

Pathos as Inquiry: Knowing Your Audience

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It is common for people to see *logos* as logical argument that leads to truth and to see the emotional appeal to *pathos* as either a deceptive rhetorical strategy or a weakness in the minds of the audience. Somehow, we think that we will find the truth by purifying our thinking of the distraction of emotional responses to leave only the cold facts and the logical arguments. However, this view is too simple. In his book, *Deep Rhetoric*, James Crosswhite argues that pathos is what “attunes” us to other beings (183). He argues that “logos would have no reason for being without pathos,” and that pathos provides motive and energy to logos, but would have no direction without it (175). He concludes, “There is no understanding without pathos” (183).

Facts and arguments are important, but it is our emotions that engage us with the problem, that make us care.

In Book 2 of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle argues that when we are talking about persuasion it is necessary to go beyond the discussion of argument (*logos*) because arguments are heard differently by people who are friendly or hostile, or angry or calm (*pathos*). It is therefore necessary for the speaker to put the audience in the right frame of mind to hear the arguments. To do this, we must know which emotions produce pain and which pleasure and how to create them. Of anger, for example, Aristotle says we must know three things:

- The state of mind of angry people.
- Who the people are angry at.
- On what grounds they get angry.

Note that there is a research project implied in this list. If we do not know these things about our audience, we have to find out.

Aristotle organizes his discussion of the emotions in terms of oppositions. The opposite of anger is calm, which he defines as “a settling down and quieting of anger.” Aristotle tends to see the source of anger in slights and insults committed by perceived social inferiors. He argues that we become angry at those who belittle us, but will be calm toward those who do not seem to be belittling us and instead regard us as we ourselves do. Repenting past actions against us and apologizing can also bring about calm.

Of course, there are other emotions that may be rhetorically useful. Aristotle’s list of emotions and definitions is very Greek and not quite what we would produce. In addition to anger and calm, he analyzes “friendly feeling” versus enmity, fear versus confidence, shame versus shamelessness, kindness versus unkindness, pity (which he notes could be paired with either indignation or envy as opposites), “being indignant” (which is related to a number of other emotions), and finally envy, which is seen as desiring the good that others have, contrasted with “emulation,” which is also a state of desiring what others have but working to acquire these goods. Thus “envy” is negative and unproductive and “emulation” is a positive striving.

There is quite a bit of overlap and things don't fit together neatly in the way that Aristotle usually attempts. However, these emotions are all rhetorically useful. George Kennedy notes in his translation of the *Rhetoric* that Aristotle saw the emotions as moods or temporary states that "arise in large part from perception of what is publicly due to or from oneself at a given time" and thus affect judgment (124). If the audience is in the wrong mood to accept our arguments, we have to figure out how to create the opposite mood.

As noted above, the root cause of negative emotions according to Aristotle is disparities in social standing. We are angry if we are insulted by someone we consider a social inferior. We are envious of someone who possesses goods that we think we deserve. We have enmity or hatred toward a person who is from an unrespectable group, such as a criminal or a beggar. All of these emotions are about a disturbance in the social calculus. Aristotle doesn't include emotions such as love or sadness, or grief, because unlike Plato, who sees rhetoric as the "art of leading the soul to truth by means of words," he sees rhetoric mainly as a one-to-many enterprise for persuading groups. He is most interested in emotions that groups of people might experience, that might be useful in persuasion. We may want to update our list of emotions to better fit our own society. We also want to consider persuading individuals as well as groups.

Finding out what your audience is thinking and feeling will help you become more persuasive to that audience. It will also make you think about the issue from different viewpoints, which may change your own thinking. Perhaps even more importantly, it will help you know what to say. Your audience is your most important writing partner.

Here are some basic questions that will help you analyze your audience and work on your rhetorical strategies. You do not need to answer every question. Some can be combined or omitted. Think about the ones that seem most relevant to your situation.

Analysis Questions

- Who is my audience? How do they define themselves?
- What do they already believe about my topic?
- What do they value?
- What do they desire?
- What is their state of mind? What emotions do they feel?
- What makes them feel that way?
- Who makes them feel that way?
- What are their reasons (arguments) for feeling that way? Are they good reasons?

Strategy Questions

- How can I find common ground with this audience?
- How can I present myself as someone they will listen to? (ethos)
- If they feel negatively about my argument, how can I make them feel more positively?
- What emotion would put them in a better state of mind for my purposes? (This is where Aristotle's threefold analysis comes to bear: state of mind, target of emotion, and grounds for emotion)
- How can I present my arguments in a way that will make them more receptive?
- How can I make sure I don't make them feel even more negatively?
- How can I be persuasive with this audience without compromising my own beliefs and values?

You can also ask questions like these about the articles you read:

- Who is the audience for this article? Are you part of the writer's intended audience
- What does that audience probably believe and or feel?
- How does the writer adapt his or her approach to this particular audience?

Asking questions about the audience, whether they be about anger or some other emotion, is likely to make you more aware of your own views and why you hold them. If you know, for example, why the people you are trying to persuade are angry, you may become more sympathetic and may see your own position in a different way and make different arguments. As you become more open to the arguments the other makes, dialogue becomes more possible and you may become more persuasive because of it.