



Ethos, logos, pathos: three modes of persuasion

Alan Barker

Delivering a memorable speech is saying the right thing, at just the right time, and in the right place.
[Max Atkinson]

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MANAGING DIRECTORS Alan Barker Gillian Barker
39 CUDNALL STREET CHARLTON KINGS CHELTENHAM GLOUCESTERSHIRE GL53 8HP
TEL & FAX +0044 (0) 1242 269762 alanbarker830@btinternet.com

Registered Office: 2 CASTLEHAM COURT, 180 HIGH STREET, EDWARE MIDDLESEX HA8 7EX
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[With thanks to Jay Heinrichs]

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The anatomy of a speech

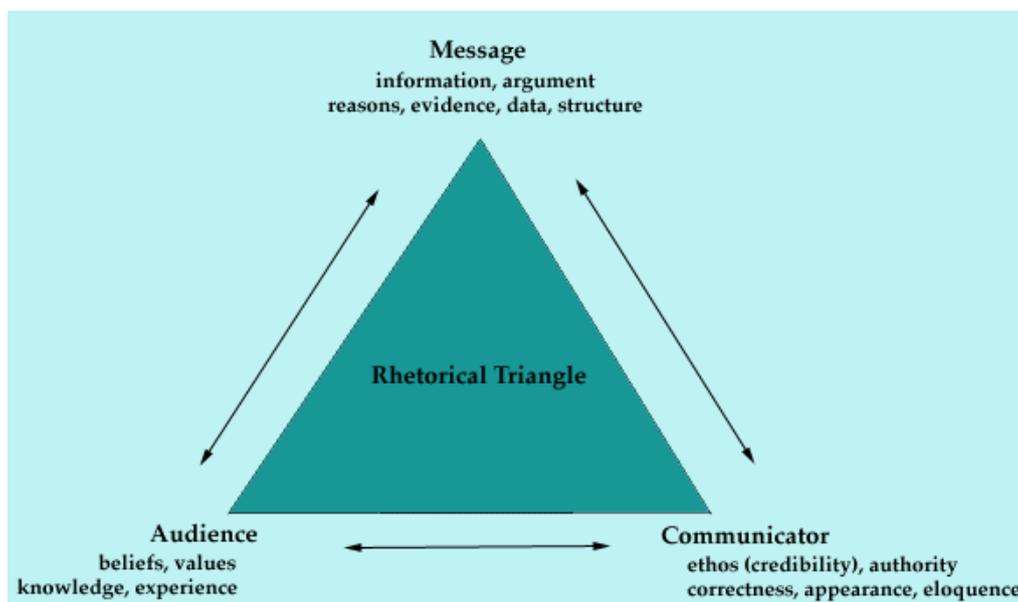
A speech is made up of three elements: the speaker, the audience, and the speech itself.

The speaker uses the speech to manipulate the thoughts and feelings of the audience. Every speech, at its heart, is an exercise in persuasion.

- The speaker might be seeking to persuade the audience to do something (a speech in parliament or on the hustings).
- They may want to persuade the audience that something is true (a lawyer prosecuting or defending a defendant; a lecture; or a presentation at a conference).
- They may want to persuade the audience that they or another person is worthy of affection or respect (the best man speech at a wedding, or a eulogy at a funeral).

Aristotle suggested that speakers persuade audiences using three modes of appeal, based on the three elements: speaker, audience, speech.

- *Ethos* persuades by the appeal of the speaker's personality or character.
- *Logos* is the appeal to reason through the quality of the argument in the speech.
- *Pathos* appeals to the audience's emotions.



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Aristotle on the three modes of appeal

Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself.

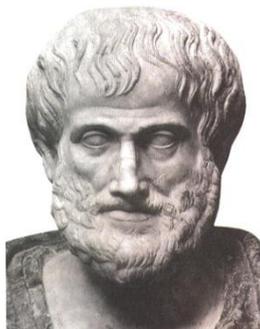
Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.

Secondly, persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions. Our judgements when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile. It is towards producing these effects, as we maintain, that present-day writers on rhetoric direct the whole of their efforts. This subject shall be treated in detail when we come to speak of the emotions.

Thirdly, persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question.

There are, then, these three means of effecting persuasion. The man who is to be in command of them must, it is clear, be able (1) to reason logically, (2) to understand human character and goodness in their various forms, and (3) to understand the emotions—that is, to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited.

Rhetoric (I, ii)



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Ethos: the power of decorum



You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his.

[Kenneth Burke]

Ethos begins with decorum: the art of fitting in. The word *decorum* itself means ‘fit’ or ‘suitable’. *Ethos* starts by matching yourself to the audience’s expectations of you.

Ethos starts by matching yourself to the audience’s expectations of you. Rhetorical decorum is the art of fitting in. The word *decorum* means ‘fit’ or ‘suitable’. Survival of the fittest, in social situations, means survival of the decorous.

Kenneth Burke, one of the last century’s great rhetoricians, suggested that decorum is “perhaps the simplest case of persuasion.” He went on to give a good list of decorous skills.

You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his.

(He was writing in the 1950s, when it was good decorum to refer to a person as ‘a man’. Times change and so does decorum.)

Decorum tells the audience: “Do as I say and *and* as I do.” Your aim is to sound like the audience’s collective voice. Decorum follows the audience’s rules. At the same time, decorum allows you to create a consensus within your audience: a sense of shared identity, beliefs and opinions that they might not have had before you persuaded them.

To convince your audience, you need to make them feel comfortable with you. You can’t be indecorous *and* persuasive. What works for one audience may not work for another. Think about your audience and ask:

“What do they expect?”

Then deliver to their expectations.

Persuasion depends on being credible. It doesn’t depend on being true to yourself; it depends on being true to your audience. This may seem dishonest and cynical. In a society that values authenticity, we tend to undervalue decorum and celebrate indecorous behaviour. But decorum, properly understood, is a great source of persuasive power, because it welds your audience into a single community of interest.

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Decorum: practical thoughts

What's the title of your speech?

Is it provocative and intriguing? Is it in language that your audience will feel comfortable with?

What's the purpose of the speech?

Inform, entertain, inspire, motivate, advocate, persuade?

What's the likely size of the audience?

Room, hall, auditorium? How intimate will the speech be? How conversational? How oratorical? Are you on the audience's home ground?

What's the occasion?

How can you demonstrate in the speech that you know something about the audience, the location, or the occasion? Can you use some background information about the place, the moment, a famous person connected with the occasion? What's the place of your speech in the event? What's the context? What will give your speech resonance on this occasion?

What do the audience know?

Experts or uninitiated? Voluntary or compelled? Favourable or hostile?

- What are their attitudes and beliefs – in general?
- What motivates this audience on this topic?
- How much are their beliefs based on fact? How much on experience?
- What arguments will convince and which will irritate?
- What are their biggest concerns and unanswered questions?
- Have they already made up their minds?

Where's the hidden audience?

Are you speaking as much to the press as to the audience? Are you being recorded? Are you hoping for media soundbites?

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Ethos: key features

Ethos, according to Aristotle, consists of three qualities.

- **virtue [arête]**
- **practical wisdom [phronesis]**
- **selflessness [eunoia]**

Virtue [arête]

It's an impossible word to translate. These days, we'd probably talk about 'values'. The speech that demonstrates and upholds the audience's values displays *arête*.

To display virtue, a speech must display a love of whatever the audience thinks is morally upright. It must express an abhorrence of unscrupulous tactics and specious reasoning. Above all, it must demonstrate thorough, unblemished integrity.

Virtue can be complicated. You may not know the audience's values in any depth. You may not be able to sympathize easily with them. You might be addressing two audiences, each with different values.

It's important to note that the speaker doesn't have to *actually* share these values; it's the *speech* that has to do the persuading. Julius Caesar, according to Casca in Shakespeare's play, has this technique off pat. [I, iii, 157-]

*Oh, he sits high in all the people's hearts,
And that which would appear offense in us,
His countenance, like richest alchemy,
Will change to virtue and to worthiness.*

Practical wisdom [phronesis]

To display practical wisdom, the speech should demonstrate that the speaker knows what they're talking about, even if they're not professionally or academically expert. (Indeed, it might be better *not* to seem too authoritative; the audience might not trust experts.)

The audience should feel that all the arguments in the speech are reasonable, and that the speaker is applying logic flexibly, with good knowledge of the specifics in this instance. *Phronesis* balances rationality with common sense. A display of good taste and discriminating judgement will also demonstrate *phronesis*.

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Selflessness [eunoia]

A speech that displays *eunoia* shows that the speaker has a sincere interest in the welfare of the audience. They should show themselves ready to make any sacrifice in the cause of the audience's benefit.

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Ethos: practical ideas

You can build these qualities into the speech at any point, but they have particular power at the beginning of the speech.

Virtue. Show that you share the audience's values.

You could do this by means of:

- **display** (showing explicitly how you share those values);
- **character references** (get someone else to brag for you);
- **the tactical flaw** (reveal some defect that shows how much you share their values);
- **changing your position** (to one that they hold).

Practical wisdom. Demonstrate that you are sensible and knowledgeable.

- **Show off your experience.** And relate it to the audience's.
- **Bend the rules.** You'll gain a lot of *ethos* from showing your willingness to be flexible.
- **Seem to take the middle course.** Point out the extreme options first, then support the sensible middle option.

Selflessness. Demonstrate objectivity, benevolence and self-sacrifice.

- **The reluctant conclusion.** Seem to deal reluctantly with what you are actually eager to prove.
- **The personal sacrifice.** Act as if the choice you are making hurts you personally.
- **Seem to doubt your own abilities.** Act as if hesitant to speak well or think clearly. Play up plain speaking and guilelessness.

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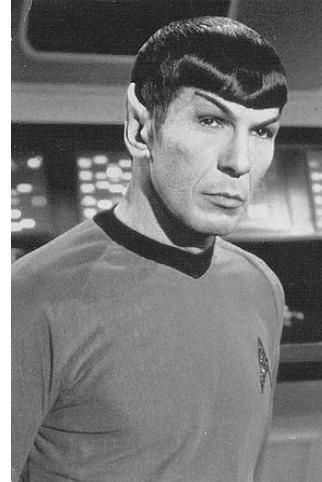
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Logos: key features

At the heart of *logos* is argument.

All arguments address an issue. We can best express the issue by asking a question.

*Should we open a new sports centre?
Is the manager of Sunderland Football Club a fascist?
Is Bob Smith guilty of murder or manslaughter?*



An argument addresses the issue by:

- making a case;
- supporting the case with reasons; and
- binding the reasons to the case with logic.

At its simplest:

[Case] because [Reason].

Four simple argument structures

[X] should happen/is true. [Case]

because

<i>[X] is a [Y].</i>	{Definition}
<i>[X] will cause [Y].</i>	{Cause and effect}
<i>[X] has desirable consequence [Y].</i>	{Antecedent and consequence}
<i>[X] is like [Y].</i>	{Resemblance}

[Reasons]

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The form of a rhetorical argument

Aristotle says that rhetorical reasoning is like, but not the same as, formal logic. In his words: "Rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectics."

He also explains that rhetorical logic differs from dialectical logic in two fundamental ways.

- Where dialectics uses the syllogism, rhetoric uses the enthymeme.
- Where dialectics uses induction, rhetoric uses the example.

It may seem a bit heavy-going, but it's worth working out what all this means. It's not really very difficult.

Syllogism and enthymeme

Dialectics uses two forms of logic: deductive and inductive. Deductive logic derives conclusions from statements. The usual structure of a deductive argument is **syllogism**, which argues a conclusion from two premises.

All humans are mortal. (*major premise*)
Socrates is a human. (*minor premise*)
Therefore, Socrates is mortal. (*conclusion*)

We might express this syllogism in simplified form:

Socrates is mortal because he's human.

Rhetoric uses a form of argument called an **enthymeme**. What's the difference? It's all in the premises.

- Syllogisms proceed from premises that are universally true.
- Enthymemes proceed from premises that are more or less probable.

Look at this argument.

John can never be a good councillor because he's a communist.

If we retrofit this argument into the form of two premises and a conclusion, we create this.

Communists can never be good councillors.
John is a communist.
Therefore, John can never be a good councillor.

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The validity of the enthymeme depends, not on a truth universally held to be true, but on a *value* or *assumption*. If the audience holds that view or readily makes that assumption, the argument will be persuasive.

Induction and example

Deduction derives a conclusion from statements. Induction derives a conclusion from observation of verifiable phenomena.

Inductive logic concludes a general truth based on the observation of things that everyone can agree are there. For example, if you want to prove that all the beetles on an island are brown, you need to observe as many beetles as possible. Your argument will be stronger or weaker, depending on how many observations you make. (And on your definition of a beetle.)

If you want to prove that women are more careful drivers than men, the argument will be weak or strong, depending on the size of your sample. (And, of course, on a universally agreed definition of 'careful'.)

The larger the sample, the less of an 'inductive leap' you need to make to cross from your observations to your conclusion.

Now, no speaker can present a huge sample of observations to support their conclusion. They don't have the time, and they can't risk boring their audience. So, instead of inductive reasoning, they use vivid and relevant *examples*.

Of course, an argument based on one or two examples can never really prove anything. But it *can* be persuasive, at least for the duration of a speech, because of the saliency effect. Human beings are notoriously suspicious of statistical information; but we are very ready to believe the truth of stories or vividly presented examples. Indeed, a single dramatic example can convince a whole audience of a general proposition.

Rhetoric is not interested in establishing the truth. It's interested in the power of persuasion.



Identify the warrant

The key to an effective enthymeme is finding the value or assumption that your audience shares. In another branch of informal logic, called Toulmin logic, this assumption is called a *warrant*: it's what gives us the warrant to derive our conclusion from our premise.

To give you an idea of how this works, have a go at finding the warrants in these arguments. I've done the first one for you; and all the rest are on the next page.

1. Alan will make a bad team leader because he's too bossy.
Bossy people make bad team leaders.
2. Buy this hi-fi because it has the most powerful amplifier.
3. Practising piano is good for young people because it teaches self-discipline.
4. A diesel-powered car is often cheaper to run than a petrol-powered car because it's more durable.
5. *The Skin I Live In* is a brilliant movie because its characters reflect universal archetypes.

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Identify the warrant: answers

1. Alan will make a bad team leader because he's too bossy.
Bossy people make bad team leaders.

2. Buy this hi-fi because it has the most powerful amplifier.
The more powerful the amp, the better the hi-fi.

3. Practising piano is good for young people because it teaches self-discipline.
Young people need to be taught self-discipline.

4. A diesel-powered care is often cheaper to run than a petrol-powered car because it's more durable.
The more durable the car, the cheaper it is to run.

5. *The Skin I Live In* is a brilliant movie because its characters reflect universal archetypes.
Any movie that reflects universal stereotypes is brilliant.

Logos: the four argument structures explained

Definition

Basic structure: [X] is a [Y].

Heuristic:

Find a noun or an adjective [Y] that appeals to the audience's values. Show how [X] belongs to that class or category.

Key questions:

What criteria are you using to define [Y]?
Does [X] match the criteria?

Cause and effect

Basic structure: [X] will cause [Y].

Heuristic:

Find effects of doing [X] that your audience will find appealing or appalling. Show how [X] will cause those effects. Correlations may not indicate cause.

Key questions:

What caused something to happen? What motivated someone to do something?
How many factors might have influenced the result?

Antecedent and consequence

Basic structure: Doing X will have consequence [Y].

Heuristic:

Find consequences of doing [X] and show how those consequences will be either desirable or catastrophic. Show how doing [X] will have those consequences.

Key questions:

Given a certain situation (the antecedent), what is likely to follow (the consequence)? Have we considered all possible consequences? Are the consequences desirable in the audience's view?

Very similar to cause and effect. The difference is that what follows may not be caused by what preceded it, but will naturally flow from it.

Examples

Since Louisa Franklin was not Paul Franklin's legal wife when he died, she isn't entitled to any of his record collection.

If students violate the dress code, then they should suffer the consequences.

Resemblance

Basic structure: [X] is like [Y].

Heuristic:

Works by **precedence** or **analogy**. Show or demonstrate similarities to the precedents or analogies chosen.

Key questions:

Precedence: What does the present issue have in common with past cases? Can it be treated consistently with past decisions?

Analogy: Can we compare the present issue, which the audience may not understand well, to something that they do understand?

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Arguing in the right tense

What's the central issue in your speech?

According to Aristotle (him again!), there are only ever three core issues.

Blame
Values
Choice

Who moved the toothpaste? Blame.

Should Brad and Jen have split up? Values.

Do you want to go out on a date? Choice.

The blame issues deal with the **past**; value questions are in the **present** tense; and issues of choice look to the **future**.

Aristotle developed these three types of issue into three branches of rhetoric.

- **The rhetoric of the past** is the rhetoric of the law court. It deals with questions of justice. He called *judicial* or *forensic*.
- **The rhetoric of the present** handles values. It deals in praise and condemnation, sifting the good from the bad, and identifying us against them. We're talking school speech days, weddings, funerals, sermons and State of the Union addresses. This is *epideictic* rhetoric.
- **The rhetoric of the future** argues about what to do: how to set and meet our goals, whether we should invest in new equipment or go to war, how we should make laws and what's to our best advantage. This is Aristotle's favourite type of rhetoric, and he called it *deliberative*.

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Branch of oratory	Place	Time and tense	Purposes	Special topics of invention
judicial	law court	past	accuse or defend	justice / injustice
deliberative	political assembly	future	exhort or dissuade	good / unworthy advantageous / disadvantageous
epideictic	wedding, funeral, ceremony	present	praise or blame	virtue / vice

The key point here is that each type of rhetoric tends to use a particular tense.

Present-tense rhetoric (epideictic) tends to lead to people bonding or splitting up.

Past-tense rhetoric (judicial) threatens punishment.

Future-tense rhetoric (deliberative) promises a payoff.

If you want to argue your case properly, choose the right tense.

- If you want to allocate blame or guilt, use the past tense.
- If you want to show what kind of a person someone is, or appeal to an audience's sense of identity or community, pick the present.
- And if you want to inspire them to action, shift to the future.



Logos: practical ideas

Structure your argument carefully in the form:

[A] because [B].

Find the **warrant** that links [B] to [A]; the assumption or value that you think your audience shares.

Look for warrants in:

- commonly used language: words or phrases the audience uses frequently
- rejected ideas: whatever the audience has explicitly argued or acted against
- commonplaces: whenever members of the audience have labelled something to define it, they reveal a potential warrant

Look for vivid **examples**.

- Key facts (with emotional or visual appeal, preferably)
- Comparisons (simple either/or pairs)
- Stories (the suspense and aroused curiosity will generate greater belief)

Make sure that you are arguing in the correct tense.

- If you want to allocate blame or guilt, use the **past** tense.
- If you want to show what kind of a person someone is, or appeal to an audience's sense of identity or community, pick the **present**.
- And if you want to inspire them to action, shift to the **future**.

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Pathos: key features

Pathos uses emotion to stimulate action. Emotions, after all, provoke *motion*.

The emotional appeal, then, should be directly related to the action that you want the audience to take. Listen to Richard Whately, nineteenth-century British rhetorician.



“For in order that the Will may be influenced, two things are requisite: (1) that the proposed Object should appear desirable; and (2) that the Means suggested should be proved to be conducive to the attainment of that object.”

[*Elements of Rhetoric*, Pt II, ch. I]

Logos argues that the means will attain the end, and that the end justifies the means. It’s *pathos* that will make the end seem desirable.

Our emotions operate on the border between conscious and unconscious. So:

Any speaker that *tells* the audience that they are going to try to arouse them emotionally will almost certainly fail. (Compare the usefulness of announcing that you are about to engage in careful reasoning.)

The pathetic appeal must be *covert*. It works by showing the audience something to which they can have an emotional response. To arouse pity, show a picture of a suffering animal or person. To arouse anger, tell a story of torture or – better still – show pictures.

Of course, a speaker may want to *lower* emotional arousal in the audience rather than *raise* it.

Pathos: practical ideas

To influence your audience to act, you need to engage their emotions appropriately.

Arouse or relax? Do you want to stimulate an emotional response, or lower their emotional arousal?

To stimulate emotion:

- Look for beliefs. Amplify them.
- Tell stories. Develop the sense of suspense.
- Speak simply. The audience will immediately distrust fancy language.
- Manage your vocal tone. Find the tone that fits. Play the 'spontaneous' card: interrupt yourself, correct yourself, make the words seemingly hard to find.

To calm emotion:

- Go passive: use passive verbs or deliberately avoid allocating blame.
- Overplay your own emotion.
- Level the three key vocal features: volume, pitch, pace.
- Use humour.

Create rapport. Mirror the audience's language. Include them in your thinking (*We all know that...; like you, I've often found; I'm sure there's not a person here who hasn't at some point...*)

Don't announce the emotion. They'll resist on the spot. Take the audience by surprise.

Task or relationship? Where does the audience like to invest their feelings? Scientists tend to invest in research results; nurses in the welfare of their patients; business folk in the bottom line; and so on. Find your emotional examples from among the audience's emotional investment banks.

When the topic is most serious, understate; when least serious, exaggerate.

[Roy Peter Clark]