

A Brief History of Public Speaking

Brief: Our current knowledge and practice of public speaking is built upon the Western tradition of ancient Greece and Rome, and has developed until the present day.

Learning Objective: To identify key figures and milestones in the history of public speaking.

Key Terms:

- **Sophist:** One of a class of teachers of rhetoric, philosophy, and politics in ancient Greece, especially one who used fallacious but plausible reasoning.
- **Orator:** A skilled and eloquent public speaker.

A Timeline of Public Speaking in Western Culture

Our current knowledge and practice of public speaking is built upon the Western tradition of ancient Greece and Rome, and has developed until the present day.

The Classical Period (500 BCE-400 BCE)

The ancient Greeks highly valued public political participation. Public speaking was a crucial tool in the public arena.

Aspasia of Miletus (469 BCE), the “mother of rhetoric,” is believed to have taught rhetoric to Socrates. During this period Pericles, the Athenian ruler and Aspasia’s partner, treated Aspasia as an equal and allowed her every opportunity to engage in dialogue with the important and educated men of society.

Socrates (469-399 BCE) greatly influenced the direction of the Classical Period. Most of what we know about Socrates comes from the writings of his student Plato.

Plato (429-347 BCE) wrote about rhetoric in the form of dialogues with Socrates as the main character. Plato defined the scope of rhetoric according to his negative opinions of the art.

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) is the most famous Greek scholar. Aristotle studied in Plato’s Academy where he later taught public speaking until Plato’s death in 347 BCE, when he opened his own school of politics, science, philosophy, and rhetoric. Aristotle divided the “means of persuasion” into three parts, or three artistic proofs, necessary to persuade others: logical reason (logos), human character (ethos), and emotional appeal (pathos).

The Classical Period flourished for nearly a millennium in and around Greece as democracy gained prominence. Citizens learned public speaking from early teachers known as Sophists (400s BCE). Sophists were self-appointed professors who taught their pupils how to succeed in

the civic life of the Greek states. Concerned about teaching others how to use the power of rhetoric for political manipulation, Plato criticized the Sophists.

The Romans: Cicero and Quintilian

Cicero (106-43 BCE) is considered one of the most significant rhetoricians of all time. Cicero is most famous in the field of public speaking for creating the five canons of rhetoric, a five-step process for developing a persuasive speech that we still use to teach public speaking today.

Quintilian (c. 35-95 CE) argued that public speaking is inherently moral. He stated that the ideal orator is "a good man speaking well."

The Medieval Period (400 CE-1400 CE)

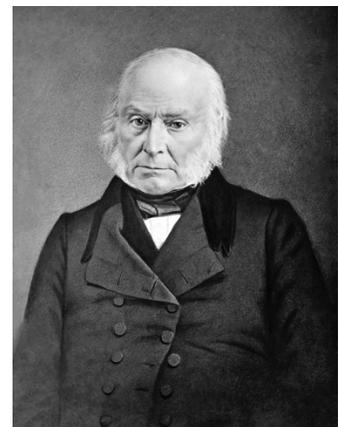
Though he lived in a time when public speech was often suppressed, St. Augustine (354 CE-430 CE), a Christian clergyman and renowned rhetorician, argued for the continued development of ideas that had originated during the Classical Period. He thought that the study of persuasion, in particular, was a worthwhile pursuit for the church.

The Renaissance (1400-1600)

Francis Bacon (1561-1626), a contemporary of Shakespeare, believed that the journey to truth is paramount to the study and performance of communication. According to Bacon, reason and morality require speakers to have a high degree of accountability, making it an essential element in oration.

The Enlightenment (1600-1800)

Overall, the Enlightenment Period served as a bridge between the past and the present. Political rhetoric also underwent renewal in the wake of the American and French Revolutions. The rhetorical studies of ancient Greece and Rome were resurrected in the studies of the era as speakers and teachers looked to Cicero and others to inspire defense of the new republic. Leading rhetorical theorists, including John Quincy Adams, advocated for the democratic advancement of the art of rhetoric.



John Quincy Adams served as a professor of rhetoric and oratory at Harvard University.

New School (1900 –Today)

Throughout the 20th century, rhetoric developed as a concentrated field of study in high schools and universities. During this time, schools established communication departments that teach classical rhetoric, contemporary rhetoric, along with empirical and qualitative social science.

From Concept to Action

Take some time to learn about your public speaking class. Does your school have a communications department? If yes, when was your school's communication department founded? If no, what department is your public speaking class a part of? What other courses does your school's department offer? In what ways do these courses reflect the greater history of public speaking?

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