7.2: Rhetoric In Ancient Times

We will begin our tour in Ancient Greece with the “first four”—Aspasia of Miletus, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—who have come to be regarded as the foremother and forefathers of rhetoric and the Communication discipline as a whole. Although little is known about her because she vanished from history circa 401 BCE, Aspasia of Miletus was perhaps the foremother of classical rhetoric as she is rumored to have taught rhetoric and home economics to Socrates. Her social position was that of a hetaera, or companion who was “more educated than respectable women, and [was] expected to accompany men on occasions where conversation with a woman was appreciated, but wives were not welcome” (Carlson 30). Her specialty was philosophy and politics and she became the only female member of the elite Periclean circle that included the most prominent Sophists of the day. In the circle she made both friends and enemies as a result of her political savvy and public speaking ability.
As a student of Socrates (469-399 BCE), Plato (429-347 BCE) wrote about rhetoric in the form of dialogues wherein the main character is Socrates. Through this form the dialectic was born. While this term has been debated since its inception, Plato conceptualized it as a process of questions and answers that would lead to the ultimate truth and understanding. Think for a moment about contemporary situations wherein this process is utilized. What about an in-class discussion wherein the professor questions the students about an interpretation or meaning of a poem? Or the role that a therapist takes by asking a series of questions to a patient to bring greater clarity in understanding one’s own thoughts, motives, and behavioral patterns? These are just two examples of the dialectic at work. What others can you think of? Ironic is the fact that while Plato contributed a great deal to classical rhetorical theory he was also very critical of it. In Georgias, for example, Plato argued that because rhetoric does not require a unique body of knowledge it is a false rather than true art.

While Plato condemned the art of rhetoric, his student, Aristotle (384-322 BCE) believed in the possibility of rhetoric as a means of creating community. The dialectical, or give and take approach, allows people to share and test ideas with one another with the goal of a more prosperous city-state. He defined rhetoric as the ability to see, in each particular case, the available means of persuasion. Two parts of this definition are particularly significant: the terms “in each particular case” and “persuasion.” The former suggests that Aristotle recognized the importance of context and audience; that a specific situation with a particular audience might direct the speaker, or rhetor, to create a message in a form that might look different in another context with another audience. He recognized the importance of audience analysis: that different things appeal to different people. To put it in contemporary terms, let us look at an example from the marketing and advertising world. Mattel, the company who makes Barbie has long been interested in selling the doll as well as her friends and accessories worldwide. (Currently, a Barbie is sold somewhere in the world every 2 seconds!)
Researching the Japanese doll market, advertisers found that Japanese girls do not play with their dolls in the same way as American girls—dressing them, fixing their hair, and role-playing with them. Instead, Japanese girls might place the dolls on a shelf and admire them. To sell Barbie in Japan meant that Mattel must also “teach” Japanese girls how to play and use Barbie like American kids do. As a result, their Japanese television commercials are explicit in the verbal messages as well as the images of playing with (not looking at) Barbie. Mattel has taken the same message—sell Barbie—and constructed it differently depending on the context and their audience. This would be an example of creating the necessary appeals to persuade kids (to buy Barbie) in each particular case (America versus Japan).

The second part of his definition dealing with persuasion suggests that Aristotle conceptualized a very specific and limited scope for rhetoric. Rhetoric exists in contexts where a person or a group of people is engaged in the process of communicating for the purpose of changing another in some way. Change may come in the form of trying to influence a prospective voter in an upcoming election or convincing a jury on the guilt or innocence of a defendant in a murder trial. As we will discuss later in this chapter, the sole focus on persuasion is one of the critiques that contemporary theorists have when assessing rhetorical theory.

While much of the classical theorists were men and dealt with traditionally male roles, Pan Chao (c. 45 CE-115 CE) provides historical insight into Eastern rhetoric and the role of women in rhetoric. A strong believer in the benefits of education, she was one of the first people to argue for the education of girls and women. Writing on the four qualifications of womanhood (virtue, words, bearing, and work), she said of womanly words, they “need be neither clever in debate nor keen in conversation,” but women should “…choose words with care; to avoid vulgar language; to speak at appropriate times; and to not weary others (with much conversation), [these] may be called the characteristics of womanly words” (Pan Chao 417). The role of women and other nondominant groups is another concern of contemporary theorists that will be discussed later in more detail.

Articulating a Classical Rhetorical Theory

Two other key figures in classical rhetoric are Cicero (106-43 BCE) and Quintillian (c. 35-95). They deserve recognition for combining much of what was known from the Greeks and Romans into more complete theoretical systems. Many of the concepts to emerge from this time are still relevant today, although they may have been transformed in some way to reflect a more contemporary context. You may, for example, recognize them in the setting of a public speaking course. In the classical system there were three types of public speeches—legal, political, and ceremonial. Eventually the genre of rhetorical discourse would include poetry, sermons, letters, songs; and with the advent of the technology, mass mediated discourse such as television, radio, and film.

Another major contribution was the formation of the five canons: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. All of these should be easily recognizable as the stages of speech preparation. First, the speechwriter must invent and formulate the arguments based on logos—rational appeal or logic. Next, the speech is organized in the most effective manner. Aristotle thought the logical appeals should go in the main part or body of the speech and the appeals to ethos and pathos should fall in the introduction and conclusion. After the proper arrangement of the information, the writer must think about style—the particular language choices that will enhance the enjoyment, and thus acceptability of the argument, on the part of the audience. The forth step, memory, was vital in the classical period but is rarely a requirement in today’s public speaking contexts. Notes, cue cards, and, teleprompters are all devices that have replaced this original forth canon. The final element, delivery, consists of the use of nonverbal gestures, eye contact and vocal
variations when presenting the speech to an audience. Think back to the evaluation form that your professor used to evaluate your speeches in class; chances are you were evaluated in some manner on your ability to perform the five canons.

Rhetoric Loses Its Status, Then Rises Again

As the Roman Empire fell and the historical period known as the Middle Ages (400-1400) dominated, rhetoric fell from grace. It was no longer a valued and honored skill but instead was thought of as a pagan art. This view coincided with the Christian domination of the period as, “Christians believed that the rhetorical ideas formulated by the pagans of classical Greece and Rome should not be studied and that possession of Christian truth was accompanied by an automatic ability to communicate the truth effectively” (Foss, Foss, and Trapp 8). Ironically, it was a Christian, Augustine, who recognized and articulated the role for rhetoric in the church. Prior to his conversion to Christianity, Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric, thus, he knew skills in oratory and that the ability to move an audience was consistent with the duties of a preacher. As the world grew bigger, people needed a form of communication that would travel across distance—thus letter writing became popular and was now considered within the scope of rhetoric.

As the Middle Ages ended, the Renaissance took its place from 1400-1600. During this period two intellectual trends—humanism and rationalism—shaped the study of rhetoric. Humanism is the study of history, moral philosophy, poetry, and rhetoric of classical antiquity. These thinkers believed that the word was to be known and understood through language, rather that the natural or physical. Rationalism, however, privileged scientific and objective answers to life’s questions and as such had little use for rhetoric. In the modern period that followed three trends in rhetoric emerged—the epistemological, belletristic, and elocutionist.

Challenges To The Canon

While much of the classical rhetorical theories arose from the closely related context of public speaking, much of the theorizing that contributes to contemporary rhetoric comes from outside this context and, to some extent, outside the Communication discipline. While Aristotle and Augustine were chiefly concerned with questions of persuasive ability, contemporary theorists are concerned with relationships between power, knowledge, and discourse. Hopefully, you can see that this is a much broader set of questions and in turn the scope of rhetoric has also expanded. Below, we will discuss this expansion and the contributors.

Rhetoric In Contemporary Times

In addition to the broader set of concerns on the part of contemporary theorists, they specifically challenged certain assumptions and biases of the canon—that of rationalism and voice. Responding to the rational bias are social constructionism and postmodernism. Social Constructionism often associated with Thomas Kuhn and Richard Rorty, questions the premise that scientific or philosophical knowledge can be assumed as fundamentally true. This perspective "discounts the possibility that truth/reality/knowledge exists in an a priori state." [Instead,] it emphasizes what cultures regard as knowledge or truth” (Covino and Jolliffe 83). Meaning, that the “truth” is not “out there” (as X Files would have us believe). Rather, the truth is determined by our own personal and cultural experiences and how language is used to understand and explain those experiences.
In any discussion of Postmodernism the difficulty of defining the term is invariably part of the discussion. Part of that problem can be located the etymology of the word itself. Modern refers to just now (from modo in Latin) and post means after. Thus, this term translates into “after just now”—an idea difficult to wrap our heads around you might say. How do you, for example, point to or mark the period after just now? (Covino and Jolliffe 76). Some qualities that describe postmodernism are that of fragmentation, nonlinearity, and instability. The film, Moulin Rouge, is an excellent example of a postmodern text as it exemplifies these qualities. The story is told not in a traditionally linear (or modern) form, but instead the dialogue is made up of a patchwork of pop songs from Elton John to Madonna to weave the tale of a 19th century romance.

The second major challenge to the rhetorical canon and to a rational paradigm has been that of voice; who gets to speak and whose rhetoric is considered significant (or even gets labeled as rhetoric). Going back to the classical period, you remember that public oratory was considered the scope of rhetoric. And you also know who traditionally hold positions of power that would grant them access to the public speaking contexts—primarily white, wealthy men. This obviously left out a lot of people: they had no voice. An Afrocentric and feminist perspective offer two responses to this challenge. An Afrocentric position seeks to include linguistic elements from African languages as well as the Black experience in America into the scope and understanding of rhetorical processes. A feminist perspective looks at the ways in which women and other groups have been similarly left of the scope of rhetorical discourse and attempts to uncover the patriarchal biases in language and restore them with more egalitarian principles.

Case In Point: Contemporary Rhetorical Theorists

Here is a list of contemporary theorists who have all challenged the canon in some way. To further your understanding of rhetorical theory explore the works of one or more of these rhetorical scholars to learn about their unique and important contributions.

- Michael Bakhtin
- Kenneth Burke
- Karlyn Kohrs Campbell
- Helene Cixous
- Mary Daly
- Jacques Derrida
- Sonja K.Foss
- Karen A. Foss
- Michel Foucault
- Sally Miller Gearhart
- Julia Kristeva
- Malcom X
- Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca
- I.A Richards
- Stephen Toulmin
- Virginia Woolf
Contributions and Affiliations

- Survey of Communication Study. **Authored by:** Scott T Paynton and Linda K Hahn. **Provided by:** Humboldt State University. **Located at:** [https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Survey_of_Communication_Study/Preface](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Survey_of_Communication_Study/Preface). **License:** [CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)