

14 ELABORATE RHETORICS

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OVERVIEW

This essay presents a working definition of rhetoric, then explores its key terms to help you understand rhetoric's nature as both an applied art of performance and a heuristic art of invention and creation.¹ The definition also situates rhetoric in the social processes of identification and division. The definition goes as follows: "Rhetoric is the art of elaborating or exploiting ambiguity to foster identification or division." The chapter develops the meaning of rhetoric, art, elaboration, exploitation, identification, and division, modeling a process that anyone can follow with their own definitions of this or any complex concept. In the end, you should see rhetoric as more than "mere rhetoric" or "the art of persuasion." You will learn to see rhetoric's presence in all situations that involve people using words and images to teach, delight, persuade, or identify and divide. You will also learn the value of rhetorical listening for understanding the social, cultural, and plural nature of identity and, thus, our capacity for identification (or division) across contexts.

You are a writer, so I'm going to presume that you don't need to hear much about *why* you should bother learning more about rhetoric. Instead, I hope to illuminate its nature as an art so that you can put it to work to change the world or to reimagine it or even re-create it.

People use rhetoric everyday for a wide variety of purposes: to persuade, move, entertain, teach, plead, divide, portray, protest, amuse, complain, inspire, empathize, debate, inquire, charm, and to do just about anything one person can communicate to others with words and other symbols, sounds, or images. This essay presumes that, as a writer yourself, you'll

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benefit from a better understanding of what the term *rhetoric* means—its definition—because it can help you not only decide what to write (invention) and how to write it but also make sense of (analyze) what you and others write and why it matters. Understanding rhetoric will help you become a better writer and reader. Like most complex concepts, people have widely divergent ideas about what rhetoric means. That's okay and to be expected. At the same time, and because we think *with* concepts and not just *about* them, developing your own workable definition of rhetoric—drawing from what others say about it—can make your writing and reading more purposeful, more of a habit or art than a happy accident.

EVERYDAY RHETORICS

Before I discuss a definition of rhetoric that I have found useful and that I hope you will as well, I want to spend a few moments making the case that rhetoric is everywhere. Rhetoric has traditionally and most commonly been defined simply as “the art of persuasion.” In popular usage nowadays, rhetoric refers to the use of language, symbols, or images to influence opinion or beliefs, often with the intent of moving people to change their minds or actions. Sometimes people use the term *rhetoric* to name an exaggerated emphasis on style and manipulation at the expense of substance or even truth. In that usage, rhetoric (sometimes referred to as “mere rhetoric”) embellishes the truth or, even worse, hides it with lies or misinformation. In this sense, rhetoric is also the use of symbols for partisan or individual interests with a goal of gaining or maintaining an advantage or privilege, winning an argument, proving a point (with gusto!), or forming special interest groups

Let's suppose, however, that rhetoric involves more than just persuasion or lying. After all, not all occasions for writing or speaking involve changing someone's mind or misleading them. Writers also teach and inform. They entertain and tell stories. They invite us to wonder about the nature of things, lives, experience, history. Writers defend principles, expose injustice, create community, and, not surprisingly, attack others. Persuasion, in other words, is only one aim of rhetoric and usually associated with speechmaking, debates, or formal arguments in public forums. You might ask, then, “How can we define rhetoric to account for and understand the many forms and purposes of writing we now use to get along in the world?” How does rhetoric bring people together or, the opposite, divide them?

Rhetoric can help us understand the everyday situations that create or threaten community. When you tell a joke, for instance, you might want

simply to make people laugh, but whether you intend them to or not, jokes also invite a bond (identity) between you and your audience. When the hearer “gets it,” there has been some identification, an “I see what you did there” moment. The hearer may also recognize the form of a joke (the setup, the punchline) and swing along with its rhythm. That recognition of form also creates some identification that helps you know, for example, when it’s time to laugh, the Aha! Moment, the spontaneous recognition of form. Jokes aren’t always funny, of course. We may not get them right away or at all. They may be painful or embarrassing to hear, especially when the laughter comes at another’s expense. Jokes may create division, in other words, marking a difference or distinction between an “us” and “them” or self and other.

Even the kind of everyday humor we find on the news satire website *The Onion* functions rhetorically to foster identification or division. Consider this headline: “Taliban Criticized for Failure to Include Diverse Array of Extremist Perspectives in Government.” (To read the full story from September 9, 2021, search the headline at www.theonion.com.) Here, we see both identification and division: the Taliban would of course not share the democratic value that diverse perspectives (extremist or not) make governments better. The joke is on those who indiscriminately apply their own values (pluralism) to people who don’t share them. We may criticize the Taliban for being extremist, misogynist, or racist, but criticizing them for not adopting the principles of deliberative democracy would be like blaming a duck for having feathers. If you get the joke, you understand this point. The humor in this headline, if you see any, directs attention to the media’s habit of manufacturing controversies as click-bait and ridicules those who criticize others because they don’t know any better or simply for the sake of critique itself. The joke divides *us* (those who know) from *them* (those who don’t) and exposes the extremist nature of confirmation bias, which simply reaffirms what we already know or think we know.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF RHETORIC

A good definition will include terms and concepts in a formal, grammatical relationship that helps you generate knowledge, much the same way that a good thesis shapes an argument. If you want to understand rhetoric, consider what others say about it, how it’s defined in dictionaries, and what people do with it (how it works), then define it for yourself so that it works like a universal key that opens innumerable doors or a seed that, with the right ingredients (water, soil, sunlight) grows into a tree with countless

branches. A good definition should help you create or re-create everything you can possibly know about the subject.

Here's the definition I've developed over the years from a variety of sources. This one helps me understand rhetoric as both an art of persuasion (an applied art) and invention (a theoretical art), what historians of rhetoric also call *rhetorica utens* (the *use* of persuasive resources, or *praxis*, πράξις) and *rhetorica docens* (the *study of the use* of persuasive resources, or *theory*, θεωρησιαι).

Rhetoric is the **art** of **elaborating** or **exploiting ambiguity** to foster **identification** or **division**.

The key words in this definition have been highlighted in bold. Let's begin.

What else can we say about rhetoric as both an applied and theoretical art? Zeno of Citium (c.335–c.263 BCE), provides us with a useful analogy for understanding rhetoric's dual nature. Zeno contrasted rhetoric with dialectic to highlight the creative nature of rhetoric with the logical, argumentative nature of dialectic. In ancient Greece, dialectic named the process of logical deduction, which begins with what people know to be true and systematically derives conclusions from it. Sextus Empiricus, in his treatise *Against the Professors*, explains the difference between rhetoric and dialectic:

Zeno of Citium, when asked what is the difference between dialectic and rhetoric, clenched his fist and then opened it out and said, "This,"—comparing the compact and short character of dialectic to the clenching, and suggesting the breadth of the rhetorical style by the opening and extension of his fingers. (2.7; 193; also qtd. in Covino, 35)

In 1644, preacher and rhetorician John Bulwer represented these two hands in his book, *Chirologia: or The naturall language of the hand*. He labeled them "eloquentia" (eloquence, which was associated with rhetoric) and "logica" (logic, associated with dialectic). See figure 1.

In *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy*, William A. Covino suggests that the open hand and closed fist convey rhetoric's function as the intermediary between the sensible and the conceptual, between what we see and what we know. Working with ideas furnished by the imagination (what the Greeks called "phantasy" or "phantasms"), rhetoric, Covino says, presents external impressions to the mind for assent or agreement. Zeno of Citium used the open hand for rhetoric to suggest that it makes the world of the imagination "graspable," understandable, or believable. Rhetoric is "an agency for

speculation” (35). As an art of invention and wonder, rhetoric grasps; it reaches out for the probable, to the uncertain as a method for discovering the available or possible means of persuasion or identification, which can in turn inform the practical application of rhetoric (in argument and other genres) to specific situations. In the image of the open hand, we see the external impressions from divergent sources coalescing in the palm, which is the concept born of experience, the manifestation of the graspable. Rhetoric also works outward, from the conceptual to the impressionable, and through systematic invention, generates multiple perspectives from the common source of experience.



Figure 1. The open hand of eloquence and the closed fist of logic. From *Chirologia: or The naturall language of the hand* (1644) by John Bulwer. <https://bit.ly/chirologia>

FROM INVENTION TO ELABORATION

Throughout its long history, rhetoric has involved the study of oral and written language of all sorts, including literature, visual symbols, and

iconography. Ever since humans discovered that what we say and how we say it makes a difference, we have studied ways to shape our speech and writing to accomplish our goals. Some people seem to be habitually more persuasive than others, so it made sense to early rhetoricians that some system of principles (an art or habit) could explain the why and how of persuasion. That art (what the Greeks called *techne*) could, in turn, be used to teach others the art of speaking (or writing) well. Initially, rhetoric was defined by some as simply “the art of persuasion,” a definition that is still with us today. But rhetoric cannot be simply defined by its ends or aims. Rhetoric is also a productive art, supplying conceptual strategies for generating effective discourse. But as rhetoric and other arts became the subject of more intense philosophical scrutiny, philosophers and statesmen in the Western rhetorical tradition like Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and Cicero (106–47 BCE) recognized that rhetoric involved more than performance. It also included the study of the use of language and the ways that rhetoric functioned as a means of uniting and dividing people, of making decisions about morality and justice, and of establishing laws for social and individual conduct—all fundamental aspects of human relations. In this sense, rhetoric is also an analytical art, meaning that it furnishes perspectives for understanding how people use language for partisan interest.

Aristotle, for example, recognized that rhetoric’s function was “not to persuade, but to see the available means of persuasion in each case” (Kennedy, *On Rhetoric* I.1.4). Rhetorical inquiry is an activity of mind, a faculty of “supplying arguments” (Kennedy, I.2.7), or of “discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever” (Freese, *The Art of Rhetoric* I.1.2). Even “the most exact knowledge” (Kennedy, I.1.12) alone does not enable one to persuade or communicate effectively due to, as Aristotle often mentions, the corruption or fallibility of the hearer. Rhetoric is the shared act of deliberation, a consideration of the probable, of “things that are for the most part capable of being other than they are” (Kennedy, I.2.11).

The idea that rhetoric considers issues which may be debatable, uncertain, or ambiguous (“other than they are”) turns out to be one of modern rhetoric’s most distinguishing interests. In the final analysis, our interpretations of experience, which include what we see and read, are open to multiple perspectives, some of which may be more reasonable or profound than others, but all of which may change over time as our circumstances and needs change. It is the inherent probability and social nature of knowledge that leads Aristotle to claim that rhetoric is the art of discovering the *possible* means of persuasion. As our decisions become harder to make or

our experience more complex and ambiguous, we find it useful to have a method for discovering what might be spoken, written, or visualized. The better control we have over the means of representing our experience and beliefs, the more likely it will be that we can change our circumstances or foster identification with others. Rhetoric is an art of invention, then, and it plays a central role in the socialized creation of knowledge.

The realm of knowledge is vast, as is our capacity for interpreting it freshly. To say that rhetoric is the art of elaborating ambiguity is to suggest that rhetoric has the capacity to shape experience by generating and utilizing form, and that it is a function of the imagination. As the elaboration of ambiguity, rhetoric helps us discern in the vastness of our experience what is meaningful personally and what may be meaningful to others.

As an art of invention, rhetoric elaborates a subject, situation, or even words that may be unsettled or uncertain, ones that can be developed, extended, and recontextualized. Elaboration in this sense involves tracking down the implications of something, including the terms that name and define it. This elaboration of meaning and significance can happen at the most general of levels (what is justice? what is literature?) or the highly specific (what is justice in this particular case? is this novel literary?). Viewing *elaboration* as an aim of rhetoric recalls classical conceptions of rhetoric as an art of invention, of, as Aristotle put it, “finding the available means of persuasion in any given case.” Rhetoric creates knowledge from experience and situations, even as it also functions as an art (or strategy) for manipulating others with words, symbols, or visual representations. What exactly does rhetoric create and elaborate?

Everything! Suppose you want to write an essay or article about the nature and meaning of free speech in public spaces. To elaborate your subject, you can start with your key terms. What do we mean by speech? Do we mean the spoken word? The written? Is a song or a protest sign a kind of speech? What have others said about speech? How does *Merriam-Webster’s Unabridged* define it? How does the US Constitution define it? The US Supreme Court? What are speech’s aims? How might speech affect others? Then, moving on, what does it mean to be free? What freedoms should be guaranteed? What are the limits of freedom? What restrictions on free speech or freedom generally have governments legalized, enforced, or rationalized? What is “free” speech? What do people think it means? How does the law define it? Does it have any limits? Why or why not? Then we can ambiguate or differentiate these terms even further by placing them in particular contexts. What does free speech mean in a theater? Online? At a protest rally? On a campus or public square? In an essay written for

a class? What do these situations have in common? Are *free* and *freedom* substance terms that can mean anything to anyone? Or that mean nothing? Do they even exist in an absolute sense? What happens to our understanding of “free” and “freedom” when illuminated by specific situations? What about free speech necessitated restrictions on hate speech? We could go on and on, tracking down the implications of our key term or terms. Rhetoric becomes the art of elaborating a subject so that we can make informed decisions about what to say or write in any possible situation, while accounting also for purpose (to teach, delight, persuade, or identify, for example), the nature of our audience, the ethical considerations attached to particular contexts (e.g., whether the exercise of freedom carries a responsibility to act in the best interests of a community), and even how people feel about a concept generally as well as its meaning and importance in everyday situations.

EXPLOITATION AND THE REDUCTION OF UNCERTAINTY

Exploitation is what’s called a loaded term: it implies something negative, like taking something that’s not your own and putting it to use for your own purposes. *Exploit* (the verb) means “to make use of meanly or unjustly for one’s own advantage or profit; take undue advantage of” (*Merriam-Webster’s Unabridged*). Exploitation more generally means to convert or transform one thing into another for some gain. It has allegiances to dialectic and logic, both of which begin with certainty (or one specific and unambiguous assertion) and lead through a process of deduction to uncontested truths. The method of development from premise to conclusion mirrors that of rhetorical argument (the closed fist) with one important glitch: rhetorical argument invites an audience to fill in any premises that may be unstated. In the classical form, the dialectical process can be illustrated by this sequence: “All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.” The rhetorical variation might leave out a premise: “Socrates is a man, so he must be mortal.” The audience provides and accepts the missing premise, “all men are mortal.” Both the dialectical and rhetorical forms end at the same conclusion. They “exploit” the certainty that all men are mortal or that Socrates is a man to win their argument and end debate.

What exactly does rhetoric exploit? To exploit ambiguity means to take a particular meaning (among many possible) and use it to accomplish some purpose, like winning an argument. Free speech, for example, has a variety of meanings and interpretations depending upon the context, but you may

decide to be a purist and argue that speech only refers to spoken or written words, not the more general act of expressing an idea or opinion. Here, you can take one meaning of the more ambiguous “free speech” to claim that throwing cream pies at politicians shouldn’t be allowed even when there’s no physical harm because pies are not speech. The Constitution does not explicitly guarantee the right to throw pies at people.

Elaboration and exploitation act together. Rhetoricians create and express knowledge with the open hand and closed fist. As Deborah Black has argued, the Muslim philosopher and rhetorician Al-Fārābī (870 CE – 950 CE) saw the theoretical and creative art of rhetoric operating collaboratively with its practical application (persuasion):

To be a truly perfect philosopher one has to possess both the theoretical sciences and the faculty for exploiting them for the benefit of all others according to their capacity, which can only be done ‘by a faculty that enables him to excel in persuasion.’ These persuasive arts are not essential for the philosopher’s own knowledge, but they are the very thing that makes that knowledge communicable and relevant to anyone else. (Qtd. in Bizzell et al. 432)

Knowledge is useless if it can’t be communicated. Some, including the essayist Michel de Montaigne, believe that ideas depend on words for their very existence (“Of the Education of Children”). Elaboration and exploitation act together.

THE OPPORTUNITIES OF AMBIGUITY

The ancient Greek sophist and teacher Gorgias once claimed, according to the Roman historian Sextus Empiricus (160–210 CE), that “nothing exists.” How can that be? Let’s consider that assertion in a moment. In his speech “On the Nonexistent,” Gorgias makes three related claims:

1. Nothing exists.
2. Even if something did exist, it would be incomprehensible to human beings.
3. Even if someone could comprehend what exists, it could not be explained or communicated to anyone else.

These claims seem absurd, the assertions of hopelessness. The world doesn’t exist, and even if it did, you couldn’t understand it or explain it to anyone? What’s the point of anything, then? Don’t I exist?

Gorgias is clever. *Nothing* (the word) is what's called a *substance* term—it can refer to *everything* and *nothing* simultaneously. If I say “*nothing* exists,” you may counter with “Not!” “I exist.” “The world exists.” The world is not an empty void where all the things we know (including ourselves) don't exist. In this sense *nothing* refers to “everything that does not exist.” However, and here's the key point: *nothing* is also a word comprised of the letters *n-o-t-h-i-n-g*. The word “nothing” clearly exists! I just used the word in a sentence. So there it is, right there. The point is that words can simultaneously refer to things (a word is a sign of a thing) and to other words (as in a dictionary). Words are also things in their own right. *Nothing* is a thing. But it is also *no-thing*.

Words refer to some things that we can't know or comprehend with certainty. This ambiguity is the occasion for and invitation to rhetoric. The word names the condition of language that words have multiple meanings, that the world named or created by words can be understood or imagined in multiple ways. Knowledge, comprised of words, is ambiguous, uncertain, or probable. That doesn't mean that all knowledge is suspect. It just means that people have legitimate and logical reasons to question it. Rhetoric is necessary when knowledge is probable or uncertain, when disagreement or difference is possible.

Ambiguity is also a necessary component in this working definition of rhetoric for a few more reasons: 1) if knowledge is absolute and unequivocal, rhetoric will not be necessary; no one argues about what everyone already believes—when the facts speak for themselves; 2) if the truth or facts are clear and universally accepted, we have no need to debate them with others or to suggest that facts may be other than they are; 3) ambiguity opens the door for rhetoric because it suggests uncertainty, disagreement, or the possibility that there may be more than one way of viewing something. When people disagree about meaning or significance, a course of action, or the value of something, you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric.

We have already seen that rhetoric can reveal (elaborate) ambiguity. We find so much rhetoric in social life because these days it may be possible to create uncertainty and ambiguity anywhere at any time. People certainly attempt it, and if you give them enough leeway, they may cloud an issue that had once seemed clear and its meaning unambiguous. Good rhetoricians and listening writers can show us why something may be more complicated than it might initially seem. Some might argue that ambiguity is our state of being, and so rhetoric may always be necessary (for its elabora-

tion) or on-call (for its exploitation, the act of taking just one perspective or meaning and running with it).

Ambiguity acts as an invitation to connect or an impulse to separate, to join forces or oppose them. Alertness to ambiguity—seeing the world in all its colors rather than black and white, is the defining characteristic of literacy according to William A. Covino, in *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy*. Ambiguity can be upsetting because it makes the world more complex. Sometimes we feel better when there's no doubt about what to do or think. Nevertheless, experience also suggests we should be wary when we feel most certain. The world is almost always more complicated, textured, and nuanced than it initially seems. Rhetoric agitates against complacency. It helps us tolerate and even appreciate uncertainty.

IDENTIFICATION AND DIVISION

From the time of the early teacher-sophists—people who traveled ancient Greece in the fifth century BCE teaching people strategies for effective speaking—definitions of rhetoric have focused on its nature as persuasive discourse. Persuasion involves the use of logical argument and other appeals designed to gain favor, to change minds, to urge action, or even gain sympathy for a cause. It is a kind of pleading that presupposes an antagonistic or at least undecided or uncommitted audience, someone to convert or cajole. Persuasion is only one purpose of rhetoric as a productive art, however. Over time, we have come to recognize that any situation involving the strategic use of symbols to persuade, teach, or delight is analyzable as rhetoric. One common aim in the many uses of language—in literature, politics, law, and even everyday gossip—is identification.

Identification is an important concept in rhetoric because it allows us to see the rhetorical nature of kinds of writing and visual expression that wouldn't usually be thought of as “persuasive” in the traditional sense. There are fairly few occasions when we find ourselves actually changing our minds on the spot in response to what we hear or read and then actually acting on that new way of thinking. However, our attitudes do change gradually, and sometimes not simply in response to direct pleading or urging. Sometimes, for example, we may be moved by a character in a novel or a film to see ourselves or others differently. A biology textbook might teach us to value knowledge when it is acquired by experimentation, even as it may also provide facts about biology. We might empathize with a character depicted in a play, suddenly realizing that we too may have been mistaken by our vanity. Even inanimate objects may function rhetorically when

people use them as symbols to induce a reaction of some kind: the atomic bomb, functioned as a symbolic threat for the fifty years of the Cold War. As the aim of rhetoric, identification focuses attention on attitude as a kind of action or readiness to act, a desire to do something, a desire to act or think together. All kinds of symbolic expression may potentially foster identification and change attitudes.

For Kenneth Burke (1897–1993 CE), the primary aim of rhetoric is identification, which he describes as an alignment of interests or motives and that he carefully distinguishes from persuasion. Unlike persuasion, which normally involves explicit appeals, argument, evidence, or coercion, identification allows for an unconscious factor as well. We may identify with someone (or some cause) and thus come to share belief because we imagine or desire to be one with another, or to feel energized or uplifted by our association. In any rhetorical situation there is always a struggle between the forces of identification and division. People can never be identical or divided absolutely. We have bodies and experiences and a common language, each of which can help us identify with each other. We also have unique experiences that we may interpret differently from others, that keep us divided.



Figure 2. “Hey—are you thinking what I’m thinking?” © John Wilhelm. Used by permission.

Here in Figure 2 we have a nice illustration of how identification works. The image is actually a re-creation of a single-panel cartoon on a “Shoobox Greeting” that shows a similar scene (two doves perched above a child catching snowflakes on their tongue, with the caption, “Hey—are you

thinking what I'm thinking?"). Identification acts like an invitation to imagine yourself to be or be like someone (or thing) in some situation that calls out to everyone involved. The situation can be verbal, visual, aural, or all three, but it is always context dependent, as we see here, the signs suggesting a motive or an attitude that precedes action. Clearly, the bird who speaks understands that they both share this situation and, possibly, the motive to act that it encourages. This situation—like so many others in our daily lives—calls forth words (themselves a form of action) and, consequently, the urge to identify with another. Acts of identification like this one may not appear to be rhetorical at first glance. The question “Hey—are you thinking what I'm thinking?” does not make an explicit argument, so the purpose isn't persuasion exactly. Instead, the viewer identifies with either or both birds (the one who asks, the one who hears), and possibly even the child. We may laugh (or groan) because we realize what the birds must be thinking. The rhetorical clincher comes when we put it all together in an “aha!” moment.

Rhetoric enlists readers or viewers in completing an argument in much the same way. Someone presents evidence or makes a claim, jumps to a conclusion, and closes the deal with the audience once they accept that the evidence or claims warrant (lead to) the conclusion. Arguments need not include all the steps of a logical and deductive process, but they can nevertheless be persuasive if the audience fills in the missing steps (often unconsciously), which they will do if they also view the writer as trustworthy and/or feel positively about the conclusion.

For Burke, our passion is the desire for what he calls consubstantiality or “shared substance” and represents an unconscious desire to identify with others. Consubstantiality can be achieved by different means, including the devices of form, which Burke calls a type of rhetorical appeal, the arousal and gratification of desire. We imagine that we share substance even when exactly what we share is ambiguous or the product of some unconscious desire. Here is how Burke puts it:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so.

Here are ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is “substantially one” with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time, he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. (20–21)

Consubstantiality may be necessary for any way of life, even if it's purely imaginary. Rhetoric potentially builds community on this fantasy that we share "something." Rhetoric can tear it down as well. In the end, rhetoric relies on an unconscious desire for acting-together, for taking a "substance" together. "In the old philosophies," Burke writes, "substance was an *act*; and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, [people] have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*" (21). As mentioned earlier in this essay, the term *substance* itself induces a kind of acting-together. You can see that happen in arguments over quality when people say some "thing" lacks "substance." Such a claim often brings nods of agreement even though, if put to the test, no one would likely agree on just what that "substance" might actually be. Substance becomes purely an acting-together with the term itself referring to nothing in particular. An ambiguous terms serves as an occasion or invitation to agree about "you know not what." It may not matter whether the term has any specific reference because the rhetorical function (inducing agreement or identification, for taking a stance) is to act together, to be social beings.

In naming identification an aim of rhetoric, I don't mean to suggest that identification is the only or ultimate goal of all verbal or symbolic acts. We desire identification precisely because we're also divided. If we were identical with each other (of an identical substance), we wouldn't need to identify at all. (What would be the point?) We are divided, and so we desire consubstantiality. We are identified, and so we desire division. It works both ways.

RHETORICS OF IDENTITY

Identification is the alignment of interests or an overlap of experience that may actually exist between people, or it may be asserted or imagined. Both the reality and the fiction suggest that identity itself is not absolute and that it may be a conscious role or the product or unconscious cultural connections. A rhetoric based on the value and necessity of elaborating or exploiting identification should also include the root term *identity*.

Identity is a powerful concept in part because of its ambiguity. We can have one and many, like a parliament of selves, complementary and distinct, each and together naming and defining who we are and how and why we act the ways we do. Drawing from the writing of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Krista Ratcliffe and Kyle Jensen show how language and discourse mediate rhetoric's intersections with knowing (invention) and being

(identity). Identity is constructed and negotiated, not essential or unquestionably singular. Good (listening) writers understand that many cultural logics, stories, or myths define us and thus influence motives and actions. They seek this kind of knowledge as a matter of course.

Intersectionality is Kimberlé Crenshaw's term for ways that peoples' lived experience, including discrimination and privilege, shapes identity and can reveal or reify or social hierarchies. Those hierarchies can lead to systemic or ideological bias that govern what Ratcliffe and Jensen call non-conscious identifications. Intersectionality elaborates the ambiguity of identity and the many ways people exploit it to perpetuate inequality and discrimination, especially in the law. In Ratcliffe and Jensen's terms, intersectionality theory

posits humans' identities and perspectives as compilations of multiple, intersecting cultural categories (gender, race, class, nationality, sexuality, athletic ability, etc.) that inform people's experiences and, thus, identities. That is, a person may identify as a woman but also as a Chicana, a mother, a daughter, a CEO, an American citizen, a homeowner, a political activist, etc. (Ratcliffe and Jensen 6)

As a writer or reader joining a public debate, you can ask this question, says Crenshaw in an interview with *Vox*: "When you're going to sign on to a particular critique by rolling out your identity, exactly how was your identity politics different from what you're trying to critique?" A reflective rhetorician will be aware of the ways her own identities influence her understanding (what can be known) and empathetic to how others might be positioned (identified) as well.

Empathy is the emotional capacity for identification, the desire for what Burke called consubstantiality. Empathy may be necessary for any way of social life, so it plays a central role in rhetoric's function as the strategic use of language and symbols to induce cooperation and build community. Without empathy, we would all be sociopaths, which by definition lack the capacity to identify with another. To the degree that rhetoric acts as the elaboration and exploitation of ambiguity, it brings hope and possibility at times when our differences seem insurmountable. With an aim of identification and an ideal of empathy, your rhetoric, your definitions of rhetoric, as a listening writer helps you understand your many selves and their multiple agencies, an important prelude to persuading, teaching, informing, or portraying others.

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TEACHER RESOURCES FOR “ELABORATE RHETORICS”

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

This essay introduces students to rhetoric as both an applied and productive art, then encourages them to reflect on a definition of rhetoric that accounts for both of these functions. The premise is that having a working definition of rhetoric helps students understand that it involves more than just persuasion or, worse, lying, and instead provides the generative principles for elaborating a subject (invention) and contextualizing it in situations that matter. A rich definition is generative; that is, it aids in the invention and discovery of new knowledge. In this case, that knowledge is *about* rhetoric, how and why it works (or not), and what writers should know if they hope to make it work for them.

At least since Plato in *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*, we’ve known that writers need more than just the recipe rhetorics provided by handbooks, the prescriptive rules and procedures for producing good writing. Knowledge about rhetoric is often equated with such rules and procedures. This essay suggests, however, that knowledge about rhetoric should include how and why it achieves its effects, how to put it to use to answer questions about what to write and how to write it, as well as what these choices reveal, hide, or ignore. What can our writing do? What difference can it make? Why does answering these questions even matter? In the end, rhetoric is a much more interesting and complex concept than we’re led to believe. Because we think *with* concepts, not just *about* them, a healthy appreciation for rhetoric as an art for elaborating or exploiting ambiguity to foster identification helps writers discover what to say and how to say it to achieve their goals.

I encourage students at all levels to develop their own definition of rhetoric, one that includes terms that help them see and explain how writing works across a broad range of media, contexts, and purposes. The rhetorical knowledge they generate can serve them well when faced with unfamiliar situations or genres. They learn to ask smart questions about these situations that can in turn lead to strategies for addressing them without having to rely on what they remember reading in a handbook. A rich definition of rhetoric can act as transferable knowledge and thus transcends the particulars of any given situation.

This sort of rhetorical inquiry can be the cornerstone in courses that value writing about writing (WAW); that teach writers to reflect on and

represent identities of privilege, race, gender, class, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation (the nature and presence/absence of identity, identification, and division); and that encourage students to research and write about applied rhetorics of social justice, activism, and social change.

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT

Prompt: You have read about the importance of identification and identity in the productive art of rhetoric. People have long recognized that identity is an important aspect of communication and social life. We have sought new ways to define, reshape, re-imagine, and refashion identity, often focusing on images of the self and the body. As media and medical technologies make it easier to define and reshape images of the self and the body, people have experimented with a variety of techniques that from a rhetorical perspective convey both curiosity and anxiety about what our bodies and our public image convey about identity.

Write an essay that examines a particularly interesting case of what we might call “self-fashioning.” You could focus on someone you know or even yourself. Or you could focus on a popular figure. Describe in detail the nature of the image/self that has been fashioned, then consider these questions:

1. What specific techniques do people use to refashion bodies and selves? (Think of changes related to appearance, including what people wear, how they look physically, what they do with their hair, how they decorate the body and the face, whether they literally reshape, re-color, or pierce the body, and so on.)
2. What seems to be the purpose of this self-fashioning?
3. What effects has the self-fashioning had on the individual and their public image?
4. How might social media perpetuate this ethic of performing the self in a public venue? What negative consequences do you see?
5. How might the images of identity people construct reflect or subvert cultural values?
6. What is rhetorical about this self-fashioning?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS

1. *Exploring Rhetoric.* Find three uses of the term *rhetoric* in the news, then explain what these uses reveal about the nature and function of rhetoric. What do these uses of rhetoric have in common? How do they differ?
2. *Elaborating Ambiguity.* Find an important ambiguous term in public life, one people refer to often but that may have multiple or uncertain meanings, then elaborate that ambiguity.
3. The word *ambiguous* derives from the Latin prefix *ambi* (“both, around”) and the root *agere* (“drive, lead”). *Ambiguous*, according to the *Dictionary of Word Origins* by John Ayto, carries the etymological notion of “wandering around uncertainly” (22; Arcade, 1990). Its relatives include ambivalent, ambidexterous, agent, and act (the latter two from the root *agere*). Ambiguity makes multiple interpretations possible, each of which may be legitimate and thus contestable.
4. *Exploiting Ambiguity.* In some situations, you want to persuade someone to take a specific course of action or to change an attitude. Using the term you chose in #2, choose one of the term’s meanings, then write a paragraph that uses that meaning to change someone’s attitude about it.
5. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke once wrote in a concrete poem called a “Flowerish” (a pun on “flourish”), “From the very start, our terms jump to conclusions.” What do you think he had in mind? In what ways do our terms, our vocabulary, determine what can be known? Spoken? Seen? What might our terms filter from view? Provide one or more examples.