorists, they specifically challenged certain assumptions and biases of the canon—that of rationalism and voice. Responding to the rational bias, are social constructionism and postmodernism. **Social Constructionism** often associated with Thomas Kuhn and Richard Rorty, *questions the premise that scientific or philosophical knowledge can be assumed as fundamentally true.* This perspective “discounts the possibility that truth/reality/knowledge exists in an a priori state.” [Instead,] it emphasizes what cultures regard as knowledge or truth” (Covino and Jolliffe 83). Meaning, that the “truth” is not “out there” (as X Files would have us believe). Rather, the truth is determined by our own personal and cultural experiences and how language is used to understand and explain those experiences. In any discussion of Postmodernism the difficulty of defining the term is invariably part of the discussion. Part of that problem can be located the etymology of the word itself. Modern refers to just now (from modo in Latin) and post means after. Thus, this term translates into “after just now”—an idea difficult to wrap our heads around you might say. How do you, for example, point to or mark the period after just now? (Covino and Jolliffe 76). Some qualities that describe postmodernism are that of fragmentation, nonlinearity, and instability. The film, *Moulin Rouge*, is an excellent example of a postmodern text as it exemplifies these qualities. The story is told not in a traditionally linear (or modern) form, but instead the dialogue is made up of a patchwork of pop songs from Elton John to Madonna to weave the tale of a 19th century romance.

Case In Point

Contemporary Rhetorical Theorists

Here is a list of contemporary theorists who have all challenged the canon in some way. To further your understanding of rhetorical theory explore the works of one or more of these rhetorical scholars to learn about their unique and important contributions.

Michael Bakhtin

Kenneth Burke

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell

Helene Cixous

Mary Daly

Jacques Derrida

Sonja K.Foss

Karen A. Foss

Michel Foucault

Sally Miller Gearhart

Julia Kristeva

Malcom X

Chaïm Perlman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca

I.A Richards

Stephen Toulmin

Virginia Woolf

The second major challenge to the rhetorical canon and to a rational paradigm has been that of voice; who gets to speak and whose rhetoric is considered significant (or even gets labeled as rhetoric). Going back to the classical period, you remember that public oratory was considered the scope of rhetoric. And you also know who traditionally hold positions of power that would grant them access to the public speaking contexts—primarily white, wealthy men. This obviously left out a lot of people: they had no voice. An Afrocentric and feminist perspective offer two responses to this challenge. An Afrocentric position seeks to include linguistic elements from African languages as well as the Black experience in America into the scope and understanding of rhetorical processes. A feminist perspective looks at the ways in which women and other groups have been similarly left of the scope of rhetorical discourse and attempts to uncover the patriarchal biases in language and restore them with more egalitarian principles.

Understanding Rhetorical Criticism

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In the second half of this chapter we would like to discuss a close associate to rhetorical theory—rhetorical criticism. To explain this exciting subdiscipline we will discuss the scope of rhetorical criticism, the purpose of this method, the kinds of knowledge produced, and the relationship between rhetorical theory and criticism. We will conclude with examples of how rhetorical criticism seeks to answer contemporary socio and political concerns.

Rhetorical criticism is *an epistemology or way of knowing many scholars find effective in coming to an understanding about the communication process and the artifact under study*. (An **artifact** or **text** is simply *the thing that the critic wants to learn about*. Artifacts can be, for example, speeches, songs, sermons, films or works of art.) Think about a speech you have heard that was very moving and inspirational. At its conclusion perhaps you wondered, “I know that was a great speech, but why”? Or perhaps a visit to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. inspired the question, “How did the artist take a controversial subject (the war) and memorialize it in a way that diffuses the controversy”? Or maybe you are a fan of the show South Park. You recognize that there are jokes that make fun of particular groups of people such as ethnic and racial minorities that could be labeled “racist.” Yet, you do not believe that the overall point or message of this program is to espouse a racist agenda. So, what is going on with this show that allows it to contain some of its racial message? These are the types of questions that rhetorical criticism can answer.

- **Scope**

While there is general agreement among rhetorical scholars that criticism is an appropriate method of study, there are differing opinions about why and how it contributes to an overall understanding of rhetoric. Depending on the rhetorical critic, the assumptions about rhetorical criticism vary. As a way of uncovering some of the various assumptions scholars bring to this method of inquiry, we will look at the various definitions of criticism and rhetoric and what is considered within the scope of rhetorical criticism.

To Persuade? We can begin to see the relationship between rhetorical theory and criticism when we examine the beginnings of criticism. Pay attention to the shared qualities and assumptions. In an early (1925) essay on rhetorical criticism, the study of rhetoric was limited to that of speakers and speeches, and included a number of points to which the critic should attend: speaker's personality, speaker's public character, audience, speaker's leading ideas, motives, topics, proofs, judgment of human nature, questions considered, textual authenticity, arrangement, mode of expression preparation, delivery, style, effect on audience, influence on the time (Wichelns). With this broad agenda for critics, Wichelns failed to provide them with a method to accomplish these goals. His essay was influential in that it led to an exclusive focus and assumption that criticism was to be centered on oral rhetoric. Hopefully, you can see how this parallels the focus of rhetoric in the classical period.

Other scholars tried to fill in some of the gaps of this early essay. Ewbank tried to broaden the scope in 1931 by performing "case studies" where the critic wrote from personal experience derived from witnessing the speech. He looked at the audience's immediate reactions and the effect of the speech on them. Hunt (1935) said the critic should be focused more on values and less on performance of a work. He wanted critics to make value judgments but gave no definition of such. Bryant (1937) was the first person to question the exclusive focus on "great" individuals. He wanted a focus on social forces or movements and thought forces and figures should be studied together. Booth expanded rhetoric to include novels, plays, editorials and songs.

Of the more recent critics, Cathcart says "rhetoric is used . . . to refer to a communicator's intentional use of language and other symbols to influence or persuade selected receivers to act, believe, or feel the way the communicator desires in problematic situations" (2). Of criticism he says it is "that special form of communication which examines how communication is accomplished and whether it is worthwhile. . . Criticism is thus the counterpart of creativity" (3). Imbedded in these definitions are Cathcart's assumptions that only messages that are intended are within the scope of study. Such messages are designed to change the listener or the situation in some way, presumably to solve the problematic situation. This implies that the rhetor knows how to solve the problem and believes that he or she has the best solution. The requirement of a "problematic situation" narrows the scope considerably as does Cathcart's examples of rhetoric—public discourse such as speeches, essays, interviews, and slogans (2). Thus, for Cathcart, a rhetor comes to the problematic speaking situation with his or her solution based on what he or she believes the audience needs to resolve the conflict. Criticism is used to assess whether the rhetor was successful in persuading the audience to accept the solution and the strategies used to gain such acceptance. Black in *Rhetorical Criticism*, defines rhetoric as, "discourse that aims to influence" (17). Criticism then, "is a discipline that, through the investigation and appraisal of the activities and products of men, seeks as its end the understanding of man himself. . . . rhetorical criticism is the criticism of rhetorical discourse" (9, 10). Here, Black offers and suggests a broader scope than Cathcart. Rhetoric is not limited to solely problematic situations; thus, it does not assume that the rhetor has a solution for the audience. Like Cathcart, he assumes the rhetorical goal is to influence and persuade and is concerned with the strategies that are most effective; scholars look at "what he says and how he says it" (17).

Many other critics assume the intent to persuade as the natural goal of rhetoric and focus on the strategies for doing so. Stewart says rhetorical criticism is "the study of man's past attempt to change the behavior of fellow man, primarily through verbal symbols" (1). Brock and Scott claim rhetoric may be defined as the human effort to induce cooperation through the use of symbols" (6). By reading about the various definitions and assumptions of rhetorical criticism we hope you can begin to see a relationship between some of the early definitions of rhetorical theory (as persuasion) and how that impacted the development of rhetorical criticism.

Or Not to Persuade? The definitions offered by Foss, however, suggest at least two different assumptions. She defines rhetoric as "the action humans perform when they use symbols for the purpose of communication with one another" (4). Like other theorists and critics, Foss is concerned with symbolic action, however, she does not assume that the sole purpose of those symbols is to persuade others. Rhetoric may be intended to persuade, but it may also be "an invitation to understanding": an offer to others to see our world the way we do, not in the hope that they will change, but that they will understand (5). At other times rhetoric may be used for self-discovery, to bring people together, or entertainment. With the focus on communication as understanding rather than persuasion, Foss offers critics a broad scope for the study of rhetorical discourse.

Foss defines criticism as "the process of systematically investigating and explaining symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes" (7). Like other critics she wants to understand strategies or processes, but she does not assume that she can understand "man," rather she wants to understand rhetoric and how humans use it. From her definitions, we see that Foss approaches rhetorical criticism with two assumptions that differ from other scholars. First, she does not assume that the role of the rhetorical critic is to judge the effectiveness of the speaker or discourse: their purpose is to understand. Second, she does not believe that the critic must possess knowledge of the motives of the communicator. In her perspective, this is not necessary because, regardless of intent,

a message has been transmitted and produces an effect upon the audience. The goal is to uncover the meanings that are produced; not necessarily the intended meaning.

- **Purpose**

While scholars debate the purpose of rhetorical criticism, the arguments fall into one of two categories: judgment and understanding. While, this may be an oversimplification in some cases, it is useful for our purpose here. Those who see rhetorical criticism as a means of judgment are concerned with articulating the effectiveness of a text or artifact and the strategies that contributed or detracted from its overall success. How effective was President Bush, for example, in persuading the American people and the world that we should go to war with Iraq in his State of the Union address in January 2003?

Those concerned with understanding may be concerned with comprehension and appreciation of the artifact itself and how that knowledge contributes to an understanding of rhetoric and rhetorical processes. A critic interested in this sort of project might ask a question such as, Does the 2003 film, *Charlie's Angels II: Full Throttle*, offer an empowering feminist voice or does it reinscribe a traditionally feminine image? Both questions can be answered by rhetorical criticism: they are just different kinds of questions. Currently, the collective opinion seems to be moving in the direction of understanding as the purpose of rhetorical criticism. We see that Foss is less concerned with judgment as she is with comprehension as suggested in her above definitions of rhetoric and criticism. She sees a direct and explicit correlation between the criticism of an artifact and an understanding of rhetorical theory: "the critic is interested in discovering what the artifact teaches us about the nature of rhetoric" (8). The overall goal is to contribute to our effectiveness as communicators. When we know and understand how rhetoric works we are able to critique the rhetorical choices of others and make effective rhetorical choices for our own communication. The aim for the individual is to be rhetorically effective in a given situation by understanding the communicative options available to him or her. Other specific purposes can include artistic, analytic, and ideological. Leff describes the artistic critic as one who sees the text as art and wants to foster an appreciation in the reader (224). The purpose is for the reader to understand and therefore, appreciate the art form. The analytic critic sees the text, (such as advertisements or political campaigns) as an object of study and seeks the means to comprehend. Wanderer talks of the ideological or advocate critic as looking at how a text may be oppressive, suppress the readers' interpretations, closes off other readings or possibilities (social protests, minorities.) Feminist and ideological criticism seek the emancipation of all human potential and exposes how that potential is being silenced by the existing ideologies.

What Can We Learn?

The value of rhetorical criticism comes from the insights it can provide about rhetorical communication and the artifact we study. Through these methodological process critics come to a greater awareness about the variety of communication options open to us in a given situation. This awareness helps us to be effective communicators. Conversely, discovering what is ineffective in a discourse teaches us what not to do when we communicate with others. By uncovering hidden meanings in a text we learn how various messages are produced and their effects. This can help us decipher how we may want to respond in a given situation: "The value of both critical theory and textual criticism derives from the extent to which they inform discursive practice and advance our understanding of rhetorical communication" (Henry 220-221). Criticism also helps us learn about a specific text. When we can identify a text with pervasive effects, rhetorical criticism can inform us as to how and why that text is so effective. Thus, rhetorical criticism enables scholars to learn more about their own communication strategies, the study of rhetoric, and the specific artifacts that interest us.

The Relationship Between Theory and Criticism

Many critics are concerned with the relationship between theory and practice and how an understanding of one contributes to the other. In this way theory and criticism are mutually interdependent: the purpose for criticism is to unite theory and practice. Criticism must be informed by method so others can see why and how we reason about quality i.e. we need theory for criticism and criticism for theory (Farrell 4). Campbell says the purpose of criticism is to contribute to the modification and application of theory (18). Criticism helps us see gaps in theory and the limits of knowledge so we may ascertain social significance of discourse. If there is a gap in theory criticism helps us create a new one. Hart, however, claims that critics do not have to choose between studying texts and contributing to theory; productive criticism can do both, regardless of the critic's intention. If you remember back to the chapter on theory at the beginning of the text we talked about theory as an idea of how something works. The "something" in this case is language or discourse; rhetorical theories provide models for how language functions as part of the human experience and rhetorical criticism is a way of testing and revising the particular theory with a real life case study.

Current Uses of Rhetorical Theory and Criticism

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Now you should have a clear understanding of what rhetorical theory and criticism are and the uses they serve for the discipline as well as the world outside academia. We would like to conclude this chapter by detailing some of the current issues and questions occupying rhetorical scholars. As the examples are numerous, we will speak to three specific content areas: the study of social movements, political and campaign rhetoric, and studies of popular culture.

Social Movements

One of the exciting things about Communication is that it has always been interested in the large sociopolitical issues facing society. Social change as it occurs through social movements is one such area of research. Think back to your history lessons concerning minority populations in the United States. Has the political status of women; African Americans; Asians; gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgendered individuals always been what it is today? (We are not suggesting here that there is finally equality among people of various races, ethnicities, genders, or sexual orientations; only that it has been much worse.) How have those changes come about? Certainly laws and customs have changed in an attempt to provide more equal access to resources and opportunities. But prior to such legislative changes a change in attitude was necessary. Here is where social movement rhetoric played a vital role in changes our nation's history. The rhetoric of leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Caesar Chavez have all been influential in changing attitudes. Scholars interested in these issues study the discourse of the leaders (i.e. their speeches) as well as the rhetorical vision they create for their audience. Moreover, they also attempt to learn from the past about what sort of rhetorical strategies will be successful in contemporary and future movements. As Bowers, Ochs, and Jensen explain, "one of the goals of studying social movements is to make predictions" (141).

Public Address

Another area of research that falls within the scope of rhetorical theory and criticism is that of public address. This area is concerned with politics and political oratory. Some students of rhetoric may go onto careers in speech writing and campaign design on the behalf of political candidates. In this context they are able to utilize their skills in rhetoric and persuasion to answer the challenge of, how can I get people to vote for a particular candidate. Kathleen Hall Jamison is an example of such a person. She worked on the Dukakis presidential campaign and has authored several books in this area. Similarly, one might be in the business of analyzing political speeches and offering

suggestions about what is effective and ineffective in a politician's rhetoric.

Popular Culture

The study and critique of popular culture is something that most, if not all, of us participate in at some level. Do you ever watch music videos with your friends and comment on the use of some of the images? Do you look forward to the commercials during the Super Bowl to see the latest and innovative advertising techniques? As you watch, critique, and analyze these images, you are beginning the process of rhetorical criticism. The only difference between you and the professional critic (beside lots of schooling) is that the professional critic has decided to make his or her analysis systematic. This is accomplished by employing one of the formal methods discussed earlier, such as the pentad or a feminist critique. As most people participate in some form of popular culture such as television, films, music, sports, or fashion, you can see the potential impact that popular culture messages and images have on a society. Thus, scholars of popular culture feel it is important to pay critical attention to them rather than dismiss them as trivial.

Summary

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Now you have a more complex understanding of the term rhetoric and realize the distinction between the use of the term in the popular press and its meaning within the context of the Communication discipline. At a very basic level, you know that it refers to the process in which humans use symbols to communicate with one another. Moreover, you should know the contributions of classical and well as contemporary theorists to understanding human symbol use. As a way of knowing, rhetorical criticism provides scholars with a unique methodological tool for understanding communication. Through the contributions and paradigm shifts from classical to contemporary scholars, the scope of rhetorical criticism has been widened to include a variety of social events, acts, and artifacts that we encounter in our daily life. This method has a direct impact on our lives by informing us about the communicative options available to us when communicating with others in cultural, professional, personal and political contexts.

Discussion Questions

1. What specific contributions did classical theorists make to the study of rhetoric?
 2. How have contemporary rhetorical theorists challenged the canon?
 3. Compare and contrast classical rhetorical theories versus contemporary ones.
 4. What idea has been at the center of most definitions of rhetoric?#Do you think rhetoric should refer only to persuasion? What are the limits and advantages to such an approach?
 5. What role do you think the study of rhetoric can play in today's social world? The political context?
 6. What are some examples of the use of classical rhetorical theory in contemporary rhetorical discourse?
 7. What sort of research question would you, as a scholar interested in the rhetoric of popular culture, ask?
 8. What might some of the limitations of rhetorical criticism as a method?
 9. What are the elements of Burke's pentad? Give an example of how you would apply it to the study of a particular body of discourse.
 10. What kind of research question would you want to ask using the method of feminist criticism?
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Key Terms

- Afrocentric
- Aristotle
- Artifact
- Aspasia of Miletus
- Audience analysis
- Canons
- Cicero
- Dialectic
- Ethos
- Fantasy Theme Criticism
- Feminist Criticism
- Humanism
- Ideological Criticism
- Logos
- Narrative Criticism
- Neo-Aristotelian Criticism
- Pan Chao
- Pathos
- Pentadic Criticism
- Persuasion
- Plato
- Postmodernism
- Public Address
- Quintillian
- Rationalism
- Rhetoric
- Rhetorical Criticism
- Social Constructionism
- Socrates
- Types of speeches

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