The Rhetorical Triangle: Subject, Audience, Speaker’s Persona

Aristotle’s Rhetorical Triangle

Subject: the writer/speaker evaluates what he or she knows already and needs to know, investigates perspectives, and determines kinds of evidence or proofs that seem most useful.

Audience: speculating about the reader’s expectations, knowledge, and disposition with regard to the subject writers explore.

Speaker: writers use who they are, what they know and feel, and what they’ve seen and done to find their attitudes toward a subject and their understanding of a reader.
  • Voice or Persona: the character the speaker creates as he or she writes

In order to make the rhetorical relationship most successful, writers use appeals

Appeals to Logos, Pathos, and Ethos

• Logos: an appeal to reason or logic; the logical thinking that informs speakers’ decisions and readers' responses
  o Offer clear, reasonable premises and proofs
  o Develop ideas with appropriate details
  o Make sure readers can follow the progression of ideas
• Ethos: an appeal to ethics or one’s character; writers connect their thinking to readers’ own ethical or moral beliefs
  o Writers demonstrate they are credible, good-willed, and knowledgeable about their subjects
• Pathos: an appeal to emotions; writers draw on the emotions and interests of readers and highlight them; the most powerful and immediate appeal
  o Use of personal stories and observations
  o Use of figurative language
  o This appeal dominates advertising

*These appeals are often intertwined and used together, simultaneously
Context and Purpose affect every element of the rhetorical triangle

**Context**: the situation in which writing and reading occurs
- An exploration (or analysis) of that situation can lead to understanding of what underlies writers’ choices
- We can’t know for sure what they mean, but we have rhetoric to help us interpret
- Context can alter rhetorical choices in form and content

**Purpose (aim or intention)**: the reason for writing or speaking (to inform, persuade, entertain)
- Words and forms carry writers’ intentions, but they may be misunderstood
- Investigating how readers perceive intentions exposes where and how communication happens or is lost
- Rhetoric is the way to connect intentions with responses, to reconcile readers and writers
- Intention is carried throughout an entire piece, and it often changes