# Week 03: Rhetorical Analysis

### Seek Learning by Study and by Faith

A prayer is more than a request for help from our Heavenly Father. This week, as you pray before your study sessions, remember the following: “I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right” (Doctrine and Covenants 9:8). Prayer requires action on our part, moving in a direction, making a plan and asking for confirmation, or studying it out in our minds.

## Study

The ancient Book of Mormon prophet Nephi declared his purpose in keeping a record: “For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God” ([2 Nephi 25:23](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bofm/2-ne/25?lang=eng#p23)). He knew his audience, and he knew his purpose in writing. As you craft messages, consider your audience and purposes.

Language is a tool we use to give and seek information, to pray, to teach each other, to express and react to emotions, and also to persuade others to think or act in certain ways. We are responsible for how we use this tool. Jesus taught, “For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned” ([Matthew 12:37](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/nt/matt/12?lang=eng#p37))

Beginning with the ancient Greeks, a large part of language education has focused on the ability to persuade. The Greeks described this as “rhetoric,” which originally meant “the act of speaking a language,” and expanded its importance to include how language was used for a persuasive purpose: to motivate an audience to action.

This week we will study persuasive techniques: how people use words to influence, lead, create new understanding, and rouse others to action by remembering audience, purpose, and channel. You will learn to identify, explain, and analyze the strategies a particular writer uses to persuade readers.

## Audience, Purpose, and Channel

As you write, consider the following questions:

* Who are your readers?
* How will they receive your message?
* What are you trying to communicate?

Knowing the answers to these questions will help you to know which writing tools will best help you communicate your message.

### Audience

Everything you write should be done with your reader in mind. You wouldn’t write a letter to a future employer the same way you’d post a message on social media. It is important to craft your message to achieve the desired response from your specific readers.

Research what you know about your audience. Consider their background like age, gender, nationality, or education level. Find out what your reader already knows about your topic and then build your writing from there.

### Purpose

After you know your audience, define your purpose in writing your message. Do you want to persuade or motivate others to take action? Do you want to sell something? Would you simply like to inform your audience? Keep that purpose at the focus of your writing. When you don’t know your purpose, your writing may not achieve any goal at all and the audience will be wondering why they are reading it.

For example, your purpose in writing a piece on the importance of clean water may be to change the reader’s mind and encourage them to then take an action, such as seeking for change in your community. You start by researching the people in your community and recognize that there are many families with children who should demand more from the leaders in the area to protect their water sources. Knowing your audience and your purpose helps you know how to motivate them toward change. This will also help you know which writing strategies will help you accomplish your purpose.

### Channel

Once you know your audience and your purpose, you can identify which writing strategies (described below) you should use to accomplish your writing goals. Will the audience respond best to emotions or logic? How can you craft your message to effectively accomplish your goals?  Think about the reaction you want the readers to have when they read your writing. Do you want them to change their behavior? Would you prefer them to have an emotional reaction? Is the goal simply to educate?

Make a list of the main points you want to make and the ideas you want to share, thinking specifically of your audience. Then, consider the best channel for this writing. Choosing the right channel will influence how the reader reacts to your message. An email will be structured differently than a business report or a post on social media. Consider how formally you want to write to your audience. Should your writing be friendly or more formal? Knowing this will help you decide which strategies you should use that will be most effective in creating your message. 

## Strategies of Persuasion

Communicative situations often contain rhetoric, which is the craft of persuading through writing or speaking.  You likely have used rhetoric to be persuasive and to recognize when others are trying to persuade you. 

### Rhetorical Appeals

As part of becoming familiar with rhetorical strategies in real life, you will recognize essential building blocks of rhetoric:

* Ethos is the presentation of a believable, authoritative voice that elicits an audience’s trust. In the case of the clean water example, you might mention your expertise in studying the problems unclean water can cause, so your reader knows you are an expert and should listen to you.
* Pathos appeals to feelings and emotions shared by an audience. Adding to our example of clean water, you could mention that parents who love their children and want them to have a healthy future will fight for their family’s right to pure drinking water.
* Logos is the use of credible information—facts, reasons, examples—that moves toward a sensible and acceptable conclusion. As you write to persuade people about the importance of clean water, you can share facts about how small changes by the local leaders will improve water sources.
* Kairos is a fourth and lesser known rhetorical appeal, and is the idea that timing is important in trying to persuade an audience. An appeal may succeed or fail depending on when it is made. The moment must be right, and an effective communicator needs to be aware of their audience in terms of kairos. Imagine there is an increase in disease spread by contaminated water, which causes schools to be canceled, and this is the moment you write a piece to engage families about making changes to create local filtering systems so this never happens again.  Your audience might be more receptive to a proposal because of the timing.

### Literary Language

You can also use more subtle strategies with your choice of language and organization. 

* Figurative language: similes and metaphors. Comparing one aspect of two things that are otherwise completely different is an essential part of rhetorical language. Simile example: “The treasure chest of nature’s wonders shone like a pirate’s gold tooth.” Metaphor example: “The pizza was a disk of saucy sunlight.”
* Numerical data: statistics and figures. When accurate, numerical data can strengthen an argument.
* Parallel structure: repetition of the same pattern of words to show that ideas are equally significant. Parallel structure, or parallelism, calls attention to ideas, achieves balance, and makes statements more memorable. For example, United States President John F. Kennedy said, “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.”
* Personification: giving an inanimate or nonhuman object human characteristics to make it seem alive and relatable. Examples: “The virus packed its bags and spread across the ocean” or “The internet erupted in outrage.”
* Repetition: repeating a single word or group of words to build emphasis. Example: “The first cause is poverty; the second cause is poor health; the third cause is discrimination. These causes have been studied, but to what effect?”
* Rhetorical question: one question that is not expected to be answered, one for which there is no answer, or one that creates a dramatic effect. Examples: “Has it occurred to you to ask why the economy is so unstable? A first point to consider is . . .”; “Do you think poverty will go away by itself?”
* Understatement: presenting something as less important than it is as a way of distancing from the truth. Understatement is often used sarcastically or ironically. Example: “It may not have occurred to politicians that poverty leads to a host of health-related issues.”

## Logical Fallacies

Occasionally when constructing an argument, people may turn to logical fallacies. These strategies sound convincing; however, they undermine logical argument by using flawed reasoning and may distract from the real issue. Learning to identify them helps you avoid them.



* Ad hominem: attacking the person, not the argument. “Only the ignorant and cruel don’t stand up for clean water.”



* Bandwagon: an argument that everyone is doing something, so you shouldn’t be left behind by not doing it too. “Everyone is going to vote for clean water.”



* Causal fallacy: claiming or implying that an event that follows another event is the result of it. “Your children won’t grow tall if we don’t clean our water sources soon.”



* Hyperbole: exaggeration. “If we do not value clean water, our lives are not worth living.”



* Slippery slope: argument that a single action could lead to disastrous consequences. “Drinking unclean water will always cause early, painful death.”

Identifying and understanding such strategies, and others, is a key element of critical thinking. 

## Rhetorical Analysis

Now that you understand how to write using these tools, it is also important that you know how to see these tools used by other writers. This is a process known as rhetorical analysis. Rhetorical analysis examines the way writers and speakers use language to influence their audience and is an important skill in understanding persuasion. Look at the individual parts of writing to understand how language works to create the effects the writer wants. A rhetorical analysis should look at the conditions of communication that surround the rhetoric like the author, the audience/readers, the main message and purpose of the message, the channel being used, and where and when is the message is being sent.

If you were doing a rhetorical analysis, you might ask these questions as you read: 

* What are the author's goals?
* What rhetorical strategies, literary language, or logical fallacies did the author use?
* How did the author use kairos (or timing) to help make the point?
* How will the audience react? Will readers agree with this writing because they are of the same opinion, or are they hostile and ready to reject the arguments? Have they heard or read the ideas before?
* Are readers likely to see the author as familiar or as a stranger who must win their confidence?

### The Workings of Rhetorical Analysis

The aim of rhetorical analysis is not to find agreement with or praise for the writer. You are looking for the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the writing by identifying the writer’s tools and what they accomplish.

As you formulate your rhetorical analysis, be aware of the approaches and strategies that writers use to persuade an audience. Your goal will be to identify them in your analysis, explain their use, and evaluate their effectiveness.

* Establishing credibility. Writers include their credentials or experience with the subject to ensure that readers will take them seriously as someone who knows what they’re talking about. To reinforce their authority, they cite reliable sources as support for their points.
* Sharing personal experience. Sharing a personal experience related to the subject enhances credibility and may also appeal to readers’ emotions.
* Targeting emotional concerns. By specifically addressing those incidents or outcomes that readers may fear or desire, the author can rally them to take a particular position. Emotional concerns also include appeals to the five senses and to broader sentiments such as love, loyalty, anger, justice, or patriotism.
* Supporting claims with convincing evidence. Ways of supporting claims include quoting, summarizing, or paraphrasing expert opinions; relating anecdotes and examples; and citing appropriate statistics and facts.
* Acknowledging the opposition. If a writer makes a point of explaining other groups’ positions carefully and respectfully, readers from those groups, as well as the target audience, are more likely to be responsive to the writer. By acknowledging the opposition, writers show they have considered opposing views and can then demonstrate that their position is preferable.
* Questioning the motivation of the opposition. By exposing others’ possibly conflicting interests, the writer can undermine the credibility of an opponent’s character or argument.
* Using devices that draw attention to claims. These include literary devices such as parallelism, repetition, and rhetorical questions that writers and speakers use to emphasize points and unify a text.

In opposition to these strategies, writers may resort to  logical fallacies in an attempt to persuade readers. While the techniques of each logical fallacy differ, all lead away from the actual argument and seek to persuade through means other than reasonable, logical thought. Such strategies include those previously mentioned like ad hominem, bandwagon, casual fallacy, hyperbole, slippery slope, and more. Being able to identify them is an important part of rhetorical analysis.

## Rhetorical Strategies in Advertising

Let’s look at an example of rhetorical analysis using the Smokey Bear advertisement.  

Smokey Bear is an image from the United States Forest Service that reflects the use of rhetorical strategies. Smokey Bear is a symbol created in 1944 to raise awareness of the danger of forest fires. Images of this gentle, personified bear are often accompanied by the slogan “Remember . . . only you can prevent forest fires” or a variation of it. The image shows Smokey dressed in rolled-up jeans, a name belt, and a ranger’s hat. The entire image is among the most recognizable of American cultural symbols.

The continuing identification of the bear and his appeal over decades is an example of the powerful use of rhetorical devices that speak without seeming to become dated and lose impact. First, a wild and dangerous animal is personified and made credible so that the credibility (ethos) of Smokey as a domesticated father figure with fuzzy, playful cubs climbing on the family mailbox removes any sense of danger and instead makes him into a believable voice for safety. No humans are emphasized in the illustration; the mail truck is seen only in the distance after having delivered another stack of fan mail. Other small animals are present in the background, as are familiar items such as a shovel, a mailbox, an American flag, a boat on crystal clear water, and the playful images of the ranger’s hat and rolled-up jeans on crossed legs. The drawing features bright primary colors and the dark forest green of bountiful nature. The print medium in the center of the illustration, the sign reading “Prevent forest fires,” unifies the visual.

Because the images are emotionally accessible to children as well as adults, they appeal to widely shared pathos. The unspoken implication is that preventing forest fires will allow these young animals and forest plants to live rather than die in a carelessly started—and deadly—fire. In addition, it will allow human life to continue safely and pleasurably, as viewers can see, far in the background, people sailing and enjoying the water. If children’s wisdom and receptivity to images are present, this idealized picture has great appeal. Rather than a harsh rebuke for adult negligence, the lesson of Smokey relies on the power of rhetoric to modify behavior with specific, carefully crafted appeals. Yet the most frequently used slogan, “Only you can prevent forest fires,” is an example of hyperbole. Certainly “you” are not the sole person responsible for starting or preventing fires. Other people and other factors are at work aside from yourself.

More explicit, however, is this earlier image:

The rhetorical strategy again is pathos, appealing to a sense of guilt. If these children can help prevent fires, then surely adults can do the same, as they are likely more knowledgeable and care for the safety and health of their children.

By performing a rhetorical analysis, we see the strategies of personification, pathos, and ethos, and even hyperbole. What other strategies do you see as you study this campaign? 

### Key Terms

**Audience**  
the people giving or likely to give attention to something

**Channel**  
a medium for communication or the passage of information

**Culture**  
beliefs, laws, customs, and habits of a group

**Ethos**  
using credibility or character to appeal to your audience

**Kairos**  
timing when conditions are right for the accomplishment of a crucial action

**Literary Language**  
a writer’s choice of language and organization

**Logical Fallacies**  
reasoning where invalid arguments or irrelevant points are introduced without any evidence to support them

**Logos**  
appealing to your audience’s logical side

**Pathos**  
appealing to your audience’s emotions

**Personification**  
assigning human characteristics to an inanimate object

**Persuasion**  
the act of persuading someone to do something or to believe that something is true

**Purpose**  
the intention, aim, or function of something; the thing that something is supposed to achieve

**Rhetoric**  
the craft of persuading through writing or speaking

**Rhetorical Analysis**

the examination of those parts of speech or techniques that persuade

## Conclusion

The gift of persuading is powerful. Consider how you have encountered persuasive writings in your life, whether it is what you have written yourself or something you read by someone else. We have greater access to information today than at any other time in history, and it can be challenging to know what is true, somewhat true, or completely false.

Your personal quest for truth should be an obligation and not just an opportunity. Study, think, and discover truth for yourself. You can then be an instrument in helping others find truth. God has encouraged all to “first seek to obtain my word, and then shall your tongue be loosed; then, if you desire, you shall have my Spirit and my word, yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men” (Doctrine and Covenants 11:21). 

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