The Elements of Classical Argument

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The basics of classical argument are the three types of appeals. Aristotle held that there were three ways to go about persuading an audience regarding a point. These three appeals are the appeal to reason (*logos*), the appeal to the speaker's character (*ethos*), and the appeal to the audience's emotions (*pathos*). This handout treats these types of appeals in brief.

Pathos

Pathos, the appeal to the audience's emotions, is likely the easiest of the three types of appeals to explain, and the hardest to pull off effectively in practice. In using this appeal, the writer tries to gain the audience's assent to the point being made by making them either feel good about accepting the argument or feel bad about not accepting the argument—or both. This type of appeal is especially effective with calls to some sort of action: think of the TV ads asking you to send money to support impoverished children in a foreign country. These ads try to make you feel bad for these children and feel guilty that you are more fortunate than they are; then they give you a way out of that sadness and guilt: you can donate money to help one (or more) of these poor children get healthcare and education.

Of course, such appeals must work, or we wouldn't see them; they do not, however, work on all people. Many of us will mute the sound or flip the channel instead of having our emotions manipulated—especially when the manipulators are trying to make us feel *bad*.

Another example of this type of appeal, however, is John F. Kennedy's "Ask not . . ." speech. In exhorting the American public to not ask what their country could do for them but what they could do for their country, Kennedy issues a mild admonition against those who expect their country to do for them, encouraging them—and others—to be, instead, people who work for the future of America. The speech was written and delivered so that no one is accused of anything; instead, everyone's patriotism is roused.

This appeal is hard to pull off, because appeals to the emotions are rarely designed, as Kennedy's was, to induce positive feelings. And when this appeal is used to induce negative feelings, people are—not surprisingly—often turned off.

Ethos

Ethos, the appeal to the speaker's character is the attempt to gain the audience's support for the writer's argument through portraying the writer as the type of person the audience would be likely to listen to and believe. It is the appeal that says, "Look at me, I'm a good person" or "I'm just like you" and "so you should listen to me."

Of course, audiences will—reasonably—be suspicious if a writer makes this appeal in this straightforward, "I'm a good person" way. Instead the writer must learn enough about the audience—how they think, how they make knowledge—to be able to illustrate that they should take note. If the writer shares points of view with the audience, that would be a good way in. If the writer has followed a knowledge-building procedure that the audience would value, that too is a good place to begin. Building *ethos* in at text is a matter of showing the audience that you know them and that there are good reasons why they should listen to you.

Logos

Logos is the appeal to reason. It is probably the most involved appeal to explain and the

most straightforward to apply—this is what we have all been taught all our lives in terms of making arguments: our arguments should make logical sense. The appeal to reason is exactly that: the writer illustrates why the position taken is logical in light of the evidence.

However, the appeal to reason is often complicated in terms of rhetoric, because rhetorical reasoning is not exactly the same as logical reasoning (which is not to say that rhetoric is illogical). Logic operates in fully developed and articulated *syllogisms*, while rhetoric often employs a truncated syllogism—called an *enthymeme*.

A *syllogism* consists of three parts: a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. While the tests for valid logic are quite complicated, the basic idea of a syllogism is the logical argument that if:

> All *x* are *y*, and
> *Z* is an *x*,
> Therefore, *z* is a *y*.

The six rules that must be satisfied in order for this to be logically valid are not important. However, an argument in this form will be logical if all six rules are met. Furthermore, the argument *must* (according to logic) be accepted if it is logical and the truth of the premises (the first two statements) is not disputed—if the premises are "true" and the logic is valid, the conclusion must also be true.

In rhetoric, though, we rarely spell out the full syllogism; instead, we argue through the use of *enthymemes*—a syllogism in which one premise (usually the minor premise, for all that matters) is not stated. The writer assumes the omitted premise. It makes the logic harder to test, because the whole argument is not spelled out, however, the reasoning in an enthymeme is usually easy enough to follow, and a bad premise is easily found and disputed.

Logic is about building your argument on evidence, and linking that evidence together in chains of meaning where one premise or thesis follows from its evidence and a number of premises and theses support the main argument being made.

Argument

An argument, then, consists of all three appeals. Most audiences will expect primarily *logos*-based arguments. Of course, knowing this and providing such an argument will build your *ethos* with that audience. *Pathos* should, most times, be subtle—even subliminal—when it is used at all.

Remember, though, that the best logic in the world—the most reasonable argument in the world—will likely not be accepted from writers who are unable to establish themselves as ethical in relation to their audience's expectations of writers who address that audience.[1]

Arguments, then, must be made logically, must be made by a writer who has established a firm ethical position, and must make good use of the audience's emotions (if an emotional appeal is within the scope of what the audience will perceive an ethical writer doing).

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[1] See the "What is a Rhetorical Situation?" handout for more on the importance of audience.