

Logos: The Question of Rhetoric

Feisal Sharif

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Introduction

Rhetorical appeals such as ethos, pathos, and logos are foundational concepts in Writing Studies courses. For this reason, we were delighted to read this succinct and insightful piece by **Feisal Sharif** about the appeal of logos. Feisal submitted this piece for a first-year Writing Studies course.

Keywords: evidential, fallacy, inferential, logos, rhetoric.



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Being rhetorical in common parlance has negative connotations associated with it. However, to the writer, being rhetorical is a tool that is essential to their toolkit. The natural question then is, “What type of tool is rhetoric?” The Greek philosopher Aristotle defined rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (Corbett 1-2). Rhetoric, to the writer, is the art of compelling the reader to be persuaded of the ideas espoused within the writing. Aristotle identified three main ways of persuading one’s audience: logos, ethos, and pathos. When a writer employs ethos, they are appealing to their credibility as it relates to the ideas they are communicating. In the case of pathos, the writer is appealing to the emotions, values, and beliefs of the audience. Lastly, when a writer is said to employ logos, they are appealing to the rationale and sense of their audience, and it is this rhetorical appeal we shall explore in greater detail.

The Appeal to the Mind

The term logos itself is Greek in its origin and has varying meanings, including *plea* and *reason* (Liddell and Scott). However, to appeal to logos is not to appeal to reason per se but to the reason of our audience. But why should a writer employ logos? It was Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, who famously defined humans by their rational faculty. Humans, Aristotle believed, were distinctly rational animals. Therefore, to appeal to our reason is to appeal to the essence of our species, and this consequently gives logos great persuasive force. How, then, is one to appeal to our reason? There are two main modes of logos: the inferential mode and the evidential mode.

The Inferential Mode

The inferential mode of logos is concerned with making valid conclusions (or inferences) from two or more premises. Aristotle further subdivided this category into two forms: deductive and inductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning is a type of logic where a conclusion results from two statements that are known to be true. The example below is a basic form of deductive reasoning.

Premise 1: Humans are rational animals.

Premise 2: Aristotle is a human.

Conclusion: Therefore, Aristotle is a rational animal.

Inductive reasoning is like deductive reasoning, but its conclusion follows with probability rather than with certainty. The example below is a basic form of inductive reasoning.

Premise 1: Most humans are rational beings.

Premise 2: Aristotle is human.

Conclusion: Therefore, Aristotle is a rational being.

If we examine the first premise, we notice that the premise does not universally apply to all humans; thus, its conclusion does not follow with certainty.

The Evidential Mode

The evidential mode is concerned strictly with providing supportive claims for an idea put forward by the writer. By way of example, supportive claims include statistical claims, facts, and anecdotes. Both the evidential mode and inferential mode taken together form the basic branches of the rhetorical appeal to reason.

Having now sufficiently explored the tool of logos, how can we use this knowledge to enhance our writing? How can we better appeal to the rationale of our audience?

Avoid Making Fallacies

The first recommendation to any writer appealing to reason is to avoid making invalid conclusions. Through the study of common fallacies, rhetoricians have been able to identify a multitude of fallacies that arise as a result of the general cognitive biases humans have. I shall introduce one common fallacy a writer can avoid to better appeal to the rationale of the audience: equivocation.

Equivocation is a form of fallacy where one word is used in two senses to draw a conclusion. Let us consider the example provided below.

Premise 1: (Only) man is a rational animal.

Premise 2: Julia is not a man.

Conclusion: Therefore, Julia is not rational.

Man, as used in the first premise, refers to humans in general; the second instance of man specifically refers to those who are male. Thus, the conclusion is a fallacy because the meaning of the term man does not sustain the same referent in the separate premises. By making an invalid reference, the writer's attempt to appeal to the rationale of their audience is hindered.

Use a Reliable Source

When making statistical claims in one's writing, using a reliable source for the information gives more credence to the claim made and thus better appeals to the reason of the audience. Using an unreliable source makes it more likely that the data is biased and thus

weakens the support of a claim. For example, if one wishes to make a claim about health statistics concerning matters like Covid-19, using a source like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ensures that the data drawn is less likely biased and thus gives more credence to the claim.

Are fallacies persuasive and thus a form of rhetorical appeal? I hypothesize that fallacies can, in fact, very much be persuasive. This is so because fallacies are a consequence of cognitive biases that can exist in the minds of the audience. If the audience is uninformed when it comes to identifying fallacies, it is likely that they will be persuaded and thus be moved by the ideas of the writer. If this is so, should writers employ fallacious arguments in their writing? The question is entirely prescriptive in nature and is an ethical consideration that must be brought to attention. If indeed the goal of a writer is to persuade the audience of their ideas and fallacious arguments allow for this, what are we to do? It seems that we have come full circle from our starting point of the negative connotations associated with rhetoric. Now we must create a system of justification where we can exclude unethical forms of rhetorical appeals while still upholding ethical ones. This question must be left to the moral philosophers and rhetoricians of our time. For us writers, we shall rely upon our intuitive moral compass in guiding our use of rhetorical appeals.

Works Cited

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