

Adam Kotlarczyk, Ph.D.
Email: akotlarczyk@imsa.edu
Twitter: @IMSAAEnglish
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy
Rhetoric Unit

19th Century American Rhetoric: Figures, Techniques, and Informational Texts

Abstract:

Ward Farnsworth writes in his 2011 *Classical English Rhetoric* “figures sound splendid when used to say things worth saying,” and nineteenth century Americans, it seems, had many things worth saying. The nineteenth century was a high-water mark for oral and written rhetoric in English; this was especially true in America. Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison wrote eloquently and passionately on abolition, even as the nation plunged into Civil War. Abraham Lincoln articulated his vision for the reunification of a country shattered by that war, while Henry David Thoreau explained the ethical need for the occasional disobedience to civil law – a concept that would later influence Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. And Margaret Fuller reminded the country and the world that slaves were not the only group in America with rights being suppressed.

This lesson introduces students to some key rhetorical figures, challenges students to research, define and provide modern examples of them, and tasks students in a paper with analyzing these techniques in important nineteenth century informational texts.

This lesson should take at least two class periods, and with readings, can be expanded to several weeks.

Common Core State Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.9 Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2d Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Materials:

Note cards with rhetorical terms written on them, one term per card (see Appendix A for list of terms)

Chalkboard/whiteboard

Students will need computers with access to the Internet for the research portion of this lesson.

Recommended: Farnsworth, Ward. *Classical English Rhetoric*. Boston: Gordine, 2011. Print.

Procedure:

1. Assign or let students work with a partner (large classes may consider groups of three).
2. Let each pair/group pick at least one card with a term on it (depending on your objectives for the course, you may want to use only some terms from this list).
3. Letting the groups go online for some quick research, have each group perform the following task with its term(s):
 - A. Find several definitions online. From these, select the clearest one (or distill or synthesize one from the several).
 - B. Find and provide an example from history or literature of that rhetorical figure in use, preferably by an author or in a text that other students would recognize.
 - C. (optional) Find an example of that rhetorical figure in use from popular culture – a movie or song, for example, that other students would recognize.
 - D. (optional) If you're really feeling ambitious, have them research the correct pronunciations, too.
4. When the groups have had sufficient time to research, have them write their term, its definition, and at least one example on the board.
5. Review and have each group present the terms (and especially the pronunciations), definitions, and examples with the class. Be aware that since most of these figures are new to the students, they may not select fitting examples. Correct where appropriate (and this is where it helps to have the Farnsworth book, which is loaded with examples).
6. To give the students practice identifying and analyzing the effectiveness of these figures, assign the attached paper prompt (Appendix B). For advanced students, the readings (under "Resources") can be performed independently; for others, you may want to cover some or all of the texts in class – indeed, they can form a solid foundation for a traditional rhetoric unit that looks at key informational texts and topics in America in the nineteenth century.

All links active as of 11-29-12.

Be aware of substantial differences in the lengths of some of these texts – Lincoln, Douglass, and Garrison are on the short side, while Thoreau and Fuller are much longer.

APPENDIX A

A List of Common Rhetorical Terms

from *Farnsworth's Classical English Rhetoric* (2011)

Anadiplosis (a-na-di-*plo*-sis) The use of the same language at the end of one sentence or clause and at the start of the next – an ABBC pattern.

Anaphora (a-na-foe-ra) Repetition of the same words at the start of consecutive sentences or clauses.

Anastrophe (a-na-stro-*ph*ee) Words appear in unexpected order – in English, usually a departure from the conventional *subject-verb-object* syntax.

Aposiopesis (ap-o-sigh-o-*pee*-sis) The deliberate breaking off of a sentence, leaving it unfinished.

Asyndeton (ah-*sin*-de-tahn) The omission of a conjunction where it might have been expected.

Chiasmus (kai-*as*-mus) Words or other elements are repeated, but their order is reversed.

Conduplicatio (con-doo-ple-KA-tee-o) Repetition of a word or phrase, with each instance separated by other words.

Ellipsis (el-*lip*-sis) The deliberate omission of expected words to achieve a desired effect.

Epanalepsis (ep-an-a-*lep*-sis) The same word or phrase is used at the beginning and end of a sentence (or set of sentences)

Epistrophe (e-*pis*-tro-*ph*ee) Repetition of a word or phrase at the end of a series of sentences or clauses.

Epizeuxis (ep-uh-ZOOX-sis) The repetition of individual words in immediate succession.

Erotema (e-ro-*tem*-a) A question that does not call for a reply.

Hypophora (hi-*po*-fer-a) The speaker asks a question, then answers it.

Isocolon (ai-so-*co*-lon) The use of successive sentences, clauses, or phrases similar in length and parallel in structure.

Litotes (*lye*-tuh-teez) A speaker avoids making an affirmative claim directly and instead denies its opposite.

Metanoia (met-a-*noi*-a) Correcting oneself; the speaker seems to change his mind about what he has just said.

Polyptoton (po-*lip*-toe-ton) Repetition of the root of a word with a different ending.

Polysyndeton (po-ly-*sin*-de-tahn) The repeated use of conjunctions.

Praeteritio (pry-te-rit-ee-oh) [sometimes called by its Greek name, *paralipsis*] The speaker describes what he will not say, and so says it, or at least a bit of it, after all.

Prolepsis (*Pro-lep-sis*) The speaker anticipates an objection (not necessarily a question) and comments on it.

Symploce (*sim-plo-kee*) Repetition of words at the start of successive clauses or phrases, and other words are repeated at the end of them, often with just a small change in the middle.

APPENDIX B: Paper Prompt

Short Analysis Paper: Nineteenth Century Rhetoric

PURPOSE

This short response paper tasks you with finding, identifying and evaluating rhetorical techniques in a nineteenth century American speech, essay, or book.

TOPIC

Choose *one* text from the list (in “Resources” of this prompt). Read your text and write a short paper (1-2 pages) that:

- (1) Briefly explains the background and historical context of your text.
- (2) Identifies *one* of the following rhetorical techniques: anaphora, chiasmus, or prolepsis.
 - a. In your paper, **provide the sentence(s)** from the text.
 - b. Provide a **definition** of that rhetorical term and **briefly explain** how that passage is an example of it.
 - c. Evaluate the **effectiveness** of the technique in this context.
- (3) Identifies *at least* two other rhetorical devices or techniques that are different than the one you selected in (2).
 - a. Repeat steps (a-c) for each.

TIPS

Make your MLA citation perfect.

Your essay does not need to be “narrative”; in other words, you may label each section in your paper to correlate to the steps listed above in “Topic.”

RESOURCES

Choose one of these texts:

Thoreau “Civil Disobedience” (<http://thoreau.eserver.org/civill.html>)

Lincoln “Second Inaugural Address” (<http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html>)

Garrison “To the Public” from *The Liberator* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2928t.html>)

Douglass “July 4, 1852” (<http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/douglass.htm>)

Fuller “Part I” from *Women in the Nineteenth Century*

(<http://transcendentalism.tamu.edu/authors/fuller/woman1.html>)

LENGTH AND FORMAT

Minimum two full, typed, double-spaced pages of content. Use standard margins and Times New Roman 12 point font. Be sure to parenthetically cite page numbers. Include a Works Cited page (this does *not* apply to your page count). Five page maximum.

EVALUATION

This paper does not require a thesis. It does require you to identify and evaluate at least three different rhetorical techniques in a nineteenth century essay, book, or speech. You will be evaluated based on your ability to find and identify *clear* examples of your chosen techniques. You will also be evaluated on your ability to provide *insightful* evaluations of the contributions of these techniques to the overall effect of the text.