

Three Ways to Persuade

by John R. Edlund

- 1 Over 2,000 years ago the Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that there were three basic ways to persuade an audience that you were right: *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*.

Ethos: The Writer's Character or Image

- 2 The Greek word *ethos* is related to our word “ethics” or “ethical,” but a more accurate modern translation might be “image.” Aristotle uses *ethos* to refer to the speaker’s character as it appears to the audience. Aristotle says that if we believe that a speaker has good sense, good moral character, and goodwill, we are inclined to believe what that speaker says to us. Today we might add that a speaker should also appear to have the appropriate expertise or authority to speak knowledgeably about the subject matter. *Ethos* is an important factor in advertising, both for commercial products and in politics. For example, when an actor in a pain reliever commercial puts on a doctor’s white coat, the advertisers are hoping that wearing this coat will give the actor the authority to talk persuasively about medicines. Of course, in this case the actor’s *ethos* is a deceptive illusion.
- 3 In our society, sports heroes, popular actors and actresses, and rock stars are often seen as authorities on matters completely unrelated to their talents. This is an instance of the power of image. Can you think of some examples?
- 4 A writer’s *ethos* is created largely by word choice and style. Student writers often have a problem with *ethos* because they are asked to write research papers, reports, and other types of texts as if they have authority to speak persuasively, when in fact they are newcomers to the subject matter and the discourse community. Sometimes students try to create an academic image for themselves by using a thesaurus to find difficult and unusual words to sprinkle throughout their texts. Unfortunately, this sort of effort usually fails, because it is difficult to use a word correctly that you have not heard or read in context many times.
- 5 Sometimes a writer or speaker will use what is called an *ad hominem* argument, an argument “against the man.” In this strategy, the writer attacks the character or personality of the speaker instead of attacking the substance of his or her position. This kind of argument is usually considered to be a logical fallacy, but it can be very effective and is quite common in politics.

Questions for Discussion

1. What kind of image do you want to project to your audience?
2. What can you do to help project this image?
3. What words or ideas do you want to avoid in order to not harm your image?
4. What effect do misspelled words and grammatical errors have on your image?

Logos: Logical Arguments

6 In our society, logic and rationality are highly valued, and this type of persuasive strategy is usually privileged over appeals to the character of the speaker or to the emotions of the audience. However, formal logic and scientific reasoning are usually not appropriate for general audiences, so we must rely on a more rhetorical type of reasoning.

7 For Aristotle, formal arguments are based on what he calls “syllogisms.” This is reasoning that takes the following form:

All men are mortal.

Socrates is a man.

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

8 However, Aristotle notes that in ordinary speaking and writing we often use what he calls a rhetorical syllogism or an “enthymeme.” This is an argument in which some of the premises remain unstated or are simply assumed. For example, no one in ordinary life would think that Socrates could be immortal. We would simply *assume* that Socrates could be killed or that he would die of natural causes after a normal lifespan. Not all assumptions are as trivial as this one, however.

9 For example, when bubonic plague swept through Europe and parts of Asia in the fourteenth century, killing as much as three-quarters of the population in less than 20 years, it was not known how the disease was spread. At one point, people thought that the plague was spread by cats. If you *assume* that cats spread the disease, the obvious solution to the problem is to eliminate the cats, and so people began killing cats on sight. However, we now know that plague is spread by fleas, which live on rats. Because cats kill rats, killing off the cat population led to an increase in the rat population, a corresponding increase in plague-carrying fleas, and thus an increase in cases of plague in humans. Killing off the cats was a logical solution to the problem of plague, but it was based on a faulty assumption.

10 Rhetorical arguments are often based on probabilities rather than certain truth. The people of medieval Europe really had no way to determine what the real cause of the plague was, but they felt that they had to do something about it, and the cat hypothesis seemed probable to them. Unfortunately, this is true of many of the problems we face even today; we can not know with absolute certainty what the real solution is, yet we must act anyway.

11 Persuasion, to a large extent, involves convincing people to accept our assumptions as probably true. Similarly, exposing questionable assumptions in someone else’s argument is an effective means for preparing the audience to accept the writer’s own contrary position.

Questions for Discussion

1. Imagine some arguments that start from faulty assumptions, such as “If pigs could fly,” or “If money grew on trees.” What would be some of the logical consequences?

2. Do logical arguments provide better support for a position than arguments that are based on authority or character? In other words, would you support a policy just because a celebrity or an important expert supported it?
3. Can you think of a time when you used a logical argument to persuade someone of something? What was it?

Pathos: The Emotions of the Audience

- 12 Most of us think that we make our decisions based on rational thought. However, Aristotle points out that emotions such as anger, pity, and fear (and their opposites) powerfully influence our rational judgments. Due to this fact, much of our political discourse and much of the advertising we experience is directed toward moving our emotions.
- 13 Anger is a very powerful motivating force. Aristotle points out that if we want to make an audience angry we need to know three things: (1) the state of mind of angry people; (2) who the people are that this audience usually gets angry at; and (3) on what grounds this audience gets angry at those people. The recent breakup of Yugoslavia into separate countries provides many examples of the power of this kind of rhetoric. Yugoslavia was created after the Second World War out of several smaller states, including Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovena, and Slovenia. Within each state there were ethnic and religious minorities with long histories of conflict. While Yugoslavia was under the control of the Soviet Union, these conflicts were kept in check by military force. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, new political structures were necessary, and political opportunities arose for the ambitious. The leaders of various factions, understanding Aristotle's three points very well, began to mobilize their followers to war by reminding them of their historical grievances against other groups. Serbian leaders published photographs of atrocities allegedly committed by Croatians during WWII, reviving a conflict from 50 years earlier. Individuals were inspired through this angry rhetoric to attack, rape, and kill, simply because of their ethnicity or religion, neighbors that had lived near them all their lives.
- 14 Many political decisions have an emotional motivation. For example, when a gunman with an assault rifle shot up a schoolyard full of children, people were suddenly interested in banning such weapons. In this case several emotions are involved, but perhaps the strongest one is pity for the small children and their families. The logical arguments for banning or not banning assault rifles had not changed at all, but people were emotionally engaged with the issue after this event and wanted to do something.
- 15 Many advertisements for consumer goods aim to make us insecure about our attractiveness or social acceptability, and then offer a remedy for this feeling in the form of a product. This is a common strategy for selling mouthwash, toothpaste, chewing gum, clothing, and even automobiles.

- 16** Appeals to the emotions and passions are very effective rhetorical techniques, and very common in our society. You may find it necessary to use them yourself.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you think of an advertisement for a product or a political campaign that uses your emotions to persuade you to believe something? Describe it, and analyze how it works.
2. Do you think it is unfair or deceptive to try to use emotions to persuade people?
3. Have you ever made a decision based on your feelings that you regretted later?