

I, RHETORICIAN

Rhetoric is the study of persuasion in speech and writing. I consider myself a rhetorician, for that is the subject of my postgraduate education, and I find it the most convenient term to describe what I do: I write on whatever subject I can and adapt my presentation for different audiences, media, and circumstances. A more general term might be “professional writer,” which I use, too. As do all good professional writers, I strongly prefer to write about subjects which I already know something of, which in my case is writing about technology and the sciences for a general audience.

THE HISTORY OF RHETORIC

As mentioned above, rhetoric is the study of persuasive speech and writing. The word “rhetoric” has a bad reputation today, as it now means false or manipulative speech meant to deceive. However, this has not always been the meaning of the term; it is a very old study, about 2500 years old, and has taken many forms over the centuries, and formed a central part of most Western education until the twentieth century.

The earliest formal studies of rhetoric took place in classical Athens. Rhetorical study at that point primarily taught people defend themselves in the Athenian court system. Early rhetoric gave us the words “sophism” and “sophistic,” meaning trickery, because many early rhetoricians taught techniques that worked but were intellectually dishonest—focusing on appeals to emotion above all others and ignoring evidence when it was inconvenient. (The early rhetoricians who called themselves Sophists, however, derived the from the Greek for “wisdom,” and it was Plato who first associated the term with its later ironic meaning of foolish, short-sighted trickery.)

The study of rhetoric was given intellectual weight by Aristotle, who defined rhetoric as the art of finding all the available means of persuasion in a given situation. Precise modern rhetoricians still favour this definition, as it does not ask a speaker or writer to use the first available method that springs to mind, but to consider all the possible means and then to select the most appropriate and best means, both intellectually and emotionally, for the audience and situation. These factors matter a great deal, for most audiences arrive with preconceptions and with certain intellectual “toolkits”—you do not present the same legal argument to a jury of your peers as you would to police scientists or to lawyers, nor would you present a budget plan the same way to voters as you would to trained economists. Similarly, the situation in which you present a case or argument varies greatly on the actual forum, whether it be a courtroom or a church pulpit or a press conference or an academic presentation, and the kind of situation, from a long-awaited glorious victory to a long-term crisis to a local tragedy.

The study of rhetoric since Aristotle has therefore focused on describing the situations and audiences a speaker or writer might face and the ways techniques vary accordingly. Another feature of rhetoric that Aristotle first codified was its focus on inductive argument and probable conclusions rather than deductive argument and certain

conclusions. Rhetoricians always work in real-world situations where observers face unclear or variable evidence and in which no one can ever be sure of the precise outcome (as Aristotle pointed out, when we can reason our way through to a sure, precise conclusion, we do not argue but judge the arguments on their technical merits), so the best we look for is an outcome that seems to be the best, most reasonably, most probably correct argument. Therefore, rhetorical arguments will oftentimes depend on emotional appeals, judgments of characters, and other arguments difficult to quantify, say for instance when we try to determine whether a killing was justified by circumstances, an unjustifiable accident, or actual murder. Non-rhetorical arguments, such as those of logic, mathematics, and, later, the empirical sciences, strove for perfect accuracy, or in some areas virtually indisputable conclusions, and relied heavily on deductive reasoning.

Since classical Athens, rhetoric has seen many changes. It has been the cornerstone of several educational systems, perhaps most famously in the Renaissance. It has served as the method of training speakers and writers in diverse fields:

- priests and pastors
- clerks
- journalists
- politicians and statesmen
- philosophers
- novelists, playwrights, and poets

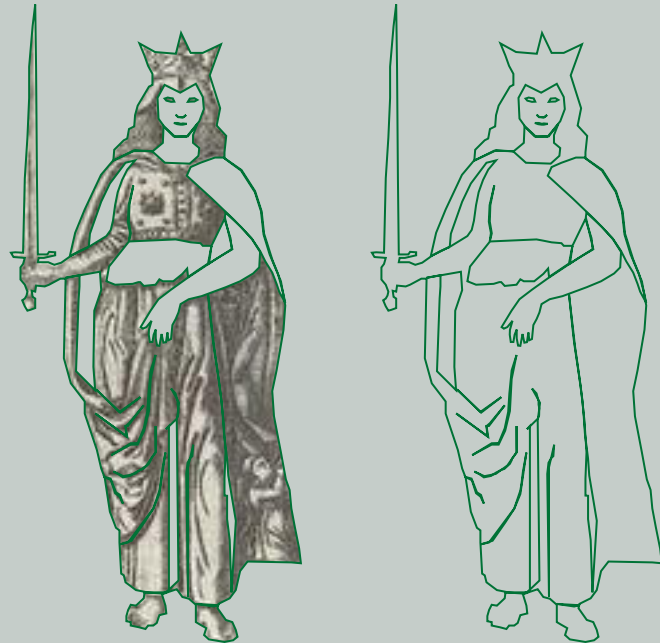
More recently, it has become the basis for university-level writing education, and also serves as the historical basis for most technical writing, documentation, and other genres of workplace writing. Rhetoric has also suffered to a certain degree not only from its association with unethical politics, but its own success, for much of its original domain now falls under other headings—for instance, audience analysis has moved into such areas as psychology and marketing.

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF RHETORIC

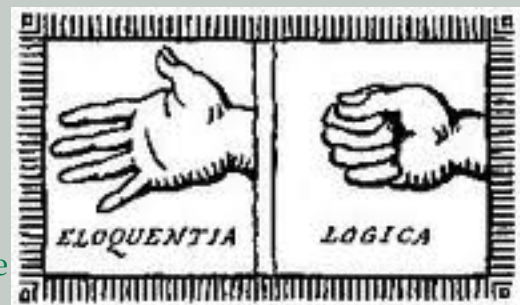
Incorporate two symbols from earlier times into my website and business cards. The first is the figure of Lady Rhetorica. Inspired by a classical tradition of personifying virtues and skills (e.g., the Graces and the Muses) as women, medieval and Renaissance authors occasionally similarly personified the studies of rhetoric, logic, and grammar, which combined to form the trivium, the basis of medieval and Renaissance humanistic education. Different artists personified these three pursuits differently, but generally Grammatica was rendered as a plain, severe woman, simply dressed, while Logica was a martial figure of the Spartan type. Rhetorica, on the other hand, had two main variants: one version was a warrior, but a gloriously bedecked warrior who bore gifts or aid as well as threats, while the other version was a beautiful, bejeweled, richly dressed woman who proffered only gifts and no threats. These different personifications express different views of rhetoric as a subject, for rhetoric could be seen as a decorative art that



bore only promises and delights (the latter version), or it could be a way of cloaking the force of logic with the rich dress of beautiful speech. I prefer this latter version, and have based one logo design on that version of Lady Rhetorica.



The second symbol I use in logo form is taken from another traditional medieval and Renaissance piece of iconography: the open hand of rhetoric versus the closed fist of logic. The open hand and closed fist is a dual metaphor about the presentation of material, either as the hard, aggressive, and unapproachable fist of logic, or the gentler, welcoming, and open hand of rhetorical.



The first threatens, the second offers aid and gifts. Of course, even an open hand offering a gift usually brings some good to the hand's owner, and I have thus adapted the open hand of rhetoric to a simplified icon with arrows indicating this two-way trade.

