

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52794-1 - Rhetoric and Composition: An Introduction

Steven Lynn

Excerpt

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I The open hand: Meet Rhetoric and Composition

Why was it necessary to imagine freshman English as separate – as different enough from the other English, or the other Englishes represented in the curriculum, to require a separate professional organization?

David Bartholomae, Chair's Address to the 1988
CCCC Convention (172)

So we must keep trying anything and everything, improvising, borrowing from others, developing from others, dialectically using one text as comment upon another, schematizing, using the incentive to new wanderings, returning from these excursions to schematize again, being oversubtle when the straining seems to promise some further glimpse, and making amends by reduction to very simple anecdotes.

Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (265)

This book is an introduction to a field, an emerging (although over 2,500 years old) and especially exciting (although often technical and service-oriented) academic discipline. Although not everyone would agree that “Rhetoric and Composition” is the best name for this field, it is in some sense situated (most people would agree) at the intersection of the art of persuasion (or “rhetoric”) and the process of writing (or “composition”). Narrowly conceived, this is a field that is predominantly North American, focused mostly on higher education, arising in the latter half of the twentieth century. More expansively, this is a field that extends into every aspect of communication, from the beginnings of learning to the end of life, worldwide, throughout history, perhaps extending even beyond the human species.¹ On the one hand, a surprisingly small proportion of people outside of this field seem to be aware of even the most fundamental research in it – as much of what passes for instruction in “Language Arts” or “English” or “Communication” appears to

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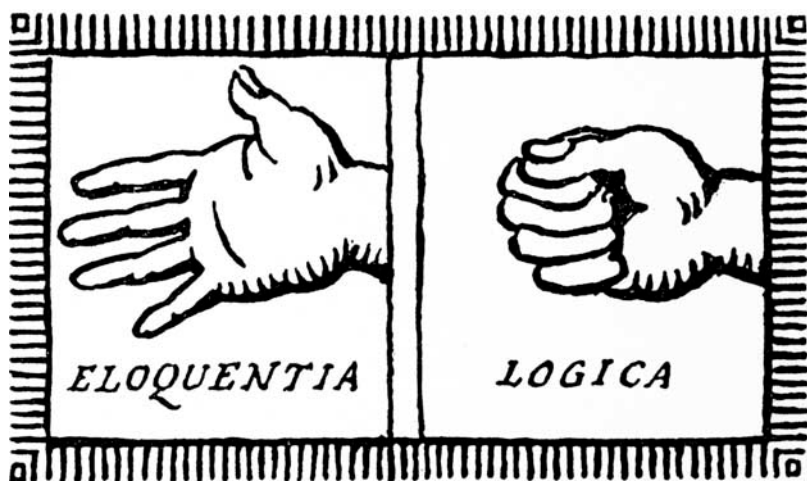


Figure 1.1 Eloquentia and Logica, an open hand and a closed fist, taken from a Renaissance rhetoric text.

be relatively uninformed: Curricular administrators, school boards, and teachers, as we shall see, continue to do many of the very things that decades of research and the consensus of experts have declared to be ineffective and sometimes even possibly injurious. On the other hand, knowledgeable teachers and scholars, from the elementary grades into post-graduate training, have been celebrating for over thirty years a radical transformation in writing pedagogy, not only within the language arts but also across the curriculum.² It is, in other words, an especially interesting and vital academic field.

Thus, all sorts of readers are imagined for this book, but most immediately I am thinking of people who want to know more about this discipline because they are entering it, or considering doing so, or even find themselves within it, willingly perhaps, or not. My audience certainly includes graduate students primarily in Literature or Rhetoric and Composition programs, but also in Film, Rhetoric, Theory, Speech, Communication, and other fields that provide teachers for college writing courses. You may in fact be reading this book because you are taking a teacher-training course in a composition

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program, preparing to teach writing for the first time, or perhaps even teaching writing as you are learning how to do it. (That, as you might suspect, will in fact always be the case, and it's one of many charms and delights of this field – that even the people who are most informed and adept are constantly learning their craft, discovering new and stimulating things, often from their students, and sometimes from other experts.) But I am also thinking of teachers in any field who might be interested in helping their students communicate more effectively. This part of the audience thus includes not only people who will call themselves writing teachers, but historians, third-grade social studies teachers, biologists, legal theorists, and others. Indeed, given the foundational nature of this field, I would hope this book will appeal to almost anyone with intellectual curiosity.

Both "rhetoric" and "composition," taken separately, are terms with complex, shifting, contested meanings. These terms and their meanings are part of an ongoing struggle to define and determine what the field is and ought to be, and this multiplicity and resistance to closure is in fact another aspect of what makes this field so interesting and alive. Before putting the two terms together in the chapters that follow, let's consider briefly the sense of each apart – a task that will lead directly to a brief explanation of what's in the rest of this book.

THE RHETORIC OF "RHETORIC"

Rhetoric's beginning supposedly occurred in Syracuse, Sicily, around 467–466 BCE when someone named Corax began teaching the art of persuasive argument to paying customers. Many Syracusans had lost their property and wealth under a succession of tyrants, and a new government and judicial system, requiring citizens to represent themselves, offered the opportunity to set things right. Here at the origins of rhetoric we can see its great potential to do good, its inspiring relationship to justice, free speech, and democratic institutions – and at the same time we can also easily see rhetoric's dark side, for

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what if your clever neighbor can argue more convincingly that your olive trees belong to him? Indeed, legend has it that Tisias, Corax's student, refused to pay for his instruction, and so Corax sued him, arguing, "You must pay if you win the case, thus proving the value of my lessons; and you must pay if you lose, since the court will force you." But Tisias countered, "I will pay nothing, because losing would prove your teaching was worthless, and winning would absolve me from paying."

At a glance, this story seems to support the popular idea that "rhetoric" is just a bag of verbal tricks. When politicians accuse one another of engaging in "rhetoric," they aren't referring to carefully reasoned and persuasive arguments. And rhetorical training in this story seems only to have given Corax and Tisias the skill to be irritating, as the case was thrown out by the judge, who said, legend has it, "From a bad crow, a bad egg." The judge is playing on "Corax," which means "crow," and some scholars, thinking that these names and the story itself are a bit too clever, have wondered if these guys really existed (see Cole), while others doubt at least the accuracy of the fifth-century date (see Schiappa). Rhetoric's big bang, like cosmology's, is in fact based on indirect evidence and conjecture, yet even if Corax refined and adapted pre-existing ideas, or a group of later teachers invented him, perhaps to give their own ideas more credibility, it seems clear that some sort of formal teaching of argumentation, especially in a judicial setting, was emerging in and around fifth-century Greece.³ Where there is teaching, can textbooks be far behind? And so within decades a substantial number of authorities had come forward, mostly it seems with advice on the structure of a speech (how many parts, what goes in each part), or with examples of the various parts to be emulated or perhaps even memorized.⁴

At some point, training in argument and persuasion was included in Plato's famous Academy, which was founded in 387 BCE. The Greek term *rhētorikē* may have been coined by Plato, adapting the word *rhētōr*, a legal term that designated among other things a person who addressed a public body (from the ancient Greek *erō*,

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"to speak"). But Plato's writings indicate that his attitude toward *rhêtorikê*, as he encountered it, was at best ambiguous and arguably quite negative. The Academy was remarkable not for its persuasive lectures and speeches, but for its innovative reliance on Socratic questioning (and also for its innovative admission of women – an orientation arguably not unrelated to learning by conversational inquiry). In Plato's *Gorgias*, rhetoric is defined as the training and practice that produce an art of public speaking, which sounds innocent enough unless you mistrust language and the public – which Plato certainly did. But Plato's problems with rhetoric can be seen most clearly in his *Phaedrus*, the work that deals most extensively with rhetoric, where such training is referred to as the "art of enchanting the soul" or "the art of winning the soul by discourse" (576). Plato does not believe that the people who are doing all this training – in particular those who were called "the sophists" – have any clue about the nature of the soul or the dangers of enchanting it, and he also worries that the focus on winning an argument is dangerously foolish. Someone who is entirely ignorant of the truth but has memorized dazzling phrases and strategies, who has learned tricks of logic and verbal manipulation (that is, from Plato's point of view, someone who has studied with the sophists), can be more compelling than someone else who is actually a knowledgeable expert. Plato does not simply dismiss rhetoric (as is sometimes suggested), for he does observe in the *Phaedrus* how an art of rhetoric based on an understanding of the soul and an inquiry into truth might be possible. But he is deeply troubled by the sophists' approach to rhetoric, which is based on what seems probable and plausible and moving to most people. This is the aspect of rhetoric that would lead John Locke some 2,000 years later, in his monumental *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), to call rhetoric "that powerful instrument of error and deceit" (508), and it is the usual meaning of "rhetoric" in modern-day politics, used as a dismissive insult, often preceded by "just" or "merely."⁵

Western civilization might have veered away from rhetoric altogether, if we really thoroughly despised it, and toward something

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like the Vulcan civilization in the *Star Trek* universe, in which all sorts of persuasive appeals and verbal manipulation are shunned in favor of logic and truth. Plato did after all famously ban the poets from his utopian *Republic* and put the philosophers in charge (having no knowledge of Vulcan science officers).⁶ But Aristotle changed everything, altering intellectual history in virtually every discipline, and (most importantly for our interests here) rescuing rhetoric in particular.

Aristotle came to teach at Plato's Academy, and the classes he offered included the school's first lectures on rhetoric – apparently as an afternoon elective or special interest course – during two different periods, from 367 to 347, and 335 to 323 BCE. So many textbooks on rhetoric had already appeared at that point, apparently, that Aristotle thought it would be useful to produce a summary of them all, the *Synagōgē tekhnōn* ("A Collection of Arts").⁷ All of the rhetorical handbooks that Aristotle might have included have now disappeared, perhaps because his guide rendered them unnecessary; and Aristotle's synthesis itself has also been lost, perhaps because his own later work, *On Rhetoric*, which appears to be based on his lectures, so thoroughly eclipsed both these handbooks and his summary.⁸ Aristotle's opening sentences seem designed to address the worries – articulated by Plato among others – that rhetoric is merely a formulaic means to an end, equally susceptible to good and evil applications, and perhaps even more attractive to unscrupulous people: "Rhetoric," Aristotle begins, "is an *antistrophos* [counterpart, or correlative, or coordinate, or converse, or mirror-image] to dialectic" (28), an assertion that assumes of course that Aristotle's audience knew what he meant by "dialectic," which was apparently so familiar that in his textbook on dialectic, the *Topics*, Aristotle never feels the need to define explicitly his subject.⁹ We can gather easily enough, however, from various sources that "dialectic" for Aristotle is the art that is concerned with a certain kind of logical argument. Aristotle's students engaged in this philosophical disputation often, and this

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practice became an essential part of education through the Middle Ages and beyond.

In a dialectical exercise, one student would adopt a thesis – say, “Old teachers are better than young ones” – and another student would be assigned to oppose this position. But instead of simply arguing with each other, one student would ask questions that could be answered “yes” or “no,” and the other student would have to respond and explain, following certain logical rules. The questioner’s goal would be to force the respondent, by a chain of reasoning, either to accept the thesis or to contradict himself. If for instance the questioner could get the respondent to agree that “Energy and enthusiasm are the most important attributes of effective teachers,” then the questioner might be able to force the respondent, based on this premise, to agree that youthful teachers may be better, despite their inexperience. The respondent’s job, in other words, was to resist the questioner’s efforts and thereby maintain the thesis in this verbal chess match.

If rhetoric deals with one person persuading others in an extended speech, and dialectic deals with two people engaged in a particular kind of debate, then how in the world are they mirror images or counterparts for Aristotle? Why does he say this? Although Athenian citizens, if they could afford it, might hire someone else to compose their arguments, they had by law to represent themselves in court. For someone who might be listening to (or reading) Aristotle’s lectures in hopes of finding some practical advice, this opening is certainly not very promising. “I want to know how to represent myself more effectively in court next Thursday,” we can imagine someone responding, “and this guy Aristotle is on some philosophical quest to define his subject!” But Aristotle has his purposes, as we shall see, when he notes that dialectic and rhetoric are counterparts in that they both deal with common opinions and probable knowledge, not with specialized expertise and scientific certainty. There is no particular field of knowledge to draw from in a dialectical dispute or a rhetorical performance: dialectic and rhetoric apply to everything.

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Dialectic proceeds according to logical rules, which Aristotle claims elsewhere to have discovered and presents in a series of works that came to be known as the *Organon*, or “The Tool.”¹⁰ Rhetoric employs similar kinds of logical progressions, taking an audience from some established or assumed propositions to their logical conclusions, but rhetoric adheres less rigorously to logical rules (you don’t have to spell out all of your supporting assumptions, for instance), and rhetoric also makes use of how the speaker is perceived, the style of what is said, and how the audience is reacting emotionally. An ancient comparison likens dialectic to a closed fist, and rhetoric to an open hand – an odd comparison, perhaps, but we might think of dialectic as a karate match, featuring contestants competing according to strict rules of procedure and scoring, whereas rhetoric is a politician shaking hands, patting backs, holding babies, reaching out and touching people to create feelings of relationship and common interest.¹¹

Also, Aristotle says, rhetoric and its counterpart dialectic are alike in that both are endeavors undertaken by all people “to a certain extent,” as they “try both to test and maintain an argument [as in dialectic] and to defend themselves and attack [others, as in rhetoric]” (29).¹² While some people argue and persuade without much skill (“randomly” Aristotle says), other people have “an ability acquired by habit,” and it is “possible to observe the cause why some succeed by habit and others accidentally.” And “such observation” is precisely what Aristotle will proceed to offer us, which “is the activity of an art [tekhnē]” (29). For students or parents or teachers over the ages who might have wondered why some kind of rhetorical study has been required of students in medieval monasteries and in twenty-first century vocational schools, in the grammar schools of Shakespeare’s England and the most elite modern research universities, Aristotle has captured here one driving idea: every human being who is capable of thought and articulation is going to argue with other human beings, inevitably and necessarily, and it is possible to learn how to argue more effectively: there is an art beyond

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luck or trial-and-error. It is an important and ultimately ethical art, Aristotle asserts, "because the true and the just are by nature stronger than their opposites" (34). We just need everyone to be able to argue effectively in order to arrive at the true and the just.

Had Lady Rhetoric (the academic subjects were traditionally depicted as women) wanted to hire a high-powered advertising agency to do a makeover for her, dispelling the idea that she was available to serve evil and goodness alike, and that her charms often made the truth more difficult to discern, clouding perception with emotion and flash, it is hard to imagine how she could have done better than Aristotle, Inc. Rhetoric may not have been a core subject when Aristotle began lecturing on it, but it would soon for many centuries become essential to the foundations of learning, forming along with Dialectic and Grammar what came to be known as "the Trivium," the three basic subjects of human discourse (see Wagner).

And this elevating association – rhetoric, a distinctive and essential art, is dialectic's partner – sets the stage for Aristotle's more explicit and influential definition at the beginning of his second chapter:

Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion. This is the function of no other art; for each of the others is instructive and persuasive about its own subject: for example, medicine about health and disease[,] and geometry about the properties of magnitudes[,] and arithmetic about numbers[,] and similarly in the case of the other arts and sciences. But rhetoric seems to be able to observe the persuasive about "the given," so to speak. That, too, is why we say it does not include technical knowledge of any particular, defined genus [of subjects]. (Kennedy, trans. 36–7)¹³

Aristotle aims to establish that rhetoric is a separate academic domain, comparable to medicine, geometry, and arithmetic as well as dialectic – as if subjects might be known by the company they

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Figure 1.2 This image of Rhetorica is from a set of fifty engraved prints depicting various entities, including the seven liberal arts. Although the engraved cards are usually called the Mantegna Tarot, they are actually not Tarot cards, nor are they most likely by Mantegna. The unknown artist is generally agreed to be Italian, and the engravings were created about 1465. Many of the surviving cards are in poor condition.