

LUC WRITING CENTER – “THE THREE RHETORICAL APPEALS”

As defined by Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher (384-322 BC), there are three main types of rhetorical appeals: **ethos**, **pathos**, and **logos**. When someone makes an argument using one or more of these rhetorical appeals, they are essentially demanding that you, as the reader or listener, believe the argument being made. There can be many perspectives on one issue. Why should you believe any one argument? And how can someone try to convince you?

The Three Elements of the Arts of Persuasion:

Ethos: Using **ethos**, the speaker or writer may try to support his or her argument (“*The global community needs to send in more troops to restore order in areas hit by famine, disease, or war*”) by claiming that they have had a lot of personal experience in dealing with the issue they describe (“*I was a UN peacekeeper in Meriet and know what it’s like to try to help a population frantic with need*”). The issue with this approach is that it requires the reader or listener, who may know very little about the issue under discussion, to make a judgment about the writer or speaker’s credentials. Also, another person might refute this argument based on ethos by also countering with greater ethos (“*I am from Meriet, lived through this period of famine, disease, and war, and only saw trouble, unrest, and brutality result from the UN peacekeeper’s mission*”). Caught between two opposing perspectives, you may struggle to decide which one to believe.

When academics publish articles in journals, especially on subjects like how to teach writing, they are appealing to **ethos** in order to get their articles accepted. An article on college writing by someone who does not have the experience of a college writing instructor would probably not be accepted. (The argument of the article, however, can’t depend only on ethos, but must be fact-based.)

Another form of **ethos** involves celebrities using their recognizable names, faces, and reputations, to sell products to consumers. Especially notable in the cosmetics industry, celebrity endorsement sends the message that you as the consumer should trust this celebrity’s word that this product is excellent – and may in fact emulate (i.e. *be more like*) this celebrity (*Jennifer Lopez*) by buying L’Oreal makeup.

Pathos: Using **pathos**, the speaker or writer may try to support his or her argument (“*The global community needs to send in more troops to restore order in areas hit by famine, disease, or war*”) by appealing to the listener or reader’s emotions through using evocative words (“*Thousands of poor little children suffer a harsh, painful death every day without food or aid due to instability*”). A common way to figure out if someone is using pathos in an argument is to count how many adjectives appear throughout a passage (4, in this example) and decide if they are very “colorful,” meaning they are intended to be emotionally gripping (“*poor little,*” “*harsh, painful*”). Remember that the speaker or writer could be telling the truth about the situation, but he or she is not convincing you logically. Instead, they are endeavoring to sway your emotions, your weak point, which could be problematic.

There is a time and place for experiencing **pathos** in speech and writing. Often, in the search for logic, we can cut ourselves off from feeling human emotions or empathy when listening to or reading someone’s story, and that can be highly unrewarding. On the other hand, throughout history powerful leaders such as Adolf Hitler have successfully appealed to the emotions of their audience using excitement, fear, and anger to motivate their followers, instead

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of logic, and the consequences to the entire world were disastrous. Be careful if you find yourself emotionally moved by an argument without being logically convinced at the same time.

Logos: Using **logos**, the speaker or writer may try to support his or her argument (“*The global community needs to send in more troops to restore order in areas hit by famine, disease, or war*”) with solid facts, statistics, and logical evidence (“*Since one thousand UN troops were sent into Meriet in 1997, establishing order and dispensing regular shipments of aid in an orderly fashion, the country has experienced a 45% decrease in the mortality rate.*”) **Logos** is the most scientific form of rhetorical appeal, since it engages with the listener or reader mentally and logically, advocating a clear thesis, or plan of action that is based on observable effects. The presence of **logos** in an argument usually means the speaker or writer’s line of reasoning is sound and worth considering.

However, since facts can be falsified, **logos** must still be questioned. Perhaps a speaker or writer provides statistics from a poll or study (“a 45% decrease in the mortality rate”). Ask yourself *where* that number came from. Did the UN troops themselves conduct that measurement of mortality rates? Do they have a *motive* for falsifying information (i.e. to make their intervention and presence in Meriet seem like a success?) Often those conducting a political survey work for the political party most favored in the results. If authors of articles carefully cite where their statistics and figures have come from, this allows the reader to go to the works cited page and find the studies and surveys the authors relied on, checking facts for themselves. Verbal mentions of where information came from or in-text citation and works cited pages are encouraging indications that a speaker or writer has crafted a carefully-researched and accurate argument using **logos**.

Any or all of these rhetorical appeals can appear in the same argument. To decide whether the person making the argument is reliable and using accurate methods, it is a good idea to:

1. Determine whether ethos, pathos, and/or logos appear
2. Find out what the speaker or writer is attempting to make you believe or do
3. Make sure you can fact-check the “proof” in the argument. Each argument, issue, and scenario is different and must be individually dealt with – a bit of **ethos** or **pathos** may be used to great advantage in an argument also employing **logos**. However, being aware of how these rhetorical appeals can influence you will help you avoid believing in false, inaccurate, or poorly-researched opinions.