

15 WHAT IS RHETORIC? A “CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE” PRIMER

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OVERVIEW

Providing an introduction to rhetoric is a foundational component of most first-year writing courses.¹ Discussion of rhetorical appeals, for example, is standard fare in these contexts, as are activities that ask students to develop an appreciation for rhetorical situations, audiences, purposes, and even more nuanced concepts such as *kairos* and genre. Unfortunately, it's easy for these concepts—along with the idea of rhetoric itself—to get taken up in these contexts as yet another set of keywords that have static and/or underdeveloped definitions, which in turn limits the ability for students to productively wrestle with the complexities of rhetoric as a resource for their own development as writers. This essay serves as an introduction to rhetoric, but it does so through the medium of a “choose your own adventure” narrative. Divided into ten sections, each of which contains a handful of rhetoric definitions that highlight one of its many qualities, this essay invites students to let their own interests guide how they come to understand rhetoric.

START HERE

“Rhetoric” is a word everyone seems to know but few can define. When I ask my students to define it, almost always one or two will immediately shout out that rhetoric is “logos, ethos, and pathos.” I’ll point out those are rhetorical *appeals*, shorthand categories for

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classifying the different ways rhetoric can be persuasive to an audience. I'll then ask them to open their phones or laptops and find at least three different definitions to share with the class, which always leads to a discussion about how *what* rhetoric is (how it gets defined) and what rhetoric *means* (what elements of those definitions we find most important) depend on factors like purpose, audience, and occasion, factors that show up as keywords in many of the definitions they locate.

It's easy to identify similarities across definitions of rhetoric, but as a concept it's difficult to pin down. What rhetoric is, not surprisingly, depends on the person doing the looking. And this brings me to you. Yes, *you*. Maybe one of your instructors assigned this essay for homework, or maybe you came across it while doing a web search. Regardless of how you got here, let me offer you an unconventional introduction to rhetoric. While it would be easy for me to describe its history as both a concept and an academic field of study, I just said that what rhetoric is depends on the person doing the looking. For this reason, I'd prefer if you—yes again, I mean *you*—could experience this idea by developing your own understanding of rhetoric. To facilitate this, I've organized this essay as a “choose your own adventure” narrative, which means that as you read, you'll be prompted to make decisions about what to read next. While I haven't calculated how many different readings of this essay are possible, if you are reading this essay for a class, there's a good chance none of your peers will read it exactly like you do, which in turn means your understanding of rhetoric will be different from theirs, even if only slightly.

If you're unfamiliar with the “choose your own adventure” idea, all you need to know is that I've organized this essay into ten numbered sections. I've also included bits of stage direction that ask you questions **in bolded text**. Depending on what you are interested in exploring, the stage directions at the end of each section will point you to which section to read next.

Each section is structured around a handful of definitions of rhetoric that share a similar focus or theme. As you'll see, people have been defining and redefining rhetoric for as long as the word has existed. Once you finish this essay, however much of it you read and in whatever order, you too should be able to develop your own definition. While I don't think you need to read this entire essay, try to cover at least five sections. That should be plenty to help you develop a fuller, more complex understanding of rhetoric.

To begin, let's start with a source that for many of us is the first place we go to when we want to learn about something, Wikipedia. As of the time of this writing, the entry for rhetoric begins this way: “Rhetoric is the art

of persuasion, which along with grammar and logic is one of the ancient arts of discourse. Rhetoric aims to study the techniques writers or speakers utilize to inform, persuade, or motivate particular audiences in particular situations” (“Rhetoric”). This is a pretty good definition, but it contains ideas that need unpacking. Rhetoric is not only the “art of persuasion,” it’s one of the “ancient arts of discourse” we use to study how people “inform, persuade, and motivate” one another.

If you want to learn more about how rhetoric is an art, *continue to Section 1*. If you want to learn more about how rhetoric is a science, *skip to Section 2*. If you want to learn more about the history of rhetoric, *skip to Section 3*.

1. RHETORIC IS AN ART

What does it mean to call something an art? We can answer this question by considering what different arts and artists have in common. Imagine Yo-Yo Ma, Denzel Washington, and Kendrick Lamar sat down to discuss their careers. What would they talk about? Yo-Yo, a famous cellist, might ask Kendrick, a rapper, about his writing process. They might talk with Denzel, an actor, about how he decides which projects to pursue. All three could probably talk about how they respond to criticism, or the qualities necessary to push through creative dry spells. Whatever they end up discussing, the chances are good that what they talk about could be applied to our understanding of rhetoric as an art.

As A.S. Hill explains, “Rhetoric may be defined as the art of efficient communication by language. It is the art to the principles of which, consciously or unconsciously, a good writer or speaker must conform. It is an art, not a science” (1141). Hill was a professor of rhetoric at Harvard and is credited with starting one of the first “freshman writing” programs in the United States, those first-year composition courses that still exist and in which you might currently be enrolled. Notice how Hill is careful to say that rhetoric is not a science, even though he also says rhetoric involves the “principles” that “good” writers and speakers follow. Almost a century later another professor of rhetoric, Karl Wallace, said it “is primarily an art of discourse. It is an art because its principles and teaching are directed to two general ends or functions: the making or producing of utterances and the understanding and appraising of them” (3). This definition is not that different from Hill’s, except Wallace identifies the purpose of rhetoric: to produce “utterances,” a term that means any written or oral speech, and to evaluate them. In a short essay about effective communication for the

American Water Works Association (yes, apparently even hydraulic engineers care about rhetoric), John Mannion says rhetoric is “the skillful, effective, artistic use of words” (3). Mannion’s understanding of rhetoric as an art is simple enough; rhetoric is an art because it requires us to use words skillfully and effectively.

Identifying rhetoric as “the art of efficient communication” or the “artistic use of words” prompts some obvious questions. Is rhetoric still an art if the communication is inefficient or inartistic? And how would we “appraise” these situations? To answer these questions, you will need to read some other sections of this essay. But before you do, I want to point out these definitions from Hill, Wallace, and Mannion were all written for non-academic audiences.

Not surprisingly, academic definitions of rhetoric tend to be more complex. As Charles Bazerman suggests, for example, “Rhetoric is the reflective practical art of strategic utterance in context from the point of view of the participants, both speaker and hearer, writer and reader” (14). Here we see that word “utterance” again, which Bazerman qualifies with the word “strategic,” but he also says rhetoric is a “practical art.” Sharon Crowley, an historian of rhetoric, argues that “at minimum [we must] conceive of rhetoric as an art of invention, that is, it must give a central place to the systematic discovery and investigation of the available arguments in a given situation” (“Composition is Not Rhetoric”). What do you think of these more academic definitions of rhetoric? Do you see any overlap between these definitions and the ones in the previous paragraph? Have these definitions adequately told us how rhetoric is an art?

You might have some initial thoughts about these questions, but let’s push forward. **If you want to consider how rhetoric is a science, continue to Section 2. If you want to consider how rhetoric can be understood as effective communication, skip to Section 4.**

2. RHETORIC IS A SCIENCE

In the opening paragraph of his 1875 textbook, Andrew Dousa Hepburn declared rhetoric “is the Science of the Laws and Forms of Prose. It investigates the method and general principles to which every discourse must conform that is designed to instruct, convince, or persuade” (13). Hepburn’s definition is useful for understanding rhetoric as a science because in suggesting that “discourse” (another word for speech or language) “must” adhere to certain laws and principles, he is not only suggesting a natural order to language and how it should be used, he also is suggesting

that once we understand how these laws work, we can learn to manipulate them in our efforts “to instruct, convince, or persuade” others.

When rhetoric gets discussed as a science, what we are talking about is our ability to observe and draw conclusions about what makes it work. But as demonstrated in Hepburn’s definition, understanding rhetoric as a science can sometimes presuppose a kind of physics determines when our rhetoric will be successful. We can see this mindset at work when Walter Fisher says that “rhetoric refers to the examination of the true nature of speech practices and literary forms of discourse” (170), which of course begs the question, the “true nature of speech practices” *for whom?* The value of these scientific definitions is that they position rhetoric as something that can be investigated and tested, a belief that has sustained rhetoric as an academic enterprise for over two thousand years.

Insofar as you come to understand rhetoric as a science, you come to understand how to dissect it into its various parts and categories, its different effects in different situations, as well as its ability to be understood systematically. “Rhetoric is communication characterized by a high degree of intentionality and high degree of structure,” explains Robert L. Scott (440). But we can also think about rhetoric as a science by considering the function of trial and error in our communication with others. According to James McNally, for example, rhetoric can be defined as “sign-behavior exhibiting a pragmatic concentration of meaning (77). The word “sign-behavior” means communication, or the use of things like words, gestures, noises, images, etc. But the key phrase in McNally’s definition is this idea of a “pragmatic concentration of meaning,” which refers to the success of this sign-behavior—the extent to which it’s effective. Like all indeterminate behavior, our communication doesn’t always go according to plan; it requires practice and adjustment, just as it requires us to occasionally learn new techniques. **Go back to Section 1 if you want to read about rhetoric as an art. To read about rhetoric’s history, proceed to Section 3. If you want to consider why the idea of effectiveness is important for the study of rhetoric, read Section 4.**

3. RHETORIC IS OLD

One of the oldest definitions of rhetoric is also one of its most famous. “Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion,” says Aristotle in a treatise that dates to the fourth century BCE (Kennedy, *Rhetoric* 36). Many historians credit Aristotle for popularizing the study of rhetoric, at least among ancient Greek

elites, but by no means was he the first to recognize rhetoric's importance. Aristotle's teacher, Plato, had a famously critical view of rhetoric. He called it a mere "knack," something akin to a hobby, and said all rhetoric is good for is appealing to people's emotions. Plato's view of rhetoric has remained popular throughout the ages.

In 1690, the philosopher John Locke said that "all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence [rhetoric] hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead judgment," before calling rhetoric "that powerful instrument of error and deceit" (827). Ezra Pound, the famous poet, echoes Locke: "Rhetoric is the art of dressing up some unimportant matter so as to fool the audience for the time being" (280). Indeed, the first definition for "rhetoric" on Dictionary.com is "the undue use of exaggeration or display; bombast" ("Rhetoric"). Even today when someone denounces an argument as "just rhetoric," they are echoing a long line of critics going back to Plato.

While Plato is credited with coining the word "rhetoric," ancient non-Western cultures had their own famous figures who taught the arts of communication. The Chinese philosopher Confucius, for example, produced works that emphasized, as professor Bo Wang says, "the art of communication in cultivating the moral self and forming reciprocal human relationships" (69), aims that speak to concerns teachers of rhetoric continue to wrestle with when it comes to judging the character of one's words. Interestingly, there is no ancient Chinese equivalent for the word "rhetoric," LuMing Mao reminds us, just as there is no ancient Greek equivalent for the "yin-yang" concept, a symbol that speaks to the idea of reciprocity that Professor Wang mentions as central to Confucius's philosophy of communication.

Another ancient culture that produced fascinating works of rhetoric is that of the Aztecs. When Spain colonized what is now known as Central America, Franciscan monks "recognized as rhetoric what the Aztecs themselves called *huehuetlahtolli*. This Nahuatl word is formed by compounding *huehue*, 'old man,' or 'men of old,' and *lahtolli*, 'word,' 'oration,' or 'language.' Thus *huehuetlahtolli* is variously translated as 'the ancient word' 'the speeches of the ancients,' or 'the speeches of the elders,' (Abbott 252), a tradition of Aztec orations that no doubt goes back centuries before the Franciscans translated them for European audiences in the sixteenth century.

The important point is that for as long as humans have existed, there have been teachers passing along orations and other ancient texts to cultivate and enrich the cultures in which they were circulated. **If you want**

to learn more about how culture influences rhetoric, skip to Section 8. If you want to see how rhetoric gets conflated with persuasion, read Section 5.

4. RHETORIC IS EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Despite Henry Jones Ripley's assertion that rhetoric "is the science of good writing" (13), rhetoricians typically avoid describing rhetoric as "good" or "bad." Instead, we prefer to think about it in terms of effectiveness. If you've prepared a presentation for your boss about why you deserve a raise, it doesn't matter how many good reasons you offer or how clearly you argue your case. What matters is whether you get a raise, right? If your boss is blown away by the quality of your presentation but then explains why she can't give you a raise, your "good" presentation can also be chalked up as ineffective. My point is simple: rhetoric isn't perfectible.

But successful rhetoric can be approximated by evaluating what makes it *more* or *less* effective in particular situations. In fact, the first definition for rhetoric in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is "the art of speaking or writing effectively" ("Rhetoric"). Defining rhetoric as effective communication is by no means a contemporary practice. After all, consider John of Salisbury's twelfth-century definition that asks, "What is eloquence [rhetoric] but the faculty of appropriate and effective verbal expression?" (McGarry 26).

One way to understand what makes rhetoric effective is whether it is persuasive, but effective rhetoric can mean other things. Edward Channing, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1926, explains that rhetoric is "a body of rules derived from experience and observation, extending to all communication by language and designed to make it efficient," adding that rhetoric helps us translate thoughts into effective language, "and effective, not in any fashionable or arbitrary way, but in the way that nature universally intends" (31-32). One problem with Channing's definition, and arguably all definitions that suggest prescriptions, is that it draws a line between nature and culture that can't be crossed. But remember, for rhetoric context is everything. As Adetokundo Knowles-Borishade notes, for instance, indigenous African rhetorical traditions didn't rely on theories that just focus on the relations between a speaker, text, and audience; they instead understood rhetoric according to five elements: "(a) Caller-Plus-Chorus, (b) Spiritual Entities, (c) *Nommo* (the Word), (d) Responders, and (e) Spiritual Harmony" (490), elements that, taken together, underscore how in-

digenous Africans had a more holistic understanding of their place in the natural world than did their Western, colonizing counterparts.

But in its most general sense, effective rhetoric can simply mean rhetoric that works, that achieves its purpose. If I write an assignment prompt for one of my classes, but the students ignore it because I sang the instructions and uploaded them as a song on iTunes, could you blame them for assuming I'd gone crazy? For this reason, I appreciate Paulo Valesio's definition of rhetoric as "the functional organization of discourse"; rhetoric, he adds, "speaks about the ways in which human discourse works and has worked" (7).

Not only can the study of rhetoric help us understand why my students probably wouldn't be persuaded by my assignment prompt song, it also can help us understand how genres like assignment prompts work *as genres*. **To read about why rhetoric goes hand-in-hand with the idea of adaptability, skip to Section 7. If you want to read about how rhetoric helps us know things, read Section 8.**

5. RHETORIC IS PERSUASION

One of the most popular ways to define rhetoric is to invoke the idea of persuasion. Aristotle does this in his definition of rhetoric (see Section 3), as do contemporary writers like Sam Leith. Simply put, says Leith, rhetoric is "the art of persuasion: the attempt by one human being to influence another in words. It is no more complicated than that" (1). Depending on how many sections of this essay you've already read, I think we can say in response to Leith that defining rhetoric *is* more complicated.

There is nothing simple when it comes to understanding how human beings attempt to persuade one another, after all. Donald Bryant writes that rhetoric is "the rationale of informative and suasive discourse" and involves "the function of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas" (404, 413). Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater say the same thing, but more clearly. "Rhetoric is commonly defined as the art of persuasion," they say "but it involves far more than the verbal devices that are often connected with propaganda. It is the shaping of discourses (or simply the uses of language) for different purposes and audiences" (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 75). And Stephanie Weaver extends rhetoric to "any use of a symbol system (language, written text, images, colors, etc.) to persuade another" ("What is Rhetoric?"). Weaver's definition is helpful because it emphasizes that persuasion can involve more than words. As Wayne Booth, a

famous literary critic, once declared, rhetoric is “the art of changing men’s [or people’s] minds” (“Scope” 95).

As you can imagine, while persuasion has always been one of the goals associated with rhetoric, exploring what persuasion means in various contexts is an ongoing project for rhetoricians. **If you want to learn about what makes rhetoric effective, read Section 4. If you want to learn about why effective rhetoric must be adaptable, read Section 7.**

6. RHETORIC IS PUBLIC ACTION

Some of the most interesting definitions of rhetoric highlight its publicness. Some rhetoricians, such as Kenneth Burke and Robert Hariman, to name just two, would argue all rhetoric is public. There is no such thing as “private” rhetoric, in other words, because even if we are using language privately—perhaps writing in a diary or talking to yourself in the shower—our ability to use language at all is dependent on others for making that language intelligible, even if no one else is present. A prolific theorist of rhetoric, Burke explained in 1950 that “the basic function of rhetoric [is] the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (41). Almost four decades later, Hariman said “[w]e can define rhetoric as a mode of reflection upon the sociality of language” (51). That is, we can understand rhetoric as that which allows us to interact with one another.

Both definitions emphasize how rhetoric is linked to our social life, but they also suggest communication itself is dependent on our ability to use language in ways that are mutually meaningful. Another interesting idea these definitions suggest, one that is abstract but important, is that we need rhetoric to imagine what a public is in the first place. As explained by Thomas Farrell, rhetoric is “the primary practical instrumentality for generating and sustaining critical publicity which keeps the promise of the public sphere alive” (199). Rhetoric is the thing that allows us to create “publics” that in turn allow us to build connections with people outside of our immediate social spheres. Social movements, for example, are dependent on the rhetoric of activists and organizers who must be able to motivate others to join their causes, work that almost always requires supplying the language around which supporters can unify.

While communities are shaped by the languages they share, the study of rhetoric allows us to see how these languages evolve and change over time, and in turn this allows us to see how communities compensate for this change by inventing new ideas, new words, and new forms of inter-

action to maintain social ties. If you want to see an example of this, open your texting app and look for any of the abbreviations, emojis, or other forms of “text-speak” you use. Gerald Hauser sums up this nicely: “Rhetoric is communication that attempts to coordinate social action” (3). **If you want to further explore the idea of how rhetoric involves more than just words, skip to Section 8. If you want to continue reading about rhetoric as a kind of social action, skip to Section 9.**

7. RHETORIC IS ADAPTATION

Many definitions focus on rhetoric’s purpose, like to persuade or “enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, move the passions, or to influence the will,” as the philosopher and Christian minister George Campbell wrote in 1776 (Golden and Corbett, 145). But there are plenty of definitions that also highlight the skills necessary to use rhetoric effectively. One of the most popular of these skills is the ability to adapt to the rhetorical demands of specific contexts. For John Franklin Genung, a famous teacher of rhetoric in the late nineteenth century, “Rhetoric is the art of adapting discourse, in harmony with its subject and occasion, to the requirements of a reader or hearer” (1). Notice this emphasis on the “subject and occasion” as guideposts for deciding how to adapt one’s language according to audience expectations.

Today we use concepts like *genre* and *decorum* to talk about rhetorical situations. For example, some of you might know that career coaches often recommend tailoring your resume for specific job applications. Let’s say you are applying for a job at a specialty shoe store for runners, it makes sense that you would include a section on your resume that lists the most recent marathons you’ve run, but this is something you wouldn’t include in the next resume you submit, which happens to be for a job at a local bank. This kind of choice speaks to the importance of adaptation as one of rhetoric’s primary mechanisms. “Rhetoric is the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible,” writes John Poulakos, a definition that captures the idea of adaptability by pointing to the related concept of possibility (36). What Poulakos’s definition captures is the importance of reading the room, so to speak, and paying attention to tone of voice, facial expressions, and all the other non-verbal conventions that help us navigate our daily interactions with one another. But the definition also suggests that through this paying attention we can discover opportunities that were previously unavailable.

Like Poulakos, William Covino and David Joliffe's definition suggests the importance of adaptation when they say rhetoric "is primarily a verbal, situationally contingent, epistemic art that is both philosophical and practical and gives rise to potentially active texts" (5). Rhetoric is "situationally contingent," which means its success isn't guaranteed, but it's also an "epistemic art" that produces "potentially active texts." What do you think this means? **To explore the meaning of "epistemic" as it relates to rhetoric, continue to Section 8. If you want to consider rhetoric as action, go back to Section 6.**

8. RHETORIC IS EPISTEMIC

To call rhetoric epistemic is to invoke what is probably the most technical phrase you'll find in this essay. "Epistemic" is an adjective that comes from the word "epistemology," which means the study of knowledge. When we talk about epistemology, we are talking about how we know things. To call rhetoric epistemic, then, means that rhetoric helps us develop knowledge.

Some epistemologies, or theories of knowledge, stress the importance of symbols, how things like words stand in for things like objects or ideas. Consider George Kennedy's definition, for example, when he says rhetoric is "the energy inherent in emotion and thought, transmitted through a system of signs, including language, to others to influence their decisions or actions" ("A Hoot" 2). Also consider the Islamic philosopher al-Farabi's definition of rhetoric as "a syllogistic art whose purpose is persuasion" (7). While similar to other classical definitions that invoke logic or reasoning (the term "syllogistic" refers to the process of drawing a conclusion based on a set of propositions), Maha Baddar explains that "al-Farabi transforms rhetoric beyond the Aristotelian model into a component of an epistemological structure whose aim is acquiring and communicating knowledge in a manner that accommodates the different capacities of the human intellect" (235). As al-Farabi suggests, rhetoric helps us understand how ideas and beliefs become true for us. Whereas in al-Farabi's definition, we see an emphasis on logic (he calls rhetoric "a syllogistic art"), Kennedy's definition highlights how rhetoric helps us process "emotion and thought." Taken together, they show us how rhetoric can help us appreciate the complexity behind how we learn things.

The definitions in this section so far have been heady, but there are simpler definitions that fit this category. Krista Ratcliffe, for example, says "rhetoric is the study of how we use language and how language uses us" ("The Current"). For Curtis Newbold, "Rhetoric is, essentially, the study

of how communication affects our understanding” (“Rhetoric Criticism”). These definitions speak to why one of the first things we do, if we don’t understand something, is to ask someone to explain it (or we open Wikipedia or YouTube), and why, if we find that person’s explanation insufficient, we ask someone else (or click on a different article or video).

One of the more thorough definitions in this category comes from Richard Cherwitz and James Hixins:

Rhetoric is the art of describing reality through language. To act rhetorically is to use language in asserting or seeming to assert claims about reality. At the heart of this definition is the assumption that what renders discourse potentially persuasive is that a rhetor (e.g. a speaker or writer) implicitly or explicitly sets forth claims that either differ from or cohere with views of reality held by audiences. (62)

This definition speaks to how things like identity (religion, sexuality, ethnicity, gender, political affiliation, etc.) can constrain not just what arguments will be effective for specific audiences, but whether a specific audience will even listen to you in the first place. ***So what? you might ask. Understanding rhetoric as epistemic helps us see how rhetoric facilitates change, which you can continue to Section 9 to read about. If you are curious about how such change relies on persuasion, go back to Section 5.***

9. RHETORIC CHANGES THE WORLD

“Rhetoric is the science which refreshes the hungry, renders the mute articulate, makes the blind see, and teaches one to avoid every lingual ineptitude,” writes an unknown definer of rhetoric (Caplan 106), but definitions like this one that list activities for which rhetoric is useful are quite common. For Tania Smith, “Rhetoric is the study and practice of communication that persuades, informs, inspires, or entertains target audiences in order to change or reinforce beliefs, values, habits or actions” (“What is Rhetoric?”) Similarly, Abdul-Raof Hussein insists rhetoric “is a linguistic tool which the language user manipulates in order to praise, dispraise, inspire, influence, or entertain the audience” (3).

Rhetoric, quite literally, changes the world. Even if the change is small or marginal or otherwise invisible, change is change. M. Elizabeth Weiser gets it right when she says “rhetoric is the way the world is manipulated around us for the purpose of persuading ourselves and others that some-

thing matters and that we should respond to it” (8). **Are you feeling done? If so, continue to Section 10. If you still have some focus left, read one more section and then skip to Section 10.**

10. EVERYTHING IS RHETORIC

I’ve subtitled this last section “Everything is Rhetoric” because even if you’ve just read a few of the preceding sections, it should nevertheless be clear the only thing harder than defining what rhetoric *is* might be deciding what rhetoric *is not*. Whether we understand rhetoric as persuasion, effective communication, or social action, practically every kind of human behavior can be understood as rhetoric.

If everything is rhetoric, then Thomas Rickert’s definition does a nice job of summing up the takeaway of this essay: “Rhetoric is revealing and doing—doing as revealing and revealing as doing—and hence integral to our dwelling in the world” (33). Even if all we are doing is thinking, that is still rhetorical labor. And if the activity of thinking can be understood as rhetorical, we must again ask *What is rhetoric not?* Rhetoric is everything and everything is rhetoric.

So how do I define rhetoric? Since I’m a rhetoric professor who also likes thinking about ethics, I like this definition by I.A. Richards with its poetically blunt emphasis on our responsibility to one another to be continuously working out how to maintain relationships: “Rhetoric, I shall urge, should be the study of misunderstanding and its remedies” (3). While this definition might be my favorite, I don’t want to shirk the question about *my* definition. For me, rhetoric is the material practice of persuasion and the mechanisms we study to understand such labor. I don’t think this definition is any better or worse than others, but it does reflect how I have personally come to understand this thing I write about and teach.

Let me close with an excerpt from Richard Whately’s *Elements of Rhetoric* because he talks about the value of defining rhetoric. After sharing various definitions, he suggests that:

To enter into an examination of all the definitions that have been given, would lead to much uninteresting and uninformative verbal controversy. It is sufficient to put the reader on his [or their] guard against the common error of supposing that a general term has some real object, properly corresponding to it, independent of our conceptions—that, consequently, some one definition in

every case is to be found which will comprehend everything that is rightly designated by that term. (1-2)

What do you think? Has my examination of rhetoric through these different categories of meaning been “uninteresting and uninstructional”? That depends, doesn’t it? Your instructor might ask you to write a response that reflects on your own ideas about some of these definitions, or you might even be asked to critique the effectiveness of my unconventional essay. If this happens, you’ll be engaged in the practice of *meta*-rhetoric, or rhetoric *about* rhetoric, which is what I’m doing in this essay. But I’ll save that discussion for class.

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TEACHER RESOURCES FOR “WHAT IS RHETORIC?: A ‘CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE PRIMER’”

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

In graduate school, I started to collect definitions of rhetoric. I wasn't systematic about it, nor did I have a particular reason for doing so outside of the fact that I had observed *a lot* of definitions for this term. I found around twenty at first, then I had fifty, then a hundred. My list kept growing until one day I realized these definitions had pedagogical value. First-year writing students and others new to the study of rhetoric are often given watered-down definitions that sometimes manage to not only make rhetoric sound vague and uninteresting but also tedious—something for pedants. Indeed, my skin crawls every time I see rhetoric “quizzes” that ask students to identify equally watered-down ideas like *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. So, I decided to introduce students to rhetoric not by simplifying it but by presenting it in all its complexity from the jump.

I didn't want to give students *a* definition of rhetoric, I wanted to give them *all* the definitions. I wanted them to mix up these definitions, get confused, try them out, make their own. Simply dumping pages of definitions into the laps of students isn't helpful, however, which is how the idea for this “choose your own adventure” essay developed. What better way to introduce students to rhetoric than by giving them the opportunity to be persuaded by multiple definitions while also being guided by their own interests? After all, as I say in the chapter, what rhetoric is depends on the person doing the looking.

What makes this essay different from more conventional introductory essays is that it provides information while also inviting readers to participate in the text's own performance as a text. That is, instructors can use this essay to illustrate how rhetoric is an abstract art with material effects. *Or is it a material science with abstract effects?* As one can see, the definitions we choose to explain what rhetoric is and does naturally constrain how we imagine its scope and utility. But that's how rhetoric works.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did you end up reading this essay? Go back and retrace your steps: What sections did you read and in what order? Spend a few

minutes reflecting on what this experience says about you. Why did you skip certain sections? What sections were most interesting and why?

2. What is at stake in defining rhetoric as either a science, an art, or both? That is, why does it matter (or not matter) whether we identify rhetoric using these categories?
3. The definitions in each section of this essay are meant to highlight a specific aspect or quality of rhetoric, so the definitions in Section 4 relate to how rhetoric can mean effective communication, the definitions in Section 5 relate to how rhetoric can mean persuasion, etc. But many of these definitions could be classified under more than one section. Pick one definition from this essay that you think could be moved to at least two other sections and explain why.
4. Pick three of the most recent emails you have either received or sent. Thinking about the different approaches to understanding rhetoric outlined in this essay, how would you characterize each of these messages as examples of rhetoric?
5. Invent your own definition of rhetoric. You can make one up from scratch, or you can select ideas or phrases to patch together (this is call “patchwriting”) from any of the definitions included in this essay. Once you have a working definition, spend a few minutes freewriting about the choices you considered as you created this definition.

ACTIVITIES

PERSUADE THE CLASS

Have students assemble into small groups and instruct each group to select one definition of rhetoric that they believe is the most useful. Then have each group plan an informal presentation in which they must convince the other groups that the definition is the best. After each group presents, the other groups must note what elements of their presentation were persuasive and why. From there, you could conduct a public or private poll, perhaps ranking each presentation, to determine which group came out on top. The discussion could then turn to why students focused on the particular

elements of each presentation. Such an activity could easily be stretched over 2-3 class meetings.

COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Ask each student to develop their own definition of rhetoric (see Discussion Question 5 above) and then instruct students to paste their definition into a shared document, such as a Google Doc, that can be accessed remotely. You could then have small groups of students (perhaps in twos or threes) to start a new shared document where they take each of their classmates' definitions and arrange them into a brief essay like this one. Or you could ask each group to decide on a medium and delivery style of their choosing. Not only would such an activity engage students in critical thinking about rhetoric, but it also encourages them to experiment with collaborative composition. Such an activity could be broken into smaller tasks and extended across multiple class meetings.