

persuasion: character

In the rhetorical tradition, there are three modes of persuasion: appeals to ethos (character), appeals to pathos (emotion), and appeals to logos (reason). This handout will help you understand how to appeal to ethos.

What is Ethos?

Ethos is about Values

Most introductions to rhetoric link *ethos* to **character, credibility, and trustworthiness**. At their core, these concepts have to do with values—the values of “the good life.” We tend to believe and trust those individuals who exemplify the values we cherish, who live the sort of life that we would want to live.

When beginning to write, ask yourself, “What values does my audience have? What matters to them?”

Ethos is Inferred, Not Possessed

If you wish to establish credibility, you will need to demonstrate that your moral, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional habits are in line with the ideals of your audience. Since *ethos* is situated in the values of the audience, it is not something that you can be said to inherently possess—in other words, writers don’t “have” credibility. Rather, they establish this credibility in the act of communicating with their specific audience.

For example, when you write a scientific paper, you will want to write in such a way that appeals to the values of your scientific audience. By building off of previous scholarship, following the scientific method, and writing clearly and concisely (i.e., by doing things that scientists value), you will begin to establish your credibility and character in the eyes of your readers.

Strategies for Appealing to Ethos

What follows are some rhetorical tools that you can use to demonstrate that your habits and character exemplify the values of your audience. While you will not use every tool in every situation, you should still familiarize yourself with each of them.

Note: Some of these tools may also be useful for appealing to *pathos* and *logos*.

Sharing Personal Information

One of the most basic ways that a you can show that your habits and values are compatible with those of your audience is simply by talking about them.



Example: “I grew up in a small ranching town in New Mexico where I learned to work with my hands.”

Example: “Our team has spent the last twenty years searching for a cure.”

Adopting the Appropriate Point of View

Your choice of pronouns can have a variety of effects on your audience: “we” unites, “us” and “them” divide, and “you” praises, condemns, or instructs.

Example: “We Americans know the meaning of sacrifice.”

Example: “Unlike those studying the humanities, we science majors have to master both our own discipline *and* math.”

Incorporating Sources

Quoting or alluding to a source that your audience holds in esteem allows you to show not only that you value the same authorities as your audience but also that you have done your “homework” on the subject.

Example: “Like the Bible says, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’”

Example: “Throughout this presentation, I will make reference to Derald Wing Sue’s ideas about microaggressions.”

Following Conventions

Some audiences expect arguments to be presented in a very specific way, and you will “lose” credibility if you deviate from those conventions.

Example: The *APA Manual* has specific guidelines for formatting and including citations in a paper.

Example: When writing an article for publication, you must include an abstract, an introduction, and a literature review along with materials and methods, results, and discussions sections.

Establishing an Authoritative Voice

One way for you to sound like an expert is to use short, unqualified, declarative statements. However, be sure to back yourself up with evidence later on.

Example: “Americans do not accept failure as an option.”

Example: “Climate change will destroy our future.”

Identifying With the Audience

You identify with your audience when you acknowledge something the audience does or believes and then claim to do the same thing.

Example: “Like you, I have spent long nights worrying about my next mortgage payment or my child’s college tuition.”

Example: “I too have wasted many weekends binge-watching Netflix.”

Giving a Balanced Presentation

Presenting both sides of the argument is one way you can show that you are capable of cool, level-headed thought. Most importantly, it is an attempt to demonstrate the value of fairness.

Example: “My opponent says that we need to take care of the environment. I agree with him: we need to make sure our water is clean and our air is pure. But we shouldn’t place so many barriers around the



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environment that we can no longer access the resources that we need.”

Example: “While it is true that tax cuts might help us for a few years, we need to accept the fact that they are not a long-term solution.”

Ethical Fallacies

Simply put, a fallacy is an argument that is more persuasive than it should be because its conclusion rests on faulty premises and assumptions. It looks like a good argument, but it isn’t.

Irrelevant Appeal to Authority

No one is an expert on everything. Sometimes writers quote authorities that are either unacceptable to the audience or who simply aren’t experts on the subject.

Example: “Of course I believe that we should have a flat tax—Brad Pitt himself argued for the idea!”

Example: “My classmate said I didn’t have to cite anything in my paper.”

Personal Attacks (Argumentum ad Hominem)

Sometimes writers sidestep the argument and attack the person making the argument. When they do this, they are arguing “to the man” and are making a fallacious argument. In theory, an argument that is right is right—independent of who is making it.

Example: “Of course she would argue for making birth control more readily available—she’s a tramp!”

Example: “He wouldn’t trust a book on the history of Christianity that was written by a Muslim.”

Guilt by Association

This fallacy occurs when a writer tries to link two persons or groups in order to impute the characteristics of one to the other.

Example: “Do you really want to vote for a man who has been endorsed by communists?”

Example: “She practices yoga in a studio owned by a sexual predator.”

Poisoning the Well

This fallacy occurs when writers try to discredit their opponents before they even have a chance to defend themselves. It usually takes the form of an ad hominem attack and/or a red herring.

Example: “I’m going to let the congressman speak, but remember that this is a man who has admitted to cheating on his wife.”

Example: “Now let’s hear what Mrs. Jones—a convicted felon—has to say about civic duty.”

Fallacy of Origins (Genetic Fallacy)

When writers commit this fallacy, they assume that the meaning something carried in its beginnings is the same meaning that it carries today. This fallacy often presents itself in arguments about the etymology or history of words. It can also involve the actual origins of something—that something is good or bad because it came from a certain place or time or person.

Example: “Why would you buy Easter candy? Don’t you know that the word ‘Easter’ is the name of an ancient pagan fertility goddess? When you buy Easter candy, you’re supporting paganism.”

Example: “I only buy products made in America because the best products are made in America.”

You, Too! (Tu Quoque)

“Tu quoque” is a Latin phrase meaning “you, too!” Accordingly, this fallacy describes the attempts of writers to negate a point of criticism by accusing the accuser of the same thing.

Example: “My opponent says I am guilty of embezzling, but she is the biggest embezzler that there is!”

Example: “You can’t fire me for being late! You’re late all the time.”

Appeal to Poverty (Argumentum ad Lazarum)

The “poverty argument” (Lazarus, in a New Testament parable, was a poor man), is based on the assumption that being poor is somehow more authentic, sincere, or genuine than being wealthy.

Example: “Those African villagers have nothing and are still happy. They must be doing something right.”

Example: “I just want to get rid of all of my stuff and live a more authentic life.”

Appeal to Tradition (Argumentum ad Antiquitatem)

Though an “appeal to the past” can be a useful way of arguing, making the claim that something is correct *just* because it has always been that way is fallacious.

Example: “Throughout history, the primary responsibility of women has been the home.”

Example: “This is the way it has been done in the U.S. since the time of the Founding Fathers. Why change it now?”

Appeal to Newness (Argumentum ad Novitatem)

The opposite of the argumentum ad antiquitatem, the appeal to newness or novelty asserts that something is good, right, or true solely because it is new.

Example: “This is the latest iPhone, so it has to be better than the previous one.”

Example: “Our company needs to keep up with all of these new social media sites. They’re obviously reaching more people than Facebook.”

Appeal to Wealth (Argumentum ad Crumenam)

The “argument to the purse” supposes that because someone is wealthy or successful, he or she must necessarily be correct as well.

Example: “My husband has succeeded in business. I know he will make a good president.”

Example: “That family has been blessed with wealth. They must be keeping God’s commandments.”

Appeal to Nature (Argumentum ad Naturam)

When writers fallaciously appeal to nature, they create a false binary in which everything natural is good and everything unnatural, man-made, or artificial is bad.

Example: “Obviously, homeopathic treatments are the way to go. The body is designed to heal itself. You don’t need to take medicine to treat illness or disease.”

Example: “Processed foods are killing us! The only healthy diet is a raw diet.”

“Thought-terminating Cliché”

“Thought-terminating cliché” is a term popularized by psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton to describe certain sayings and phrases which are used to effectively end thought and therefore discussion.

Example: “It is what it is.”

Example: “You only live once.”

Comparison to Hitler (Reductio ad Hitlerum)

The *reductio ad hitlerum* is exactly what it sounds like—making an argument by comparing something or someone to Adolf Hitler and the Nazis.

Example: “I think we’ve heard my opponent’s argument before—in 1940s Berlin!”

Example: “These sorts of prisons are essentially modern-day concentration camps.”

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