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Rhetoric
Audience Awareness and the Rhetorical Triangle

Change One Thing, Change Everything: The Rhetorical Triangle

Abstract:

This lesson exposes students to the most fundamental rhetorical concept, that of the “rhetorical triangle,” a device for understanding and articulating audience awareness in persuasion. Provided here are suggestions for a brief and engaging mini-lecture, followed by an exercise using two classic pieces of American rhetoric, speeches by the suffragettes Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Students will be challenged to learn the principles of the rhetorical triangle, close-read a text for rhetorical clues and cues, and make sound judgments about the speaker’s rhetorical process based on evidence. This lesson and activity are suitable for students in grades 9-12, and have been used by the author in the teaching of gifted 10th graders.

Common Core Standards:

RL.11-12.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

SL.9-10.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

Procedure:

Students should come to class having already read the speech [“Woman’s Right to the Suffrage” by Susan B. Anthony](#) and [“The Destructive Male” by Elizabeth Cady Stanton](#) (URLs for reputable online versions of these speeches also appear at the end of this document). Both speeches are short, historically significant, and offer a blend of accessible and challenging language.

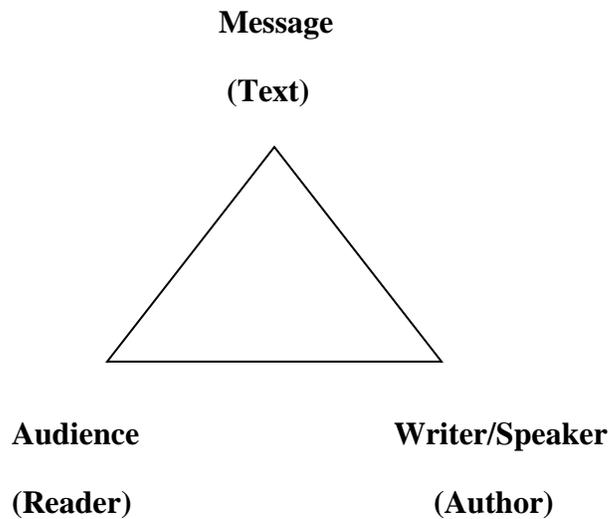
Before the students make use of these texts, begin class with a mini-lecture/discussion of the rhetorical triangle concept. The teacher might proceed with the following:

- 1.) Ask your students to make a list of all the different people they communicate with (in writing or in speech) on a regular basis.
- 2.) Ask them to take this list of people and divide them into "groups" based on how the student communicates with them (in terms of style and context). Are there certain audiences with whom they are primarily formal? Informal? Do some audiences share with the speaker certain in-jokes or codes? Does the speaker only communicate with some audiences for very

specific and limited purposes? What are the distinctive features and circumstances of, say, conversations shared with siblings versus with parents? (A useful way to dramatize this difference in communication style can be to ask students to imagine scenarios in which they ask someone to borrow five bucks. How would they have to do it differently if talking to a friend versus a sibling versus a teacher versus a stranger, and so on?)

3.) Call on some students and see if they can articulate why these different groups and corresponding communication methods exist. ("Why *don't* you talk to your grandma the way you talk to your best friend?" and so on. . .)

After this discussion, students will have recognized that communication isn't just about what's being said, or by whom, but *to* whom. The time is right to explain the rhetorical triangle. The following diagram and explanation proves very useful toward that end:



The **Rhetorical Triangle** illustrates the relationship between a writer or speaker, their message, and their intended audience. A writer or speaker must have a thorough understanding of the audience to whom they are speaking, how this audience is likely to react to their message, and how that message should be presented to make for the most successful persuasion. If, in imagining a given rhetorical situation, any one of these elements is significantly changed, the whole rhetorical situation and the demands it puts on the speaker changes with it.

Now that the students have a basic understanding of how the rhetorical triangle can be used to articulate the more nebulous concept of “audience awareness,” they are ready to apply the concept to the Stanton and Anthony speeches.

Invite your students to review the speeches carefully, looking for text-based answers to the following questions. (The author of this lesson has had students work through these questions in small groups, creating a single, brief, shared document that can be collected and graded, however other recording and reporting methods could be used to suit a different instructor’s needs.) :

- Can you identify that audience and their probable personal interests, concerns, biases?
- How and where do X and Y establish a relationship with their audience?
- How do X and Y present their messages in a way that best suits and persuades their audiences?
- Identify the point where the speaker is at the greatest risk of alienating their audience. How can you tell?
- Identify the point where the speaker seems most likely to "have their audience in the bag"? How can you tell?

Students are likely to observe that Stanton's approach to arguing for women's suffrage is more aggressive than Anthony's, and seems to rely more on emotional pleas than logic and reason (arguably better represented in Anthony's speech). Ideally, they will also note that Stanton's audience of attendees at a women's suffrage convention makes it likelier that she will have a supportive and even embittered audience. Also, as a respected suffragette and formal speaker, she would be viewed by her audience as having some authority. Anthony (who is defending herself in a court of law) is not in a position of authority; it is her audience, the judge and jury, who are in control of her circumstances, and thus the values of the court and the white males with voting rights who represent it dictate what can and can't be said without raising alarm.

After reporting out, whether through class discussion or collected written work or both, you will be able to gauge student understanding effectively and move toward more complicated rhetorical concepts like ethos, pathos, and logos.

Two final notes to the instructor: first, the author of this lesson has found it helpful to explicitly refer students analyzing Stanton and Anthony's speeches to the brief biographical prefaces included with each (often, students don't read these and miss information that can help them make informed deductions about an audience's probable composition, attitude, etc.). Some answers will be based on a combination of reasonable inferences and specific textual evidence, but this is a good thing, as students need to realize that not all aspects of a rhetorical situation are overtly expressed in a document. Second, if Anthony and Stanton's speeches don't suit your classroom's needs, any two speeches delivered on similar or even identical topics by different speakers to different audiences can be used instead. The important thing is that the speakers and their situations be different *enough* to create a marked difference in the content and style of the message delivered – but the fundamental topic must remain the same. Americanrhetoric.com and Historyplace.com (the prevalence of banner ads notwithstanding) provide very comprehensive and well-organized transcripts of speeches that can be used for this and other rhetoric lessons.

Materials:

Paper copies of or electronic access to the following speeches by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (or a pair of others, as your needs dictate):

Susan B. Anthony: <http://www.nationalcenter.org/AnthonySuffrage.html>

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/stanton.htm>