

Knowledge, Belief, and the Role of Rhetoric: A Mini-Module

This module is designed as a follow-up to “Three Ways to Persuade: Integrating the Three Appeals.” It introduces additional Aristotelian concepts, explores the distinction between knowledge and belief, and helps students understand the role that rhetoric plays in negotiating between the two. Students will gain experience in surfacing unexamined assumptions in their own thinking and in that of others. Finally, students will apply ethos, pathos, and logos to various problems to discover which of the appeals is the most persuasive in each situation. The writing tasks asks students to analyze a problem in their school or community and write up a list of talking points for leaders as to what they should say and do about it.

This is a concept module without a central text, so it is not organized in the normal ERWC-style Reading Rhetorically, Connecting Reading to Writing, Writing Rhetorically pattern. In this sense, the module itself is the text.

Learning Goals

Students will be able to:

- Make distinctions between certain knowledge, belief, and opinion
- Understand the role of rhetoric in matters where we do not have certain knowledge
- Understand the role of rhetoric in mediating between experts and decision-makers
- Assess the effectiveness of different rhetorical appeals in different situations
- Surface assumptions in their own thinking and in that of others
- Write a list of rhetorically effective “talking points” regarding a specific issue or problem that demonstrates their understanding of the previous outcomes

Activating Background Knowledge

Activity 1: A Mistaken Belief

Have you ever believed something to be true, only to find out later that it wasn't? Perhaps you thought a particular product was the best, but it wasn't. Or you found out that a person you know was lying about something, or behaved differently than you expected, or that their reputation did not reflect who they really were. Perhaps you thought a particular food was good for you, but it turned out not to be. We all have many beliefs that turn out not to be true. Answer the following questions:

- What was the belief that turned out not to be true?
- Why did you believe it was true?
- How did you find out that it wasn't? What convinced you?

Share your answers with a partner. Discuss what you learned from your experience. What advice would you give others, based on your experience?

Exploring Key Concepts

Activity 2: Knowledge versus Belief

The difference between knowledge and belief is an important question in the history of rhetoric. Aristotle, the

ancient Greek philosopher, defines rhetoric as the art of “finding the available means of persuasion.” Plato, who was Aristotle’s teacher, argues against rhetoric because he says it persuades the audience to belief, not true knowledge, and could be used to make people believe things that were not true. In the dialogue called *Gorgias*, Plato has the famous sophist (or rhetorician) Gorgias define rhetoric as “the art of persuasion in courts of law and other assemblies about the just and unjust.” Plato then has Socrates ask Gorgias, “Which sort of persuasion does rhetoric create in courts of law and other assemblies about the just and unjust, the sort of persuasion which gives belief without knowledge or that which gives knowledge?” Gorgias answers, “Clearly, Socrates, that which only gives belief.” This exchange leads to some important philosophical questions. Discuss these questions with your partner:

1. What is the difference between “knowledge” and “belief”?
2. Is “proving” different from “persuading”? Does “proving” lead to knowledge, while “persuading” leads to belief? How do we “prove” that something is true? Are there some notions that we believe strongly, even though we can’t prove them?
3. What is the difference between what is certain and what is probable? If, as in a courtroom, the jury decides that something has been proved “beyond a reasonable doubt,” does that mean that it is certainly true or merely highly probable? Are we persuaded only by what is certain or sometimes by what is probable, in that it is likely to be true, or that most people would agree that it is true?
4. In the dialogue mentioned above, Gorgias says that rhetoric is about the “just and unjust.” How would you distinguish a “just” action from an “unjust” action? (The word “just” here is related to the word “justice.” A “just” action is one that is morally right and fair.) Can you think of an action that you would consider to be “unjust”?
5. Is it wrong to persuade someone to believe something that might not be true? Is the use of rhetorical strategies a bad thing, a tool of deception, as Plato argues?

Thinking about the discussion you had about the questions above, write a short paragraph answering the following questions:

Did the experiences you described in Activity 1 involve persuasion of any kind? Did someone persuade you to believe the false thing? Did someone later persuade you that the false thing was actually false?

Activity 3: Exploring Key Concepts

The following concepts are important in thinking about the problem of belief versus knowledge. Take a moment to read the definitions to see if they make sense to you:

Persuasion—Using words or actions to encourage someone to believe or do something

Knowledge—Knowing with certainty that something is true

Belief—Accepting with confidence or faith that something is true, with or without evidence

Opinion—A view not necessarily based on fact or evidence

Probability—The likelihood that something is true based on experience

Think about how we make decisions in our daily lives. Which concept is the most common basis for our decisions? Which concept is the least common basis? Using “1” for most common and “5” for least common, rank the five concepts. Then share your rankings with a partner to see if you agree. Discuss any differences.

Activity 4: Applying the Concepts

One way of thinking about this is to apply the concepts above to a current controversial event such as a murder, a scandal, a celebrity divorce, or other prominent news item. You might choose such a story or your teacher might direct you to one. Once you have chosen the current event, read some stories about it and fill out a chart with six quadrants labeled like this:

What I know for certain	How do I know it?
What I believe	Why do I believe it?
What is probable	Why do I think so?
In my opinion, they should . . .	On what do you base your opinion?

After filling out your chart, share it with your partner to see if you had similar ideas and came to similar conclusions. You will probably find that when you came to different conclusions, it is because you made different assumptions.

Activity 5: Clarifying Assumptions

Aristotle calls arguments that are based on assumptions instead of certain facts “enthymemes” or “rhetorical syllogisms.” What we call them doesn’t really matter, but in daily life, most of the arguments we encounter are based on assumptions. Often, we don’t question these assumptions because we ourselves share these assumptions with the speaker or writer. This is normal. If we always waited for certain knowledge, we would never be able to do anything at all.

However, a lot of disagreements in our society come about because people make different assumptions about people, news sources, and facts. When you shared your charts in Activity 4, you probably found that where you disagreed, you made different assumptions. To explore this, make a T-chart like the one below. Some examples of the kinds of assumptions people might differ on have been inserted, but you should write down your own assumptions. Do not judge your partner’s assumptions. We all make different assumptions based on our background and experience.

Partner A	Partner B
<i>Assumed news source A was more reliable</i>	<i>Assumed new source B was more reliable</i>
<i>Assumed that person C was telling the truth</i>	<i>Assumed that Person C was lying, and person D was telling the truth</i>

<i>Trusts the police</i>	<i>Doesn't trust the police</i>
<i>Knew more about how a factor in the event really works</i>	<i>Didn't know much about that factor</i>
<i>Has no relevant experience</i>	<i>Has relevant experience</i>

Using the chart above as an example, make a list of the assumptions you made when filling the chart in Activity 4. The column on the right in the previous chart, starting with “How I know it,” will give you some clues. After you have made your list, fill out the chart below with your partner. (If you are in a group, you might make your own chart with more columns.)

Partner A	Partner B

Discuss the T-chart you produced. Then answer the following question in a short paragraph:

How did writing down your knowledge, beliefs, opinions, and assumptions about a specific event and sharing them with a partner affect your understanding of your own thinking processes and the thinking processes of your partner? Do you think that more sharing of this kind would help our society get along better? Why or why not?

Considering the Role of Rhetoric

Aristotle counters his teacher’s argument against rhetoric by saying that all things can be used for good or bad purposes and that rhetoric is like a martial art, such as boxing, which can be used either to protect the innocent or to attack them, depending on the intentions of the boxer. He also says that while the truth has a natural tendency to win, if the speaker on the side of the truth is not skilled and his opponent knows rhetoric, the truth might not be persuasive. In other words, if only the bad guys know rhetoric, the bad guys will win.

Aristotle also says, “The duty of rhetoric is to deal with such matters as we deliberate upon without arts or systems to guide us, in the hearing of persons who cannot take in at a glance a complicated argument, or follow a long chain of reasoning” (Book 1, Part 2). What Aristotle means here is that some questions can be dealt with “systematically,” by which he means logically or even scientifically, but other important questions cannot be investigated in this systematic way. In the second part of his statement, he is saying that even when we do have expert knowledge, some audiences will not be able to understand it well enough to make their own decisions based on it.

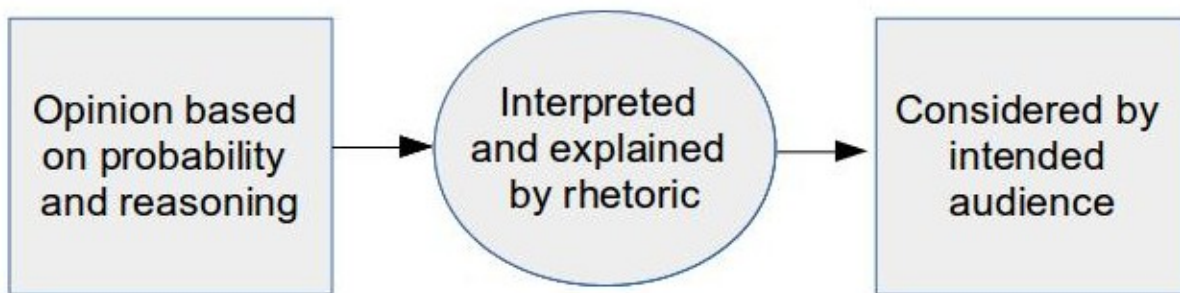
From this perspective, rhetoric has two main functions:

1. Rhetoric is useful when we don't have certain knowledge, but we still feel that we must do something.
2. Rhetoric is also useful in cases where we have certain knowledge, but the meaning of the knowledge has to be explained to the audience to make it persuasive.

In summary, some questions, especially questions about moral values and opinions, do not have scientific solutions. Other questions that do have scientific approaches may need someone to interpret the scientific results for non-expert people. In both cases, rhetoric is useful. These two cases, however, cover almost all human decision-making. Human life is full of uncertainty.

You have probably noticed by now that part of what allows rhetoric to deal with non-systematic, non-logical issues is that it involves more than just the appeal to logos. Often, all three rhetorical appeals—ethos, pathos, and logos—work together to address the problem. (Note: If you don't know the words "ethos, pathos, and logos," please read the related article "Three Ways to Persuade: Integrating the Three Appeals" by John R. Edlund.)

The first case described above might be represented by the following chart:



Activity 6: Which Appeal is More Effective?

Let's look at how the three appeals might be used in a case where there is no certain knowledge:

Claim: My favorite song is better than yours!

With a partner, imagine that you have different favorite songs. (You can share your favorite songs or favorite musical artists at the moment, but this is not essential to the activity.) In making this kind of argument, which kind of appeal is more likely to be effective in persuading the audience that the speaker's song is the best? Rank the appeals 1-3 in terms of effectiveness, with 1 being most effective and 3 being least.

Rhetorical Strategy	Purpose	Argument	Effectiveness
Ethos	Establish that I am knowledgeable about music	<i>I play trumpet in the school band.</i>	
Pathos	This song has positive effects on the listener's mood.	<i>When I feel lonely, this song cheers me up more than any other.</i>	

Logos	Establish the expertise of the musicians.	<i>The lead singer went to Julliard (a famous music school).</i>	
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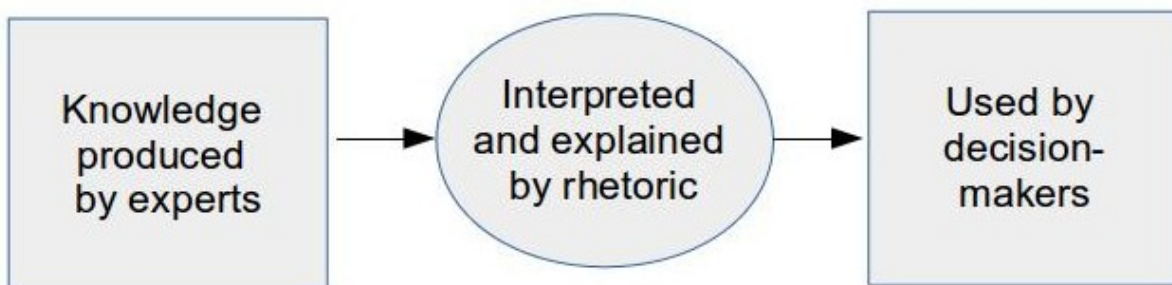
Now let's take a more complicated example than a favorite song. Let's say that businesses and homeowners in a community are complaining that there are too many homeless people on the streets. One politician wants to build more homeless shelters, but his opponent wants to increase enforcement of laws against sleeping in public places. In this case, one of you should take the homeless shelters argument and the other take the law enforcement argument. How would each of you fill out the chart?

Rhetorical Strategy	Purpose	Argument	Effectiveness
Ethos	Build credibility with constituents		
Pathos	Characterize homeless people and why they are homeless		
Logos	Show that my solution will be effective		

After you fill out your charts, discuss which of the appeals would be most persuasive. Rank them 1-3 in terms of effectiveness, with 1 being most effective and 3 being least. Is it the same for both sides?

Activity 7: Scientific Knowledge for Non-scientists

In the second part of Aristotle's statement, he says, "in the hearing of persons who cannot take in at a glance a complicated argument, or follow a long chain of reasoning." He means that even if there is scientific data about a problem, some audiences that need to make decisions about it will not have the training to understand it. This looks like this:



Let's take the example of a trial in which the main evidence against the defendant involves a DNA sample. The jurors are unlikely to have the necessary scientific knowledge, such as an advanced degree in genetics, that would allow them to interpret the DNA evidence on their own. The lawyers, perhaps assisted by experts, have to explain the evidence and what it means. This means they have to make arguments and use rhetoric to persuade the jurors. Working with your partner, one of you take the part of the prosecutor while the other takes the part of the defense attorney. How would each of you fill out this chart:

Rhetorical Strategy	Purpose	Argument	Effectiveness
Ethos	Convince jurors that the scientific expert witness is believable (or not).		
Pathos	Make jurors feel confident in their decision to convict (or cause doubt).		
Logos	Show that the scientific evidence is reliable and proves guilt (or cause doubt).		

After you have filled out the charts, rank the appeals 1-3 in terms of effectiveness, with 1 being most effective and 3 being least. Again, is it the same for both sides?

Activity 8: Water Pollution

Let's take another example to explore how ethos, logos, and pathos work together. Suppose that the citizens of a city are concerned that their water supply is polluted. The water is sometimes a brownish color and people have been getting sick. A group of people goes to a city council meeting to voice their concerns. If you were the mayor of this city, what strategies would you use to deal with this problem? (Note: This actually happened in Flint, Michigan. See <https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/11/health/toxic-tap-water-flint-michigan/index.html> and <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/q-a-what-really-happened-to-the-water-in-flint-michigan/>). In groups of four or five, consider this problem and fill out the "Actions" section of the following chart:

Rhetorical Strategy	Purpose	Argument	Effectiveness
Ethos	Build credibility with constituents		
Pathos	Address the fears and concerns of your constituents		

Logos	Determine whether the problem is real, and if so, what causes it and how it can be fixed		

After filling out the chart, discuss whether or not the mayor would be successful if he or she did only one or two of these actions and the ways in which the three appeals work together.

Using Your Knowledge

Activity 9: A Writing Task

For this assignment you are going to think about a community problem. This could be a problem at your school, in your neighborhood, or something on a bigger scale, such as your city, your state, or the whole country. If you can't think of a problem, you could use the Flint, Michigan example from the previous activity.

When a leader has to speak or write publicly about a problem, he or she will have a member of the staff write up a bulleted list of "talking points." The purpose of the list is to help establish the message and help the leader stay on that message, no matter what questions he or she is asked. This list should have the following:

- A clear purpose. What are we trying to accomplish?
- Arguments that support that purpose, expressed in clear language, short and simple enough to memorize. These arguments should address all three appeals: ethos, pathos, logos. (Just like you have been doing in the charts above.)
- Anecdotes (personal stories) that people can relate to that support the arguments are very useful. Keep them brief, however!
- Points of common ground that both sides can agree on.
- A proposed call to action.

With your issue or problem in mind, imagine that you are a staff member working for a community leader. You have been asked to come up with talking points for an upcoming press conference. Write a one-page list of talking points for your boss.

Gathering Feedback

Activity 10: Read Around Review

This process will help students get feedback and revise their talking points.

1. Students get into small groups of four or five.
2. Each student passes his or her talking points to the right.
3. Using the bullet point list from activity seven, each student considers whether the talking points contain everything on the list, but are also clear, short and simple enough to memorize.
4. Each student writes one comment or question on a sticky note and attaches it to the talking points.
5. Students pass talking points to the right again and repeat the process.
6. Students continue passing the talking points around until the talking points come back to the original

writer.

7. The group discusses the talking points they have read. Writers ask questions about the suggestions and questions they received.
8. Individual writers make revisions according to the feedback they received.

Reflecting on Learning

Activity 11: What I Now Know

Write a short paragraph describing what you learned from doing the activities in this module.

Works Cited

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