

What is Rhetoric?

Brief: Rhetoric, which dates back to ancient times, is the art of speaking well and includes five key parts: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.

Learning Objective: Define rhetoric and identify its five parts.

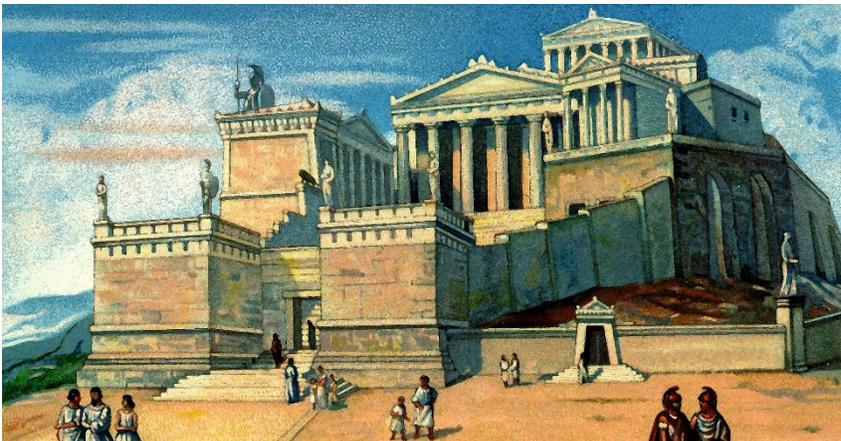
Key Terms:

- High style: A formal style of speech delivery.
- Invention: Finding or thinking up good speech content.
- Low style: An informal style of speech delivery.
- Rhetoric: The art of speaking well.

Definitions of Rhetoric

A public speaking class is essentially a rhetoric class. This can be confusing because today the word rhetoric is often used to indicate that a speaker is lying (“His record doesn’t match his rhetoric”) or that a speaker is filling air with meaningless talk (“Let’s move past all the rhetoric and get down to business”).

However, the study of rhetoric has been an important part of Western Culture for more than 2000 years. Because public speaking is so critical to developing a healthy democracy, ancient Greeks and Romans spent a lot of time thinking and writing about what’s required to make a good public speech.



The Acropolis of Athens

The ancient Greek Aristotle defined rhetoric as “the faculty of discovering in any particular case the available means of persuasion.” Aristotle’s teacher, Plato, held that rhetoric is “the art of

winning the soul by discourse.” And, the Roman thinker Quintilian suggested simply that rhetoric is the art of speaking well.

The Five Parts of Rhetoric

Earlier thinkers established that the study and practice of rhetoric involves five main parts: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.

Invention

The first requirement of a good speech is good material. Invention means finding or thinking up good speech content. Aristotle suggested that speech content is either inartistic (found) or artistic (novel, meaning you had to think it up).

Arrangement

Once you determine your speech topic and what artistic and inartistic proofs you will use, then you need to think about the best possible way to arrange your speech.

How much background information do you need to provide? How should you arrange your main points? How long or short should you make your introduction?

In many ways, arranging a speech is more difficult than arranging an essay because a reader can jump around in an essay (scan the section headings, revisit a complex point, etc.), but an audience member must listen to the speaker’s flow of information in chronological time. Given this, you must think about how your audience will hear and understand your speech.

Style

Once you know what you will say and the order in which you will say it, then you can begin to focus more on the details of exactly how you will say it.

Some speeches are stylistically rich (Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is a famous example), while others are stylistically plain (most business presentations, for example), yet both have a type of style. The rhetorician Cicero talked about high, middle, and low styles in public speaking.

You are probably familiar with high style; many political orators use it for landmark speeches. In the United States, the State of the Union Address is usually delivered in a middle or high style. You are also probably familiar with low style, such as what is commonly used on a television talk show. Ultimately, style is governed by the topic and the audience you are addressing.

Memory

This part of rhetoric was really important for speakers in classical Greece and Rome because they delivered extremely long speeches (often in a very high style). It remains important for us today because a speech is spoken, not read.

If you don't practice your speech, you won't be familiar with it. However, you shouldn't try to memorize your speeches word for word. Much like speakers who read their speeches, speakers who rely on memorization to deliver their speeches tend to sound monotone and, as a result, lose their connection with the audience.

Delivery

The final main part of rhetoric is the one that people tend to fear the most: standing up in front of an audience and actually delivering the speech. However, if you have the invention, arrangement, style, and memory parts prepared and practiced, the delivery part of the speech becomes the natural culmination of your efforts and feels much less scary.

From Concept to Action

Search a video platform such as YouTube for examples of high style speaking and low style speaking. For high style speaking, look for and watch a public speech delivered by a famous person. For low style speaking, look for and watch two or more people talking in an informal "talk show" format (not a one-on-one interview, which is likely to be more of a middle style). Notice the differences in styles. Specifically, how are these types of delivery different? Do you notice any similarities?

OER IMAGE SOURCES:

"Acropolis Athens Greece Antique Old Vintage." Pixabay. <https://pixabay.com/illustrations/acropolis-athens-greece-antique-1348511>. Accessed 9 March 2019. [CC0]

OER TEXT SOURCES:

"Rhetoric." Lumen Learning. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/publicspeakingprinciples/chapter/another-option-for-week-one-this-chapter-is-cc-by-matt-mcgarrity-senior-lecturer-university-of-washington>. Accessed 9 March 2019. [CC BY-SA 3.0]