

FIFTH EDITION

“THEY SAY / I SAY”

*The Moves That Matter
in Academic Writing*



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INTRODUCTION TO RHETORIC AND ARGUMENTATION

UTA - 61

INTRODUCTION TO RHETORIC AND ARGUMENTATION



FIRST-YEAR WRITING AT UT–Arlington is grounded in the ancient art of *rhetoric* and focuses primarily on written *argument*. This chapter explains what we mean by these terms and introduces you to essential concepts used throughout ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302.

RHETORIC

In the fourth century BCE, the Greek philosopher Aristotle defined rhetoric as “the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion.” Let’s look at two aspects of this definition that highlight how ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302 may differ from your high school English classes or your college English classes that focus on literature.

. . . in each particular case

When Aristotle writes that rhetoric focuses on “each particular case,” what he means is that every instance of communication occurs in a unique situation. (We’ll call this the *rhetorical situation*.) For example, as you read these words, a communicative act is occurring that has never happened before and will never happen again. The way you are comprehending the text, the

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prior knowledge you are connecting it to, the associations it's evoking—even the mood it's putting you in—are different from what a classmate will experience when they read this same text. If you yourself return to these words later in the semester, you will do so in a situation that is different from this precise moment, and thus your reading experience will be different.

It is this emphasis on the uniqueness of rhetorical situations that differentiates first-year writing at UTA from most high school writing instruction. Specifically, we reject the notion that there are hard-and-fast rules that must be followed any time we write. If you have ever had a teacher say you should *never* use first-person pronouns, passive voice, contractions, textspeak, and so on, or that you should *never* begin a sentence with a conjunction or end a sentence with a preposition, then you have been misled. Sometimes we find ourselves in rhetorical situations where “breaking the rules” is the most effective way to communicate. In such situations, it would be silly to follow a certain set of rules—and thus communicate *less* effectively—just because we learned them from a teacher.

To elaborate on this point, consider the following: any time we ask a roomful of students how many of them have learned never to use “I” in academic writing, every hand shoots up. Yet in the preface to *“They Say / I Say”*: *The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, Graff and Birkenstein devote an entire section to explaining “Why It’s Okay to Use ‘I.’” If there really were hard-and-fast rules of writing, then either Graff and Birkenstein or a whole lot of English teachers would have to be wrong. In reality, the question of whether it’s okay to use “I” can only be answered once we determine whether it is appropriate for the particular rhetorical situation we find ourselves in. As it happens, the papers you will write in ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302 put you in situations where it is perfectly fine to use “I,”

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so you should go with Graff and Birkenstein on this one. But the more important point is that you must decide anew what rules to follow in each new rhetorical situation you encounter. If you find that a professor in a different class doesn't want you to use "I," then don't do it!

. . . *the available means of persuasion*

So how do you know what choices to make in a particular rhetorical situation? To answer this question, we refer you to a second component of Aristotle's definition of rhetoric: "the available means of persuasion." To persuade someone simply means that you get them to do something or believe something. Thus, the most important significance in all of rhetoric is the *audience*, the person or persons you hope to persuade. This focus on audience is another way that ENGL 1301 and 1302 differ from high school English and even many other college English classes that focus on literature.

If you attended public school in Texas, then in all likelihood you took State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) writing tests at the end of fourth, seventh, ninth, and tenth grades. We'll be honest: these tests violate nearly every principle of sound writing instruction and assessment that English scholars recommend. Because the tests are timed, they don't allow you to engage in a writing process that includes sufficient time to think, research, brainstorm, draft, step away from what you've written, get feedback, revise, and edit. Because the tests tell you what to write about, you don't get to choose a topic that interests you or that you know something about. But perhaps the worst thing about these tests, at least from our perspective, is that they don't tell you whom you're writing *for*. For example, the tenth grade "persuasive" essay test in 2019 asked

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students to “write an essay on whether competition is necessary for success.” Write an essay for *whom*? How can students write a persuasive essay if they are given no information whatsoever about who it is they’re trying to persuade? Our primary purpose is not to criticize the STAAR test. Rather, we’re concerned that you may have developed the habit of writing your essays to no one in particular, which probably means you write all your essays in pretty much the same way. This is a habit you’ll have to break in ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302 because all your papers will be written for specific audiences, and you’ll be graded based on how well your writing meets the expectations of those audiences.

We also want to point out that rhetoric’s emphasis on audience entails an approach to texts that might be different from what you’ve grown accustomed to in classes that focus on literature. In a typical literature class, you treat texts as stable objects that can be analyzed, somewhat like a frog you dissect in biology class or a machine you take apart in engineering class. For example, if you read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in high school, you might have underlined passages, written notes in the margins, and written a paper in which you quoted passages as textual evidence for your analysis. If you still have that novel lying around somewhere, flip through it and you’ll find that the novel itself and all your notes are still there. You might even discover that your written analysis of the novel is still valid because, after all, the novel itself hasn’t changed. A *rhetorical* reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, on the other hand, would consider the text not as a fixed object but rather as one element in a dynamic reading *experience* that changes with each reader and reading. Seen from this perspective, a text does not have a single meaning but rather an array of potential meanings that are triggered by the act of reading.

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At this point you might be wondering: “If every rhetorical situation is unique, and if everything depends on the audience, does this mean that ‘anything goes’ when it comes to reading and writing?” No, rhetorical reading and writing does not lead to textual anarchy because, as you’ll discover when you write the Discourse Community Analysis in ENGL 1301, people who share similar backgrounds, interests, knowledge, and language practices constitute a **discourse community**. Like any community, a discourse community imposes certain standards of behavior, and these community standards determine what is appropriate when it comes to the conventions of reading and writing.

Ethos, pathos, and logos

As Aristotle delves more deeply into the dynamics of rhetorical situations, he identifies three elements that are always at work when people attempt to persuade others: **ethos, pathos, and logos**. You will depend heavily on these three terms—which we will call the **modes of persuasion**—as you read and write papers in ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302, so you’ll need to develop a deep understanding of them.

Aristotle defines ethos as the mode of persuasion that derives from “the character of the speaker.” Successful ethos appeals occur “whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence.” (Note that Aristotle belonged to an oratorical culture, so he always refers to speeches, not written texts.) In other words, ethos refers to what we think of the writer or, conversely, what our readers think of us. A writer should come across as knowledgeable, which depends to some extent on their credentials but is even more dependent on whether they provide essential facts and information and

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engage in sound reasoning. A writer should also seem to be of good character, someone who respects readers, deals fairly with opponents, and exudes honesty and fair-mindedness. Finally, a writer should have readers' best interests in mind, even when supporting an unpopular opinion. Most of us will listen to someone who challenges our views, but only if that person seems genuinely concerned with our well-being.

Pathos, according to Aristotle, refers to persuasion that occurs "through the hearers when they are led to feel emotion by the speech." Writers need to put their readers in the right frame of mind if their words are to achieve their intended effects. For example, a writer might make readers feel sympathy for victims of a natural disaster as part of a campaign to raise money for relief. Or a writer might evoke outrage in readers in order to rally support for racial justice. A writer who wants readers to change their ways might attempt to elicit feelings of shame or guilt. In all these instances, writers must be aware of and appeal to readers' deeply held values. Also, since writers are trying to get readers to *feel* a certain way, they need to evoke sensations and stir the imagination.

Finally, Aristotle defines logos as the mode of persuasion that emerges from "the argument itself." We will identify the different elements of an "argument itself" in the next section. For now, know that writers appeal to logos when they make it clear to readers what is being asked of them and provide convincing explanations *why* it is being asked. Writers should marshal strong evidence to support their assertions and defend any underlying assumptions that readers might question. And in most cases, writers should anticipate that some readers are likely to raise objections. Successful logos appeals give voice to those objections, recognize their validity, and attempt to answer them.

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Before we move on to a more in-depth discussion of argument, let's clear up a common misconception about the modes of persuasion. In high school English classes, ethos, pathos, and logos appeals are often treated as discrete linguistic devices, perhaps lumped together with literary devices like metaphor, personification, alliteration, etc. We sometimes hear students say things like, "I want to start with my ethos appeal, then I'll move into a logos appeal, and I'll finish up with a few pathos appeals." This is a mistaken way of thinking. The rhetorical modes are not linguistic devices and in fact are not *in* the text at all. Rather, they constitute an analytical framework that allows us to see different facets of what is already happening any time we attempt to persuade others. You might think of the rhetorical modes as lenses that foreground different aspects of a single picture. If you examine a text under the ethos lens, you get an image of the writer. Look at that same text under the pathos lens, and you see readers' emotional responses. View the text once again under the logos lens, and you see facts and reasoning.

Let's look at an example. In his inaugural address on January 20, 2021, President Biden spoke the following words:

Few periods in our nation's history have been more challenging or difficult than the one we're in now. A once-in-a-century virus silently stalks the country. It's taken as many lives in one year as America lost in all of World War II. Millions of jobs have been lost. Hundreds of thousands of businesses closed. A cry for racial justice some 400 years in the making moves us. The dream of justice for all will be deferred no longer. A cry for survival comes from the planet itself. A cry that can't be any more desperate or any more clear.

If we look at these words under the ethos lens, we see Biden's attempt to come across as someone who is well-informed about

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recent and long-standing national crises, honest about the challenges ahead, and determined to rally Americans to the cause. If we switch out the ethos lens for the pathos lens, we see an attempt to stir feelings of sorrow, indignation, and renewed purpose among all Americans. Replace the pathos lens with the logos lens, and we see facts about the coronavirus, racial injustice, and climate change that support the claim that few periods in American history have been as challenging as our own. The words remain the same, but by examining those words from the different vantage points afforded by the rhetorical modes, we see different effects.

ARGUMENT

You might associate the word *argument* with ugly fights at the dinner table or nasty exchanges online, but the original meaning of *argue* is simply “to give reasons.” We make arguments when we go beyond mere assertions and provide reasons for those assertions. In this sense, argument is an ethical, collaborative activity that acknowledges the presence of others who might question our beliefs and fulfills our obligation to justify those beliefs. All the papers you will write in ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302 require you to make arguments. In this section, we introduce you to a set of terms that names different parts of arguments, and we explain how these different parts work together.

An argument begins with a **claim**, which is simply a statement of belief. When President Biden said that “few periods in our nation’s history have been more challenging or difficult than the one we’re in now,” he made a claim. Had he stopped there, he would not have made an argument because he would

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not have engaged in the act of giving *reasons*. Only after Biden provides reasons (i.e., the coronavirus, racial injustice, climate change) for his claim does he meet the minimal requirements of argument.

One way to think of argument is as a conversation with a questioning other. You make a claim; the other person asks, “Why do you think that?”; you answer the question. At that point you have made an argument because you have *reasoned* with someone. A good rule of thumb is that you don’t have an argument until you have connected one statement with another statement with a word like *because* or *since*. If we say, “ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302 are important classes,” we don’t have an argument. If we say, “ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302 are important classes *because* they prepare you to read and write arguments in your major,” we have an argument. “Stay in school”: not an argument. “Stay in school, *since* a college degree is required for most well-paying jobs”: an argument.

As soon as a claim and reason are hooked together, they create a third, invisible statement that provides the logical connection between the claim and reason. We call this invisible statement a *warrant*. Now, warrants are tricky precisely because they are invisible. You can *make* them visible, however, by plugging claims and reasons into the following formula: “If [reason], then [claim].” For example, the first argument mentioned above produces the following warrant: “If they prepare you to read and write arguments in your major, then ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302 are important classes.” We can fiddle with the wording of the formula to improve clarity. So, for instance, we might rewrite the warrant as follows: “If it’s true that ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302 prepare you to read and write arguments in your major, then it must follow that they are important classes.” We can even pull back and state

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the warrant as a general principle, e.g.: “Classes that prepare you for your major are important.”

Because warrants are so elusive, let’s go ahead and work through another example. The second argument mentioned above reads: “Stay in school, since a college degree is required for most well-paying jobs.” In the most basic formulation, this argument produces the following warrant: “If a college degree is required for most well-paying jobs, then stay in school.” If we modified the formula a bit to clear up what the warrant is actually communicating, we might come up with something like: “If it’s a proven fact that a college degree is required for most well-paying jobs, then it follows from that that you should stay in school.” What both these phrasings of the warrant are getting at is a general principle: “Do what’s required to get a well-paying job.”

If readers agree with our reason and warrant, then they will be logically compelled to grant our claim, but how do we get readers to agree with our reason and warrant? The answer is to supply **evidence**. We use the term *evidence* in the broadest possible sense to refer to any and all support for reasons and warrants. Certainly this includes things you might immediately associate with evidence, such as established facts, statistics, official records, and expert testimony. But it also includes other types of support that might get readers to agree with you—things like personal experiences, first-hand observations, common sense, and informal logic. There’s really no limit to what can serve as evidence because there’s no limit to what might prove persuasive to a particular audience in a particular situation.

One more thing: Since rhetoric and argumentation always, in the end, boil down to the audience, there may be times when you don’t *need* to provide evidence for a reason or a

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warrant because it is a statement that your audience *already* believes. Warrants in particular often boil down to common-sense assumptions that you don't need to state explicitly or provide support for. To go back to the examples mentioned above, do you really need to be convinced that classes that prepare you for your major are important or that you should take steps to land a well-paying job? Probably not, so it would be pretty pointless for a writer to go on and on explaining why being prepared for your major is preferable to being unprepared, or why a well-paying job is preferable to a low-paying job.

In the end, it all comes down to audience—or, as Aristotle put it, “the persuasive is persuasive to someone.” If you keep in mind that all the texts you read and all the texts you write are attempting to persuade particular people, in a particular situation, at a particular time, then you will be well on your way to success not just in ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302 but also in the reading and writing you do for school, work, and civic life.