Three Ways to Persuade: Integrating the Three Appeals
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 of your position: *ethos, pathos,* and *logos*. These concepts can help you persuade others and help you understand how persuasion works in articles you read and speeches you hear. Although we are going to look at them one by one, in practice they all work together.

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's term *ethos* refers 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. 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 often the first thing we notice, so it creates the first impression that influences how we perceive the rest. *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 particular instance the actor's *ethos* is a deceptive illusion, but the character, background, and authority of the speaker or writer can be legitimate factors in determining whether we find him or her credible.

3   A writer's *ethos* is constructed largely through word choice and style. Sometimes, when we are asked to write about something that we are still learning about, we might be tempted to use a thesaurus to find some big words to impress the reader. Unfortunately, this usually backfires, because it is difficult to use a word correctly that you have not heard or read in context many times.

4   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. This type of argument attempts to undermine a speaker or writer's *ethos*.

5   A modern concept related to *ethos* is what rhetorician Kenneth Burke calls "identification." If the audience feels connected to the speaker, feels that the speaker is part of a group to which they also belong, and/or feels admiration or sympathy for the speaker, they are more likely to be persuaded by the speaker's words. Identification creates strong emotional attachments that can make an audience ignore valid opposing arguments and facts. The emotional component of identification means that *ethos* and *pathos*, the next mode of persuasion we will discuss, are working together.

Questions for Consideration:

1. Think of a celebrity or politician who works hard to project a particular image. What does she or he do to create this image?
2. Think of a time you or someone you know tried really hard to project an image. What kinds of things did you or this person say and do to create this image?
3. Think of a time when you noticed a gap between a person's image and how they really are. Explain how you saw this gap.
4. Do you think that it is wrong to try to create an image of yourself that might not be who you really are? Why or why not?

Pathos: The Emotions of the Audience

6   Most of us think that we make our decisions based on rational thought. However, Aristotle points out that emotions such as anger, pity, 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.

7   Anger is a very powerful motivating force. Aristotle says 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. While the actual causes of a war may be economic or political, and thus related to *logos,* the mobilization of a people or a nation to war inevitably consists of appeals to *pathos*. Leaders mobilize their followers to go to war by reminding them of their historical grievances against other groups or nations, blaming other groups for economic difficulties, and focusing on perceived insults, crimes, and atrocities committed against their own citizens by others. In the twentieth century, such appeals to *pathos* inspired the Holocaust in Germany, genocide in Rwanda, and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. Individuals were inspired through *pathos* to attack, rape, or kill neighbors who had lived near them all their lives, simply because of their ethnicity or religion.

8   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.

9   Of course, not all appeals to *pathos* result in violence or political action. Advertisements for consumer goods often aim at making 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. Our desire to be attractive to others turns into a desire for products or other symbols of success. We may even rationalize these desires by making logical arguments about why we *need* these things.

10   Appeals to the emotions and passions are often very effective and are very common in our society. Such appeals are not always false or illegitimate. It is natural to

feel strong emotions about tragedies, victories, and other powerful events as well as about one's own image and identity. You may find it useful to consider the emotions of your audience in your own writing.

Questions for Consideration:

1. 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. When do you think it is unfair or deceptive to try to use emotions to persuade people?
3. Think of a time when you made a decision based on your feelings that you regretted later. Why did you make this decision and why did you regret it? Did emotions ever serve you well in making a decision?
4. When writing a message, is it a good idea to ask yourself, "What emotions may help persuade my audience to do or believe what I want? What choices might evoke these emotions?" Why or why not?

*Logos***: Logical Arguments**

11   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.

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

> All men are mortal.
> Socrates is a man.
> Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

13   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 or assertions 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. As a result, we can logically say the following: Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal. Not all assumptions are as obvious as this one, however.

14   For example, when the bubonic plague swept through Europe and parts of Asia in the 14th 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 supposedly thought that the plague was spread by cats. If one *assumes* 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 the 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.

15   Aristotle favored arguments from probability. He distrusted evidence from written documents because they could be forged and testimony from witnesses because they could be coerced or bribed, so he went with what was probably true. For example, if a big strong man claimed that a small weak man had beaten him up and stolen his money, Aristotle would find that improbable.   Of course, today we prefer that our arguments be supported with relevant evidence in the form of facts, statistics, professional research and other data. However, even fact-based arguments can depend on faulty assumptions.

16   Persuasion, to a large extent, involves convincing people to accept our assumptions as probably true and to take appropriate action. Similarly, exposing questionable assumptions in someone else's argument is an effective means for preparing the audience to accept your own contrary position.

Questions for Consideration:

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. When you write a class assignment, is it a good idea to consider the values and beliefs of the teacher? Should you also consider what arguments and what kinds of support will be most persuasive? Should you choose words and make stylistic choices to have the most persuasive effect on your teacher? How would you write differently for another audience, such as your best friend or a brother or sister?
3. Go to a news site and look at the headlines of several articles. Are there any hidden assumptions in the headlines? How do the headline writers try to persuade you to click? Now click on one of the headlines and read the article quickly. Ask yourself, "How do the arguments and the support offered by the writer connect with the values and beliefs of the intended audience?   What assumptions does the author take for granted the audience will accept?"

17   It is tempting to see *ethos, pathos*, and *logos* as separate parts of a text, but in fact they almost always work together. The same element in speech or writing can simultaneously function in all three ways.   A detailed description of an assault rifle, a bird's nest, or an abstract painting, to choose some random examples, could be part of a logical argument, but also simultaneously give an impression of the speaker and cause an emotional effect in the audience. Each appeal is a perspective, a way of looking at a text and how it does what it does. They are not pigeonholes in which to sort specific elements of the text, but concerns that all writers must deal with, and resources that writers can use to achieve their persuasive goals. Sometimes a writer will depend on one sort of appeal much more than another, such as *logos* in a scientific article, or *ethos* in a campaign speech.   However, you will find elements of all three in each text you study and they are worth thinking about in every text you write.   They are useful concepts that help you understand why a speech or an article affects you the way it does.