

Rhetoric



Definition

For some, rhetoric is a bad thing: the shading of truth as practiced by a shady politician or the “spin” embellishing a story into lies. In this view, rhetoric is opposed to truth or knowledge.

A contrasting view more consistent with its origins understands rhetoric as both a set of practices and a theory helping us to make, represent, and share knowledge.

Aristotle, one of the earliest rhetoricians, focused on how rhetoric helps us compose knowledge and communicate as members of the public—in the forensic (or judicial) sphere; the deliberative (or legislative) sphere; and the epideictic (or ceremonial) sphere. From its beginning, rhetoric was intended to serve the needs of a *group of citizens* at least as much as it was intended to serve *individual citizens*.

Today, rhetoric is associated with all the places where we write: from the schoolhouse to the courthouse; from a birth certificate to the presidential inaugural address; from a protest poster to a text message.

Importance to the Field

Key terms provided by rhetoric help us to both understand and compose texts. For example, the five rhetorical canons—*invention, memory, arrangement, style, delivery*—can guide composing. Kenneth Burke’s *terministic screen* helps us understand that a way of seeing blinds, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* helps us recognize that all rhetoric is culturally contextualized. Using such terms to frame inquiry, writing tasks, and ways of sharing what we have learned makes us better writers and rhetorical citizens.

Resources

- Baca, Damian, and Victor Villanueva, eds. *Rhetorics of the Americas: 3114 BCE to 2012 CE*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Hertzberg, eds. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001. Print.
- Gaillet, Lynée, with Winifred B. Horner, eds. *The Present State of Scholarship in the History of Rhetoric: A Twenty-first Century Guide*. Rev. ed. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2010. Print.
- Lunsford, Andrea A., ed. *Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women in the Rhetorical Tradition*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995. Print.
- Richardson, Elaine B., and Ronald L. Jackson II, eds. *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004. Print.



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