

A Brief Overview of Rhetoric

by Joseph Petraglia-Bahri

Rhetoric is arguably one of the oldest disciplines in the world. Its earliest antecedent can be found in the [sophist](#) tradition of Classical Greece. Two of the earliest sophists, Tisias and Corax, made a comfortable living traveling around Hellenic Europe teaching people the finer points of [oratory](#). The sophistic tradition was harshly criticized by major philosophers of the time (most notably, Socrates and Plato) as an unintellectual and immoral profession. In [Plato's](#) view, rhetoricians (i.e., sophists) were more concerned with appearances rather than substance--in Plato's play *Gorgias*, he has the character of Socrates accuse the rhetorician/sophist Gorgias of specializing in making the bad case seem best and the best case seem bad.



Although Plato certainly felt that clear expression was important, sophists such as the "real" [Gorgias](#) thought that rhetoric played a much greater role in human affairs. Basically, the difference between these views lie in the area of [epistemology](#), or the study of knowledge. If one adopted Plato's [foundationalism](#) (the belief that genuine knowledge corresponds to a fixed truth) using language persuasively could naturally lead the listener away from the truth. But if one shared Gorgias' [antifoundationalist](#) belief that "nothing actually exists. . .but even if it did, it would be incomprehensible to man... but that, even if anything were to be comprehended, it could not be articulated and communicated to others" persuasion was not so much misleading as a way for society to come to consensual knowledge. Still other sophists, such as Gorgias' student [Isocrates](#), believed the learning of rhetoric had a strong [democratizing](#) and civilizing effect. In his emphasis on eloquence and well-spokenness, Isocrates represents another aspect of rhetoric that we continue to associate with rhetorical training to this day.

Even a quick synopsis of Greek rhetoric would be woefully incomplete if it neglected one of rhetoric's most illustrious theoreticians: [Aristotle](#). Aristotle, a student of Plato, did

more than any of the sophists to codify rhetoric into a rational system of argument and presentation. It is from Aristotle that we get [the distinction of syllogistic \(formal\) reasoning from ethymemic \(i.e., informal\) reasoning](#), and the well-known division of rhetorical "proofs" into those which are logical ([logos](#)), those which appeal to the emotions ([pathos](#)) and those which get their strength from the credibility of the speaker ([ethos](#)). Aristotle is also credited with development of the [topoi](#) -- or topics -- that a rhetor could use to "discover" an argument. More than any other individual, perhaps, Aristotle gave rhetoric a quasi-scientific basis and connected the study of persuasion to other arts and sciences.

Rhetoric's centrality to education survived the eclipse of Greek power by the Romans, and as with so many other arts and sciences, the Romans took the rhetorican tradition and made it their own. Like the Greeks, the Roman education system centered on, and expanded, the practice of [declamation](#) -- a sort of speech-making class in which young men were assigned often fanciful topics and instructed to give an appropriate speech. Perhaps Rome's greatest rhetorician was [Marcus Tullius Cicero](#). While, relative to Aristotle, little rhetorical theory actually originated with Cicero, he elaborated and developed several central ideas and is widely reputed to be the most widely read rhetorician of the Classical period. Chief among Cicero's contributions to rhetoric are his treatment of the "canons" of rhetoric (i.e., [invention](#), [arrangement](#), [style](#), [memory](#), and [delivery](#)) and his rethinking of [kairos](#) (the occasions on which rhetoric is appropriately deployed), and [stasis theory](#) (a system for determining the issue upon which an argument rests). And although less famous than Cicero, [Quintilian](#) is another influential Roman rhetorician who did much to synthesize the best of the Greek and Roman traditions.

The Fall of Rome and the onset of the [Christian Era](#) in Europe posed a set of unique problems for rhetoric, tainted, as it was, with its roots in pagan Greek and Roman education. Another factor in rhetoric's decline was that, historically, when the foundations of knowledge are weakest, the power of persuasion is most appreciated (as in the Greek experiment with democracy)



but that the need for skilled argumentation is least pronounced when a "higher authority" is most stable, and Christianity provided the ultimate in higher authorities: the word of God as revealed in scripture. Rhetoric as a discipline owed its survival to one of the most central figure of that era -- [St. Augustine](#). Augustine's chief rhetorical work was *De Doctrina Christiana* in which he argued that even though Christians need not adopt the sophistic notion of persuasion, eloquence was still needed to make the Bible's teachings effective.

Traditionally the study of [speech](#) rather than texts, with the onset of wider [literacy](#) rhetoric became more closely associated with the written word. Students were still required to study grammar, letter-writing (or "[epistolary](#)") and courtly expression, but as the writings of many of the Greek and Roman rhetorical scholars were lost to the Middle Ages, rhetoric continued to lose its intellectual edge. Despite Augustine's efforts, the study of rhetoric and rhetorical theory suffered through a long period of benign neglect. Although rhetoric was still part of the curriculum it was essentially an impoverished and, often, trivial discipline limited to the study of [tropes](#) or figures of speech. A person who did much to keep rhetoric pushed to the margins was the educational reformer [Peter Ramus](#) who decided that the traditional canons of rhetoric should be divided between dialectic (i.e., logic) and a modified version of rhetoric consisting largely of style and delivery.

The Age of Enlightenment, drawing its inspiration from Descartes' rationalism (another sort of foundation for knowledge), did little to revive rhetoric's fortunes, although the rise of sciences during this period also ushered in a desire for clarity. Thus, the study of rhetoric turned away from the study of ornamentation and towards issues of correctness and the avoidance of fallacies although it remained a body of technical skills. Still, it is during the Enlightenment that rhetoric found an advocate who tried to re-establish rhetoric's epistemological dimension and its general importance to science as well as to humanities: [Giambattista Vico](#). But just as Augustine was unable to really pull rhetoric out of the restrictive box religion had put it in, Vico was unsuccessful in saving rhetoric from the "new religion" of scientific reason.



From Vico's era to our own century, rhetoric remained an important study, but one largely confined to issues of oral and written style and presentation. Of course, great rhetorical thinkers came along from time to time (Nietzsche, for instance, drew attention to the enormous role metaphors played in our lives) and the connections between rhetoric and psychology began to be explored, but it is clear that strong beliefs in scientific methods left little room for a respectable conception of persuasion. One curricular development occurred during this period, however, that has had a lasting impact on the discipline. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Harvard University mandated that all students should learn the fundamentals of basic written English. With this decree, what we now call [composition](#) was essentially made synonymous with rhetoric. Although freshman writing courses often deal very little with rhetorical theory, composition, along with speech communications, have nonetheless provided an academic "home" for scholars interested in rhetoric. Composition has also provided a space for a renewed appreciation for the [women rhetoricians](#) whose contributions to rhetorical theory from the Hellenistic period on continue to be uncovered.

We can end this brief overview of rhetoric on a high note. The twentieth century is perhaps the most exciting era in which to study rhetoric since the Classical Era. This has come about with the advent of what is generally referred to as the [New Rhetoric](#): the rediscovery of rhetoric's epistemological importance and the centrality of persuasion and argument to our everyday lives. It is impossible to list all the reasons for this newfound prominence or all the contributors to the New Rhetoric, but among the most influential we must certainly count [I.A. Richards](#), whose work on [metaphor](#) linked rhetoric to literary studies, [Chaim Perelman](#), whose book [The New Rhetoric](#) is now a classic, [Steven Toulmin](#), best known for his analysis of argument, and perhaps the most influential rhetorician of our era, [Kenneth Burke](#). And among current rhetorical topics that are attracting the most attention, we might identify the study of how [electronic environments](#) influence persuasion and communication and what is called the "[rhetoric](#)

[of inquiry](#)" movement. This movement uses rhetorical theories to examine the workings of [sciences](#), social sciences and humanities in an effort to understand how language practices create and further what we accept to be "true" about the world. In this way, then, we can see that rhetoric has returned full circle to the epistemological issues that gave it its initial importance.

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