

## The Rhetorical Triangle

Making Your Writing Credible, Appealing, and Logical

Make your message strong by addressing the three points of the triangle.

Does your heart sink a little when you are asked to prepare a written document or present information to an audience?

If so, you're not alone! Many people struggle with putting their ideas and thoughts on paper and delivering a message. It's a skill that needs to be learned and practiced. And unless you're fresh out of school, your writing skills, in particular, may be a little rusty.

Yet with the increase of email and working with people in remote places, delivering clear and persuasive communication is becoming more and more important. The trend is away from direct, one-on-one communication because people do not have to be face-to-face any more when they work together.

Perhaps the biggest problem with this is that when you write, you often don't get a second chance to make your point in a different way. You get one shot, and if you lose your reader, it is difficult to get them back. This is why you need to pick and choose your words carefully, and present your points in a style, manner and sequence that best suits the message you are sending.

The Rhetorical Triangle is a useful way of formulating your thoughts and presenting your position. Here we look at how you can use it to improve your writing.

Understanding the Tool: Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the ancient art of using language to persuade. If you use it well, your audience will easily understand what you're saying, and will be influenced by your message.

By taking the time to understand how rhetorical arguments are structured and presented, you can vastly improve your own writing, and make your points clearly, efficiently and effectively.

The term "rhetoric" in modern language has been used to refer to arguments that are designed to obscure the truth. The word has therefore taken on a negative connotation ("All that politician does is spew rhetoric.")

This is not the sense that we're using here when we talk about the Rhetorical Triangle.

Applying the principles of rhetoric helps you structure an argument so the truth becomes immediately apparent to your audience. With the Rhetorical Triangle approach, we focus on the three things that have the greatest impact on an argument:

1. The writer.
2. The audience.
3. The context.

These three elements form the points of the Rhetorical Triangle:

According to this approach, these three factors determine the persuasiveness of your argument. Your writing – and any other form of communication – needs to take all three into consideration.

The Writer

Whether consciously or sub-consciously, your audience wants to know what your motives are for your communication. If you don't make it clear why you are presenting information, some people will assume that you are not being totally candid, or that you are hiding something. Members of your audience may ask themselves:

1. Are you providing information?
2. Are you trying to educate?
3. Are you making a call for action?
4. Are you attempting to persuade others to change a perspective or firmly held belief?
5. Are you presenting ideas for problem solving or analysis? Or
6. Are you just trying to entertain?

The way in which the identity of the writer (or speaker) affects the argument is known as ethos. The audience wants to know who they are dealing with. So make sure you clarify:

1. Who you are.
2. Why you are competent to speak on the issue.
3. Where your authority comes from.

Your audience will also be trying to figure out what your motives are and what you believe, value, and assume. This information helps them determine your credibility and decide whether you are being sincere.

### **The Audience**

When you communicate, in writing or verbally, you need to understand your audience. Knowing who you're speaking to helps you avoid using technical terms when speaking to lay people, or "dumbing down" the content if your message is intended for professionals. Things to consider here include:

1. What are the audience's expectations?
2. How will they use the information you provide?
3. What is the audience hoping to take away after reading/listening?
4. Why are you communicating to this audience in the first place?

This part of the triangle is concerned with appealing to the emotions of the audience, which is known as pathos. The audience needs to be moved by what you are saying. Ask yourself:

1. What emotion do you want to evoke? Fear, trust, loyalty...?
2. Do you have shared values you want to draw on?
3. How do your audience's beliefs fit with your message?

Connecting with your audience through pathos is a strong means of gaining support.

### **The Context**

Finally, your audience analyzes the content and circumstances of your communication.

1. What events preceded the communication?
2. What types of arguments are used?
3. Are they logical and well thought out?
4. How are they delivered?
5. Where is the document or speech delivered?
6. Is this communication necessary?

Here the emphasis is on logic and reason, or logos (pronounced log-oss). Your audience needs to be able to follow what you are saying for it to be believable. Ask yourself:

1. Have I presented a logical, well-constructed argument?
2. How do I support my claims?
3. What evidence do I have?
4. What are the counterarguments?

The three points on the Rhetorical Triangle relate directly to the three classic appeals you should consider when communicating.

1. Ethos – Building trust by establishing your credibility and authority (Writer).
2. Pathos – Appealing to emotion by connecting with your audience through their values and interests (Audience).
  - i. Logos – Appeal to intelligence with well-constructed and clearly argued ideas (Context).

To be fully effective and persuasive, your communication must appeal to all three of the elements of the Rhetorical Triangle. An argument that is purely based on emotion won't last for very long. Likewise, if all you do is present facts and figures, you will lose your audience's interest and they won't be able to relate to what you are saying. Finally, you can be the most credible person going, but if you don't make sense, or your arguments aren't logical, you won't be considered credible for very long.

Using the Rhetorical Triangle

When preparing a written document, speech or presentation you should first consider the three elements required for effective persuasion. If your communication is lacking in any of the three areas, then you'll decrease the overall impact your message will have on your audience.

### **Step One**

Fully consider the impact your credibility has on the message. Failing to do so risks leaving your audience unconvinced. Answer the audience's question, "Is the source credible?"

1. What is the purpose of your communication?
2. A call for action?
3. To provide information?
4. To educate?
5. To persuade or change a perspective?
6. To present ideas?
7. To entertain?
8. Who are you as a person?
9. Establish who you are and reveal your biases, beliefs, values and assumptions as appropriate.
10. Explain where your expertise comes from.
11. Use expert testimony.
12. Show why you should be considered an authority.

### **Step Two**

Fully consider your audience; otherwise they may feel disconnected and the message will be lost. Appeal to their emotions where this is appropriate and honest. And answer the audience's hidden question, "Is this person trying to manipulate me?"

1. Who are the members of my audience?
2. What are their expectations?
3. Why are they reading/listening?
4. How will they use this document?
5. What do I want them to take away?
6. How can I connect emotionally?
7. What emotions do I want to evoke?
8. Do I use anecdotes or personal stories?

### **Step Three**

Fully consider the context of your message. And make sure you deliver it with a solid appeal to reason. Answer the audience's question, "Is the presentation logical?"

1. How will I present the information?
2. What type of reasoning will I use?
3. How will I support my position? With statistics? Observations?
4. What tone will I use, formal or informal?
5. How will I deliver the communication?
6. What events are surrounding this communication?
7. What background information do I need to supply?
8. What do I need to present to make sure my points are clear?
9. Are there counterarguments I should bring up and then dismiss?
10. Does the method or location of my communication fit with its message?

### **Key Points**

Making persuasive arguments is not easy. By applying the principles of rhetoric to your initial planning, you can significantly increase the success of your communication.

Your audience wants to know that you are credible, they want to know that you understand them, and they want the argument to be logical. These are the three cornerstones of the Rhetorical Triangle, and they must all be addressed in order for your argument to be effective.

Make sure you keep your message balanced between these points. That way you will ensure your message will be clearly understood and received with the correct intention. When you seek to understand how your message will be perceived in this way, you're in the perfect position to address your audience's concerns before they even have a chance to surface.